



FILM REVIEW

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth?

Kaise Jeebo Re!

A Story of Uprootment

Direction : Anurag Singh and Jharana Jhaveri

Review : ○ Anuradha Dutt

Why is it that development projects on a large scale hit the economically depressed, especially the rural poor? The answer is simple. For our policy makers in the government, they are without a voice and so, dispensable. Schemes such as mammoth dams that require vast inputs of funds and high technology for their implementation are invariably biased in favour of the vocal English-educated city dwellers and owners of industries as well as wealthy farmers who control the rural economy. They are the people who benefit from these projects by getting power and water for irrigation to meet their ever-growing needs. The people who are forced to give up their homes to make way for such schemes are left to swell the ranks of unskilled and migrant labour, dwelling on the peripheries of society.

Thus, the flip side to development in India and other Third World countries is that it extracts a tragic price in terms of disrupting traditional lifestyles and sources of livelihood. The imposition of conventional models of development, with their

emphasis on size and technology, entails large-scale displacement of people and destruction of both cultural heritage and environment. This phenomenon is explored in detail in *Kaise Jeebo Re!* (How Do I Survive, My Friend!), an 80-minute award-winning film, produced by Jan Madhyam. While the film's focus is the Narmada basin, the parallels with the Tehri dam and similar projects are self-evident.

The film shows how the building of large dams creates a huge tribe of the dispossessed, who are brutally uprooted from their homes and land by impersonal government agencies that pay them a pittance to compensate for the loss of everything dear and familiar. Stripped of their dignity, and suddenly rendered rootless, they are left to fend for themselves. The whole process of rehabilitation is one that cannot be reduced to a matter of simply migrating from one place to another. There is the issue of psychological and emotional bonding, a state of being that evolves through several generations of a family living at the same place. To be abruptly made to leave so that a large dam or factories or some other monolithic instrument of progress can be put up on their land, must be intensely disorienting.

As an entire community is shifted to a new area, it is confronted with the formidable challenge of having to start from scratch to build-up the whole foundation of social existence,

resting on sources of livelihood, functioning shops, schools, dispensaries, hospitals, shrines, and other institutions. Usually, the task of infusing soul into a new settlement remains unfinished as the inmates fail to adjust to alien surroundings and the administration defaults on its obligations towards them. Like boats set adrift, they have no place to set down anchor.

The wasted human potential is as much of a loss as the destruction of invaluable eco-systems and historical monuments. The fact that a select group of politicians, policy makers, financiers, technocrats, building companies, contractors and their hangers-on batten on these projects and grow fat is subject for a separate debate altogether, and the film touches on this only briefly.

The strength of *Kaise Jeebo Re!* is its emphasis on the tragedy of displacement in a poignantly human context. The plight of those rendered rootless by the Bargi dam is juxtaposed with the resistance offered, by others similarly threatened, to the ambitious Sardar Sarovar project. It also shows the Bargi dam evacuees expressing their solidarity with the anti-dam movement led by activists such as Medha Patkar and the multitude that may be forced to join the ranks of the dispossessed. The boat rally in 1992 against the Bargi dam and the satyagraha at Bijasen village, under four to six feet of water, in the mid '90s are symbols

of this protest. Their resolve is clear: they will not allow so many lives to be ruined ever again.

The film's roving camera moves from the urban jungle where evacuees struggle to eke out a living, to the Narmada, one of the seven river goddesses of India, revered by millions, before cutting to the site of the Bargi dam. It shifts back and forth between the mighty river and its environs, and the displaced, who speak at length about their misery. They lead a precarious existence in makeshift settlements, with no civic amenities.

As the film unfolds, some interesting data emerges. This river, the daughter of Shiva, which originates at Amarkantak and flows westwards into the Arabian Sea, is worshipped as "the mother of all creation" by the tribals who form the bulk of the displaced. The popular belief is that a curse will fall on anyone who tries to block the flow of the Narmada. Since the late 1970s, the river has been the scene of "one of the most ambitious river valley projects in the world", says the commentary. Over 3,000 dams are slated to be built in the valley for the purpose of irrigation and generation of hydro-power. Of these, 30 are large dams. About 15 million people are to be uprooted.

The Bargi dam, 40 km upstream from Jabalpur, was the first dam to be built on the river. At 69 metres high and over 5 km long, the reservoir submerged an area over 300 sq km, displacing more than a lakh of people, mainly tribals. Ironically, the project came to be called the Avantibai Sagar Dam, after a 16th century tribal queen. When the reservoir was completely filled, it overshot its mark and submerged 61 villages, in addition to the 101 that had been slated for submergence. These included some relocated villages such as Sarra on the periphery of the reservoir. People

still live there with great difficulty, fearful that their children may slip into the water and drown.

One of the gravest injustices perpetrated by the government on the evacuees is to make fishing, a hereditary profession, illegal by using the State Fishing Corporation to acquire monopoly rights over the Bargi reservoir and recruiting private contractors. The fisher-folks have now been reduced to the status of paid labour, their income virtually halved, at the mercy of the contractor's musclemen. Those who had migrated to Jabalpur fare no better, being reduced to pulling rickshaws, hand-carts and other odd jobs. They live in shanties, threatened with eviction all the time. What a sorry contrast to their former existence, when they lived off the bounty of nature. "In our village we lived like kings. In a strange land we are treated like dogs," says one man.

The common refrain is that the government should return their land, "our inheritance," and take back the compensation which, in any case, was totally inadequate. Promises of loans and sources of livelihood, land, free electricity, roads, functioning schools and hospitals remain unfulfilled, as at Jamunia, a relocation site. The cattle die by drinking silted water or getting trapped in the silt on river banks. About 30 per cent of the displaced are reported to have died of trauma and maladjustment. The survivors worry for their children—the end for all of them seems near.

Other disturbing facts emerge. One third of the world's large dams, over 3,500, have been built in India after independence. And, almost 80 per cent of the dispossessed are tribals and Dalits. Christ may well have proclaimed that 'the meek shall inherit the earth', but here, it is to the contrary. The repercussions of the Bargi dam are felt 300 km away, at the

Sardar Sarovar project, to be built at a cost of Rs 4,400 million. The camera moves to the site of the dam. Touted as 'India's economic lifeline', this dam will submerge an area of 390 sq km, displacing two lakh people and drowning 245 villages. Another million people are not included in the rehabilitation package, which is supposed to be the best in the world. It is clearly not so, for some evacuees have returned to their villages, despite the danger of submergence. The tribals in this region, with one of the most fertile soils in the world, have traditionally been self-sufficient. Yet, the government's duplicity is evident from its labelling the area as a 'least developed region'. Here, however, the people are determined to prevent a replication of the Bargi dam disaster. Their opposition to Sardar Sarovar is both well-orchestrated and widely publicised, to counter effectively the support, largely political, for the dam. The film allows a glimpse of the advocates of the project proclaiming at public meetings the gains from the project.

But it is the forceful opposition from those threatened with evacuation that commands our attention. The stakes involved, no doubt, are very high. But the price to be paid is even higher, with millions rendered rootless, forests, farm land and historical buildings submerged, and a thousand temples threatened by the Sardar Sarovar alone. The age-old custom of *parikrama* on foot along the banks of the Narmada seemed to have come to an end when the Bargi reservoir was filled. Another mammoth project would irrevocably erode a vital part of India's heritage. The enormity of this loss is brought out graphically in the film. It has done a good job of collating information and footage on a contemporary issue that redefines the very concept of development. □