**The Real Swadesis** BY VEENA RAO

ARAVINDA & RAVI went back from the US to work in the rural interiors of India, and were the inspiration behind Ashutosh Gowariker’s ‘Swades’. A chat with the tireless twosome- the real Mohan Bhargavs.

She was raised in the US. He was a PhD in particle Physics from the University of Maryland. In 1998, the two NRIs quit their lives in the US and moved back to India, to work for the cause of rural development and people’s movement.

They have been acknowledged as one of the inspirations behind Ashutosh Gowariker’s “Swades”. Aravinda Pillalamarri and Ravi Kuchimanchi’s journey from the US to the Adivasi heartland of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has been reflected in the movie, where NASA engineer Mohan Bhargav, played by Shahrukh Khan, goes back to the interiors of rural India, in search of his roots.

Gowariker read Rajni Bakshi’s book ‘Bapu Kuti’, through which he got to know about Aravinda and Ravi, and the Bilgaon project. He was interested in meeting the two NRIs and the idea of lighting a village appealed to him. After spending considerable time with Aravinda and Ravi, both dedicated Association for India’s Development (AID) volunteers, Gowarikar visited Bilgaon, an adivasi village in the Narmada valley, which is the back drop of the NBA movement. The people of Bilgaon are credited with doing 2000 person-days of ‘shramdaan’ [note 1] to make their village energy self-sufficient. The Bilgaon project is recognized as a model for replication by the Government of Maharshtra.

“Ashutosh was interested in knowing things like the costs and whether that was something Shah Rukh Khan could withdraw out of the ATM machine, the size and space of something that would be needed to light a village so he could visualize the sets, how fast something like this could be built and also about suggestions for the story and the script that he read out,” says Aravinda. “He took contacts so that he could get the turbine replicated.”

But the conflict and with it the people power that comes to ascertain the right to water resource and local decision making is not brought out in the movie though that was discussed as well, say the duo.

When Aravinda and Ravi first went to the Narmada valley in 1998, it was totally dark. Then the first lights came through the pedal generator that they helped design whereby lighting up the schools (jeevanshalas) and the Satyagraha center with people taking turns pedaling- one hour of pedaling gave three hours of light to a room. Today, Bilgaon is energy-self-sufficient. They hope the day is not far when every house in the Narmada valley has lights. Ravi and Aravinda believe that this can happen soon if the issue is raised, since the Sardar Sarovar Dam is nearby and is reported to be already generating power. “But where is this power going to?” they question.

It has been an enlightening journey for Aravinda and Ravi, who decided to plunge headlong into India’s development and people’s issues through AID. Ravi is one of the founding members of AID at College Park, Maryland. He was a PhD student in particle Physics, when he decided in 1998 that he wanted to return to India to work for the cause of the villages. “ It was not an easy decision to quit formal research in Physics which I love. However with scientific papers accessible on the Internet nowadays, I manage to keep up with the developments in the field and even publish something once in a while,” he says. “If you believe life is not compartmentalized, then you don't have to get out of one compartment (Physics) to get into another compartment- grassroots.”

For Aravinda, it was the urge to work for the cause of India’s development that led her to set base in India. “I thought when I moved to India that I was getting away from the first world and into the third and fourth worlds,” says the US raised activist. “But living in Bombay, accessing current at the flip of a switch, water on tap, and of course Internet at one's fingertips, the first world was still very much with me.

“What I found after spending some time with the indigenous people of the Narmada Valley was that when they would go to meet the district collector it was all foreign - foreign language, foreign concepts. One can be in the same country yet be in a different world. If you read the Supreme Court judgment on the Narmada case you will find some appalling anthropological interpretations of tribal society and people. They actually say things like, we need sturdy people to occupy the border areas, and therefore displacing them from the valley is a matter of national security. And a real classic statement: tribals do not live in community -- their houses are far apart. But if you spend even a few days in a tribal hamlet you will learn that each one of those houses was built with the participation of every family in the village. Yet today those houses are submerged without the consent of any of those villagers, just by decisions made in remote centers of power approved in World Banks and Supreme Courts that don't even speak the same language or live in the same world as those whose fates they seal.”

Aravinda and Ravi believe that struggling with the people of the Narmada Valley and many other movements throughout India has given them the opportunity to be part of a great struggle for freedom and democracy.

“People of the third and fourth worlds deserve the opportunity to express themselves, to be heard, to develop according to their own aspirations and principles, to access technology and modern amenities on their own terms without being deprived of what is valuable in their own society and culture,” says Aravinda. “Too often, the choice is- if you want clean water, electricity, and higher education, then come and fend for it in the city - risking everything at steep odds.”

“Why aren't we finding ways to provide these in the villages so that people actually have a choice where and how to live,” she questions. “If we look at budgets and development plans we find it is highly skewed towards the urban areas and plans for urgently needed local projects like watershed management in the rural areas just don't get a fair share. And the large centralized projects whether for water or electricity tend to provide more to those who already have these, and leave those without in the same boat or even worse off.”

The duo first visited the villages affected by the Sardar Sarovar dam in 1998 after reading about the NBA movement, seeing films and meeting Medha Patkar (of NBA) when she visited the US. Since then they have been part of satyagrahas, met with government officials from tehsil to state level and also tried to raise awareness at the Supreme Court and World Bank.

