

# An Ecological Catastrophe

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The business bosses are rightly grateful to the Gujarat government for the massive corporate welfare benefits they receive at the expense of the tax paying public. But the hapless public has little recourse as the state has been turned into an ecological nightmare by the avaricious corporates and an authoritarian government. This tragedy is compounded by the virtual absence of a political opposition; and the civil society has either been silenced or co-opted, with just a few remarkable exceptions.

Like many great cities in the world, Ahmedabad too has been the gift of a river. But today the Sabarmati river is being eliminated by design to grab real estate for the corporates. This is perhaps the first case in the world of a designed destruction of a river. This writer was a startled witness, about three years ago, to bulldozers pulling down the compound wall of the Sabarmati Ashram abutting the river bank. Along with the river were also to disappear the lakhs of poor who had nothing but a make-shift hut in the subhuman slum pockets on the banks of a river that nurtured the city until it was dammed upstream. The corporates and their greedy political cousins will build a fortune on the grave of a river, but their fortune will remain a challenge not just to ecology but to civilization itself.

The Western Ghats, the Vindhya-Satpura ranges and the Aravalli mountains terminate in Gujarat, from the southeastern corner to the northeastern tip, giving it a rich and varied assemblage of fauna and flora. Gujarat has a high proportion of the country's vertebrate fauna, as high as 27 percent, birds and mammals in particular. However, while the national forest policy envisages to achieve an average of 33 percent forest cover across the country, Gujarat has reduced its forest cover to 7.7 percent of the terrestrial area in the early part of the decade, a trend that has worsened since. Between 1980 and 2005 the state has officially destroyed 546 sq km of its forests. An indication of the increasing pace of forest destruction is the growing number of animal attacks on people, mainly the Adivasis. According to official statistics, between 2000 and 2005 there were over 50 deaths and about 800 persons sustaining injuries caused by wildlife attacks, mainly Leopard and Sloth bear, due to their venturing out from the diminishing habitats.

The development juggernaut is at the centre of the forest destruction, displacing people and eliminating their livelihood. Mining continues to take its toll on even sanctuaries like Balaram Ambaji and Narayana Sarovar, the latter already truncated to lease out mining lands to powerful business houses. The real estate lobby is mischievously eyeing the Nal Sarovar sanctuary which is a haven for transcontinental migrant birds. Though the opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam on Narmada has made it known well, what is not so well known is that the state has about 230 other dams with an inundation area of 1400 sq km, a greater part of this being former forestlands. The dams have not only caused the destruction of forest but also played havoc on the ecology of the rivers and are the source of the salinity increase in vast areas of the state, rendering the land infertile. With the vast network of irrigation canals, soil salinity is pervasive in the state posing a grave threat to the future of its

agriculture. The paradox here is that such irrigation infrastructure was created in a state having about 400 natural water bodies, excluding the rivers, with a combined water spread of over 2000 sq kms!

An environmental disaster without parallel anywhere in the world, the Kalpasar project, is in the making. A megalomaniac fantasy to create a 2000 sq kms freshwater basin in the Gulf of Khambhat by building a dam in the Gulf into which drain the rivers Narmada, Mahi, Sabarmati and Dhadar. The idea is to supply water to the industries located in Saurashtra through a 660 km long canal. A multilane road and railtrack are also planned on the 64 km long dam wall. Tidal power generation is also part of the project. A Department of Kalpasar has been established to undertake this about one lakh crore (one trillion) rupees project officially known as Gulf of Khambhat Development Project. This project that has not yet drawn the attention of the civil society is going to be a massive marine disaster that will eliminate the Gulf and all the estuaries and the mangroves of Khambhat. The lethal combination of dictatorial politics and scheming business extends the boundaries of absurdity.

The Alang coast of the Gulf of Khambhat is already a dangerously polluted place. The world's dumpyard of dead ships here might make a few businessmen in some far away cities rich, but the dangerous waste that these ships are, pollute the land, the beach and the sea and put the life of hundreds of migrant workers at risk. It was a national shame that the Gujarat government wanted the lethal French waste ship *Le Clemenceau* to be brought to Alang; it was international protest that eventually forced the French government to call back the waste ship to their shore.

Alang is, however, not alone as a pollution hotspot. The four decades old Nandesari industrial area near Vadodara is a massive pollution estate that has rendered the groundwater of a large area of the district unusable and turned the area's once fertile farms into barren lands. Mini and Mahi rivers are also victims of this pollution estate; it is indicative that the endangered Indian soft shell turtle has all but disappeared from these rivers. The story of Ankleshwar and Vapi are no different. The groundwater of more than 70 talukas of the state is reported to be polluted.

Modern Gujarat turns even a fabulous festival into an environmental tragedy. The annual kite festival held on the *Utharayan* day in January causes a massacre of birds, especially the winter migrants. The kite strings laced with powdered glass (in order to cut the rivals' strings) snag the unsuspecting birds, often leading to death. The strings hanging from trees continue to cause mortality. In Ahmedabad alone more than 5000 birds were killed by kites in 2005. A year later the mortality in the city and surrounding areas included 16 White rumped vultures, a highly endangered bird species protected in the schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act. A people who had an admirable tradition of protecting the Sarus crane on their farms and patiently suffering the crop raiding by the Nilgai have been turned into bird killers!

While the Narmada environmental disaster continues to play out, the inundation of part of the adjoining Soolpaneswar Sanctuary received little attention even as the Supreme Court took a categorical position against non-forest activities in sanctuaries and national parks even if prior clearance under the Forest Conservation Act had been obtained, through its order of 13 November 2000. A passionate forest officer in the sanctuary told this writer of the submergence of a significant part of a range within the sanctuary perimeter

by the Sardar Sarovar dam. However, officials in Gandhinagar responded variously to queries on the issue: either denying submergence or claiming to have obtained central clearance. This issue did not attract the attention of the Central Empowered Committee (appointed on the direction of the Supreme Court) that takes a firm position with regard to protected wildlife areas in other parts of the country.

The indicators clearly tell of the kind of economic prosperity in the state. 148 farmers in the state had committed suicide as admitted by the chief minister in the Legislative Assembly in March 2007. (And no compensation was paid to their families, even as the heaping of support to the corporate houses goes on unrestrained). The National Family Health Survey report of 2006 has recorded an increase in the proportion of women suffering from anaemia from 46.3 percent in 1999 to 55.5 percent in 2004. The polarization of wealth and poverty has abysmally deepened in Gujarat.

As the corporate greed rapidly devour the state's natural resources and reduce the environmental space like an occupying force, in connivance with the officialdom, it will be a long struggle before a semblance of sustainability can be brought back to the home of the Mahatma. This national struggle shall not be delayed, for, there are several other states wanting to rapidly emulate the Gujarat 'model'. □□