

# Knowing Medha Patkar

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**New Delhi:** Medha Patkar or Medha *tai* (aunt) - as she is popularly known – has been fighting for the right to life and livelihood of those sections of people who get nudged to the sidewalks of life in a nation's search for growth and prosperity.

Her odyssey, spanning 21 years, is a struggle against an unjust system that deprives common people - especially the natural resource-based communities - who pay the cost for the benefit of those who already have much more with them.

Hers is a philosophy focussed on achieving marginalised people their rights. The following words, her own, best reflect her wisdom, her vision and the meaning of life according to her.

"I have raised the issue of mega projects, the development planning, democratic and human rights, economics and corruption of monitory and natural resources by such projects and suggested that just and sustainable alternatives in water, energy and other sectors are possible," says she.

"Most of those that I work with in the Valley are going to lose their lands, their homes, their forests, their community, their culture and indeed, their very identity because of this project. I have taken up their cause because I can feel their loss, I can identify with them they are indeed like my family. I will continue to fight for them in every forum and in every way that I can."

Patkar was born on December 1, 1954 in Mumbai. Her father was a freedom fighter and later a trade unionist. Her mother worked in a women's organisation named Swadhar.

After earning an MA in social work from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, she worked with voluntary organisations in Bombay slums for five years as well as the tribal districts of North-East Gujarat for two years.

She left her position on the faculty of Tata Institute of Social Sciences as well as her unfinished PhD when she got immersed in the tribal and peasant communities in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat - which she eventually organised as the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

The NBA Movement began as a fight for information about the Narmada Valley Development Projects and continued as a fight for just rehabilitation for the lakhs of people ousted by the Sardar Sarovar Dam and other large dams along the Narmada river.

Eventually, when it became clear that the magnitude of the project precluded accurate assessment of damages and losses, and that rehabilitation was impossible, the movement challenged the very basis of the project and questioned its claim to 'development'.

Patkar has gained fame through the andolan making her a known name throughout India. She is one of the recipients of Right Livelihood Award for the year 1991.

Medha Patkar has received numerous other awards, including the Deena Nath Mangeshkar Award, Mahatma Phule Award, Goldman Environment Prize, Green Ribbon Award for Best International Political Campaigner by BBC, and the Human Rights Defender's Award from Amnesty International.

Among India's most dynamic activists, she is Medha *tai* for schoolchildren and policemen alike.

She knows the Narmada Valley hamlet by hamlet. Equally fleetfooted on the narrow mountain paths with only a torch and the light of the moon and stars, or on the Indian Railways where all the Ticket Collectors are familiar with her travelling karyalaya - documents, banners, pamphlets - Medha Patkar follows the truth to its lair.

Veteran of several fasts, monsoon satyagrahas on the banks of the rising Narmada, her uncompromising insistence on the right to life and livelihood has compelled the post-Independence generation in India as well as around the world to revisit the basic questions of natural resources, human rights, environment, and development.

Facing police beatings and many jail terms on the way, she continues to believe in the best of people and the democratic system. She has won over police and even government officers through her simple faith in justice and comprehensive analysis of the facts.