“We have also made friends with many young activists of the Narmada movement and we are inspired by their courage and dedication,” says Ravi. “We have great respect for the adivasis of the Narmada valley like Noorji bhai who have taken this non-violent struggle of gandhian proportions from their village to the World Bank in Washington DC, which eventually withdrew from this project after their internal investigation found that the issues the NBA was raising were valid. Through nearly 20 years of struggle many of them have grown old waiting for rehabilitation, and our courts are yet to deliver them justice.”

The young activists believe that it is not just alternate energy that is needed, but also alternate purposes and alternate politics. The electric lines from the Sardar Sarovar dam by-pass the adivasi belt of villages of the Narmada valley, which are right next to the dam. These villages have been in darkness despite 55 years of independence. Lower lying adivasi villages have been submerged for the sake of the dam. “So why are the electricity benefits bypassing the remaining adivasi villages and going straight to the cities? The purpose of the dam is not the development of the underprivileged,” they say.

“Gujarat's Narmada waters are stored in villages of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra by the sardar Sarovar dam. Alternate designs where Narmada waters are diverted to Gujarat and stored locally require a smaller dam. Currently states, which are bearing the brunt of displacement, do not get many benefits out of the dam and they have no will to rehabilitate people. The state that is getting the maximum benefits is having the least displacement and so is demanding a higher and higher dam. Thus the inter-state politics and alternate design options are connected. An alternate development paradigm has affected people as planners and stake-holders of the development process. Local watershed structures that tap rain water often compete for state funds that are eaten up by larger projects.”

Aravinda and Ravi also stress the importance of alternate life-styles where ordinary citizens play a key role. Reducing wasteful consumption of electricity in the peak evening hours in our city homes will imply that more village homes will have lights in the night, especially in a country like India where energy is scarce, they say.

What is their day like while touring remote villages? In the plains of Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh, they don't have a language gap. But in the adivasi villages of Maharashtra, they depend on having at least one person who can speak both Hindi as well as Pavri / Bhilali, the local languages.

“It is a lot of fun and also one feels a burst of energy when one goes to villages,” they gush. “Things would have happened since we last went to the village. There is catching up to do, exchanging notes with the village people... how what we were planning together actually got implemented. What new challenges cropped up. What new ideas do they have since our last visit. It is a process of collaboration with each village and our days are spent going from one village to other once we visit a cluster of villages and spending the maximum time we can with the people and planning and doing things. Sometimes people have been working on a problem for some time and get stuck in trying to get the required information or sanctioning from the government and need to meet the officials. Usually in the tour we stay in a village person's house when night falls. We are pampered as their guests and we eat and sleep in their homes.”

Most villages in India are welcoming and it is not hard at all to visit a village, talk to people, make friends instantly and begin a collaboration, they insist. The challenge is in going from this beginning to the most deprived and oppressed people in the villages, because these people are off the radar screen of the village people who have the leisure time to chat with visitors. Working with the oppressed may hinder the interests of some of the better-off people. So one also has to go through a process where village people are sensitized to the poorest people's plights and rights in their own village. There is local knowledge and talent, both in the poor and the better-off in the village and this needs to be understood and tapped. Rapport is built slowly over time, through both ups and downs that one can share and build on, they add.

The two NRIs who have dedicated their lives to the cause of India’s rural development have a word of advise for Indians abroad. “Avail of of opportunities to keep in touch with the struggles of the majority,” they say.

“To understand the need for an Employment Guarantee Act, for minimum wages, for Right to Information, transparency in public works, one must read beyond what makes it into mainstream media headlines. One must have the patience to go to smaller press publications, some of which are now accessible through Internet and sites like ‘India Together’. One cannot only depend on the Internet and English media - many very important analyses are articulated in the various languages of India. When an urban educated individual, especially an NRI, hears the issues of the common people, then he or she can keep these issues in the public by writing letters to the editor. NRIs have also served the people's causes by writing letters to government officials, who tend to behave differently when they know they are being watched, especially by NRIs. In the countries of their own residence, NRIs have also come together to hold companies such as Dow or Ogden responsible for toxic waste dumping or illegal displacement resulting from their operations in India. People have been able to bring this to the notice of shareholders and put pressure on these companies to change their policies.”

It has been an incredible journey of self-discovery and fulfillment for these two NRIs who returned to make a difference. Their vision for India is simple. “It is high time the people in the cities and villages sit together and have a shared vision.” And that encapsulates their awe-inspiring story!

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This article: <http://nripulse.com/profile_RaviAravinda.htm>

Notes:

1. Shramdaan – a labour of hope: is a film that showcases the powerful technique that brings people together and ensures their commitment to long-term sustainability of the project. Shramdaan means voluntary, in-kind contribution, usually in labour, of the WHOLE village to a development project.

Note: This definition from a website that reports on these projects: WATERSHED ORGANISATION TRUST (WOTR) WOTR is one of the premier NGOs tackling water scarcity, rural poverty, and food insecurity in the drylands of India today. Our participatory approach achieves holistic sustainability and the full engagement of each village we work and links ecological rejuvenation with socio-economic programmes. In its 18 years it has organized over 1,000 watershed development projects, covering over 600,000 hectares and impacting 821,000 people. <http://voices.wotr.org/category/watersheds/> If this interests you, it would make a good research project.