

Refusing to go Dutch

By Claude Alvares

"GOING Dutch" is an old familiar phrase for, "you pay your way, I pay mine." But if recent events in Holland are any guide, the Dutch themselves are fast shedding that uncooperative attitude, particularly in their relations with India. Unknown to many in this country, for the past two years they have begun to take a more active interest in developments here from technology transfer to human rights, and for the first time have gone beyond the normal constraints of foreign policy or business dictates.

A small nation of 14 million people, the Dutch were forced to go multi-national long before the rest of their neighbours - Phillips, Unilever and Royal Dutch Shell are giant MNCs today - because of the small domestic market. More than half the incomes of these companies comes from trading abroad, and Dutch aid policy has traditionally done little beyond directly or indirectly supporting these and other similar interests - till the arrival of Nobel Laureate economist, Jan Tinbergen and a young radical politician called Jan Pronk, when for the first time an effort was made to see that Dutch aid went to countries that needed it most, and within these, to people who needed it most (the "poorest of the poor" as Dutch documents describe them).

India is the biggest recipient of Dutch aid but till this year three-quarters of it went to purchase fertilisers, and a sizable amount was scheduled for the mechanisation of the Indian fishing industry. Reports of serious conflicts in the fishing industry between traditional fishermen and mechanised trawlers had however already begun filtering into Holland, and this year the India Committee of Netherlands (an action-group based in Utrecht, but affiliating 20 such groups from all over the country) decided to go on the offensive.

LARGE CONTRACT

The Indian Sixth Five-Year Plan had targetted for a total of 350 deep-sea trawlers, and a large contract for these was due to be signed between Dutch shipbuilding yards and the Indian Government, the money to come out of development aid. Hearing of the move, and already exasperated with ineffective Central and State Government measures to protect traditional fishermen, the "National Forum for Catamaran and Countryboat Fishermen" now began to appeal directly to Europeans to boycott Indian fish exports

and to mobilise opinion against the European export of mechanised trawlers. A special letter was sent to the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation. The India Committee took up the battle from there.

The main thrust of the argument was that the Ministry was following a contradictory programme: on the one hand, official development policy declared aid to the poorest of the poor, on the other, funds from the same Ministry were being used to purchase Dutch trawlers that would only further immiserate many more of the 6.5 million traditional fishermen along India's coastline. The Dutch public was inclined to agree that the trawler policy was incorrect, and the Dutch government, bowing to pressure, indicated to the Indian Government that the entire matter would have to be re-examined.

FISHERY RESEARCH

Meanwhile nine trawlers had already been despatched to India, but the production of another eight (each costing Rs. 75 lakhs) was effectively blocked. A compromise solution was worked out. Some of the nine trawlers already sent could be used in an "experimental deep-sea fishing programme": they would work for some months in the deep sea zone, having been guaranteed a sufficient rate of return in case the catch was less than that. They would fish following briefings from Indian fishery research institutes, use specific nets and gear for deep-sea fishing and if necessary use Dutch technical assistance.

According to a Dutch prawn biologist, there were fourteen different kinds of prawns to be caught in the Indian deep-sea zone and finding out if these can be caught in high enough quantities to make deep-sea fishing profitable, can only be done by "taking out" commercial vessels into the zone. According to the Dutch expert, facts from fishery surveys are only indicators and statistical averages from samples, but never proof that commercial trawlers will or won't catch enough to make profits. Such "trial and error" experience is necessary. It was only through a combination of institute surveys and real life tryouts that Dutch deep-sea fishery came into being.

Significantly, the Indian Government, despite all the pious rhetoric in Plan documents expressing sympathy for the traditional fishermen, refused to accept the proposition, saying that this would amount to interference in the country's do-

mesic affairs. No guarantees were ever offered that the mechanised trawlers would not desert the deep-sea zone and invade the traditional ecological niches of the artisanal fishermen groups. As a result, in the final week of June this year, when negotiations between Indian and Dutch officials took place in The Hague, the issue of the trawlers did not even come up: the money was routed to another project.

It was a difficult phase for the Dutch: the decision was a big blow to the Dutch shipbuilding yards, especially since there had been indications that after the eight trawlers, more orders would have been forthcoming. Representatives of the shipyards met members of the India Committee to ask them to lay off the issue, but the Committee held its ground.

Nobody in his right mind would now conclude that the fishing problem has been solved. No real solution will be available till Central and State Governments put a moratorium on the introduction of any fresh trawlers, unless they can also afford patrol boats for violations. But the Dutch by their action have raised the whole question of development cooperation to an entirely new level, and this is the most significant aspect of the event.

The second major issue that has now been brought to the Dutch public eye by the Indian Committee is the sale of fertilisers to India. 70 per cent of Dutch aid to India is credit (at 2.5 per cent interest) to purchase fertilisers from Dutch companies. In 1981, India spent 160 out of 234 million guilders on fertilisers. But in 1980-81, India paid 150 million guilders more for the same quantity of fertilisers it had purchased in 1979. In other words, for the same money we got 57 per cent of the fertilisers we got in 1979: a price-increase of 77 per cent!

AID MONEY

In the US, during the same period, prices of urea declined by nine per cent. But because of the credit tie-up, India continued to buy 46 per cent of its fertilisers from Holland and only nine per cent from the US. The India Committee charged that a cartel was operating among fertiliser companies supplying goods to the Third World from development money. Because of it, India effectively paid back 33 per cent of its aid money without even receiving it.

Also revealing, about 60 million guilders worth of fertilisers were lost

in handling at Rotterdam port itself: we were the losers. The fertilisers, observed a report of the India Committee, are anyway destined for rich farmers in India and this again indicated that Dutch aid policy should be reviewed and brought in line to support activities or transfers of resources to the "poorest of the poor".

In August this year, the India Committee issued a Declaration roundly condemning human rights violations in India, which was signed among others by 20 Dutch groups and committees concerned with India and by the seven principal political parties in the Netherlands (having a total of 144 seats in the 150 member Parliament). The Declaration, which was to be presented to the new Indian Ambassador in The Hague in September, expressed considerable anxiety over fake encounters, blindings, and atrocities against tribals and Harijans.

CIVIL RIGHTS

That is not all. An Amsterdam group of lawyers is now busy preparing legal material for the Supreme Court of India on the pavement dwellers question, on a request from Indian civil rights groups. The only precedent in the pavement dwellers question comes from Holland, which is also facing a severe, artificially created housing shortage. At last count, some 500,000 people were looking for a house.

In the absence of government action against speculators and blackmarketeers, homeless people have invaded vacant private and government property for occupation. They are officially known as "squatters", and just as our pavement dwellers and slum inhabitants have had to face bulldozers, the squatters have had to face Centurion tanks and helicopter raids in their struggle to assert their rights to housing.

The squatters' movement is more than ten years old, but important judgments are being painstakingly collected and translated for preparation of an "aidememoire" to the Supreme Court. It is an unusual attempt at cooperation in the international legal system, but as one Amsterdam lawyer says, the problem in the case of the pavement dwellers and the squatters is the same: the basic right to housing, which is not being enforced, while governments continue to protect speculators and contractors. "Our legal systems may differ", he says, "but as far as we are human beings, we are all the same."