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Narmada dam protests find echo in America



SAM RAO
San Francisco, Calif.

Protestors outside the Indian Consulate in San Francisco

ANGRY protests calling for the release of NBA activist Medha Patkar and her supporters were witnessed at several places across the US last week. Patkar and several others were arrested and forcibly hospitalized in New Delhi early last week following a prolonged hunger strike, which they undertook to protest the increase in the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Ahmedabad.

While supporters from across the world joined in with day-long solidarity fasts by registering through an online campaign, on April 8, volunteers of Association for India's Development Maryland chapter demonstrated outside the Indian Embassy in Washington DC.

About 25 protestors mostly IT workers and students collected outside the San Francisco Consulate of India on April 10 braving

rains, with banners saying "Save Narmada, Save Humanity" and raising chants of "Stop the Sardar Sarovar dam" "Release the arrested activists".

Organized by AID Bay Area chapter and members of other progressive groups, the protest urged Indian government to release Medha Patkar and others from hospital custody, drop all charges against her and suspend the increase in the dam's height.

AID volunteer Prashant Jawalikar said, "The Narmada Control Authority's decision to raise the height of the dam despite their failure to provide rehabilitation, is a violation of all democratic and humane principles of governance and must be condemned in the strongest terms."

The protestors demanded release of the report of Union Minis-

ters' fact-finding team on the status of rehabilitation of the affected and displaced—mostly tribals in the to-be-flooded area. They also asked for records about rehabilitation to be made public, with clear reference to names of affected families and also villages they have (supposedly) been relocated to, and the amount of land granted etc. "We are here to express solidarity with the activists fasting for the 13th consecutive day that are protesting the increase in the height of the dam," said the protestors said in a memorandum submitted to the Consul General.

The protestors alleged that public officials were fabricating data to bolster the case for supposed benefits of the Sardar Sarovar Dam project (SSP), claiming that power worth about Rs 7 crore would be generated daily. Independent calculations reveal only a third of the amount—which would further be depleted as water gets routed to canals and irrigation, according to the activists.

Activists also revealed that several concerned scientists have issued a public challenge to the government project engineers to sign a legally binding bond to pay the revealed shortfall, a challenge that remains unanswered to this day.

Stanford University student Neepa Acharya said: "Many environmental and human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Friends of the Earth have highlighted problems with the rehabilitation. They all agree about the unreliability of claims being made about the benefits of the SSP. Given this, and the many concerns raised earlier about various other aspects, we demand a comprehensive review of the project."

When age knew no bar

SAM RAO
Hayward, Calif.

THREE-YEAR-OLD Rehena Prasad dressed as a Krishna and more than 20 dancers in full Odissi regalia ushered the dance drama "Mahishasura Mardini" at the California State University on April 9.

Held at the California State University (CSU)-East Bay in Hayward, the event was part of the annual presentation of the East SF Bay Nataraj School of Dance. More than 300 people attended the event which was directed by Sima Chakraborty

Beginning with Mangalacharan, the traditional opening piece of an Odissi concert, the dancers

offered flowers to deity Lord Jagannath, followed by a salutation to Mother Earth.

Ananda Bhairavi Pallavi, the following piece was a pure dance piece based heavily on rhythmic patterns. The dancers Ashmi Chakraborty, Sushmi Chakraborty and Sushrita Neogi matched their feet and expressions perfectly to the vocals.

"Mahishasura Mardini" or the main item told the tale of triumph of good over evil with elaborate lighting and perfect feet placement and timing from all the dancers. "It is indeed a pleasure to see these kids raised in America put in so much effort in get their performances right," said Daksha Shah, an attendee.



Dancers performing Mahishasura Mardini

No more passage from India?



GUEST COLUMN
Gautam Dutta

FOR better or worse, immigration has grabbed national headlines. A bill passed by the House of Representatives would make it a federal crime to (1) stay in the US without proper documentation, and (2) help any immigrant who lacks proper documentation. How will the current debate affect the Indian American and South Asian community?

Much like the proposed US-India nuclear pact, immigration is one issue where we simply cannot afford to stay silent. Much is at stake. While most undocumented immigrants come from Latin America, a surprising number also come from South Asia. Let us take one example. Suppose the sister of a US citizen arrives from India on a tourist visa, but then overstays the visa. Under the House bill (H.R. 4437), she could not only be arrested, imprisoned and deported, but

her brother's family could also be charged with a felony for helping her stay in the country.

What is more, if bills like H.R. 4437 become the law, some anti-immigrant lawmakers may next attack the H-1B visa program, which has enabled generations of Indian American professionals to immigrate here. Listen to Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo: "The H-1B program is not necessary and actually is harmful to our nation's interests."

In 2003, Tancredo tried to kill the entire H-1B program. This year he may try to do so again—especially with fears of outsourcing and immigrants (again) on the rise. We must fight mean-spirited measures that are aimed against immigrant communities like ours. We must see to it that our Senators and Congressmembers hear our collective voice.

Going as far back as the mid 19th century, South Asian immigrants have helped make America strong and prosperous. By acting today, we will ensure that this great country belongs to all Americans: immigrants and non-immigrants alike.

Gautam Dutta is the founder of South Asian Americans for Government Accountability (SAAGA)

