

The Role Of Arundhati Roy As A Social Activist In The Greater Common Good

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Abstract

In Booker Prize Winning Novel "The God of small things", Arundhati Roy turned a compassionate but unrelenting eye on one family in India. Now she lavishes the same acrobatic language and fierce humanity on the future of her beloved country. In this spirited polemic, Roy dares to take on two of the great illusions of India's progress : the massive dam projects that were supposed to haul this sprawling subcontinent into the modern age abut which instead have displaced untold millions and the detonation of India's first nuclear Bomb, with all its attendant Faustian bargains.

"Roy peels away the mask of
Democracy and prosperity to
Show the true cost hidden beneath
for those who have been mesmerized
by her fictional Vision of India, here
is a sketch, Traced in fire, of its topsy,
Turvy society, where the lives of
the many are sacrificed for
The comforts of the few."

Keywords: Compromising politicians, construction companies, environmental damage, irrigation, power production and flood control.

The Greater common good attacks the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in Western India. The Greater common good aruges against the building of a controversial dam on the Narmada River in India. Roy notes that 60% of the 2,00,00 people likely to be uprooted by the project are tribal people, many illiterate, who will be deprived of their original livelihoods and land. Roy criticizes the World Bank, the Indian government and

a political system that favors interest groups at the expense of the poor. Roy notes in "The cost of living", India is the third largest dam-builder in the world", having constructed since 1948 a total of roughly 3,200 big dams. The latest and most ambitious undertaking along these lines is the Sardar Sarovar Dam, a monumental mega-Dam that is being built on the Narmada River in Central India. In Roy's words, the reservoirs of these dams have "uprooted millions of people."

Arundhati says about her essay "The Greater common Good" – I thought that some dams (not 3,200 of them) were being built on the Narmada that large numbers of people were being displaced and that resettlement was being carried out callously in true government fashion. When the World Bank withdrew in 1993 and the Supreme Court ordered a stay on the construction in 1994, I thought that the struggle had more or less been won. I assumed that the court was reviewing the whole project. In February, when the stay was lifted, my antenna went up. Then I substituted the fiction, I intended to read in the coming months with journals and books and documentary films about dams. I developed an inordinate interest in drainage and irrigation. I met some of the activists who had been working in the valley for year with the NBA-the extra ordinary Narmada Bachao Andolan. What I learned, changed me, fascinated me. It revealed in relentless detail, a Government's highly evolved, intricate way of pulverizing a people behind the genial mask of democracy. In March, I traveled to the Narmada Valley, I returned ashamed of how little I knew about a struggle that had been going on for so many years. I returned convinced that the valley needed a writer.

The NBA has been fighting for over 20 years to get adequate rehabilitation for people who have been dislocated from the Narmada Valley in Central India. The Narmada Valley Development project is supposed to be the most ambitious river valley development project in the world. It envisages building 3,200 dams that will reconstitute the Narmada and her 41 tributaries into a series of step reservoirs – an immense staircase of amenable water of these, 30 will be major dams, 135 medium and the rest small. Two of the major dams will be multipurpose mega dams. The Sardar Sarovar in Gujarat and the Narmada Sagar in Madhya Pradesh will, between them, hold more water than any other reservoir on the Indian sub-continent.

Her essay on the subject is a pain-takingly detailed and impassioned account of the economic impetus behind the dam, which is now more than halfway completed, as well as, its environmental and social affects. Roy contextualize the Sardar Sarovar project in the wider

history of India's massive dam building – history propelled by what she calls on "Iron Triangle" of "Compromising politicians, bureaucrats dam – construction companies", environmental "racketeers" and "Friendly neighborhood world bank officials".

"The Government of India has
Detailed figures for how many
Millions tons of food Grains
Or edible oils the country
Produces and how much more
We produce but the Government
Of India does not have a record
Of the number of people that have
Been displaced by dams."

Roy recounts how India's 3,200 dams have drowned thousands of villages, uprooted millions of people and caused irreversible environment damage, while the government has stood by documenting no record of the displacement and offering almost nothing in the way of rehabilitation. The million of displaced people don't exist anymore. When history is written – they won't be in it. Not even as statistics. Some of them have subsequently been displaced three or four times – a dam, an artillery proof range, another dam, a uranium mine, a power project. The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war.

The Government claims to the Sardar Sarovar projects will produce 1450 Mega watts of power. The thing about multi-purpose dams like the Sardar Sarovar is that their 'purposes' (Irrigation, Power Production, and flood control) conflict with each other. Irrigation uses up the water you need to produce power, flood control requires you to keep the reservoir empty during the monsoon months to deal with an anticipated surfeit. And if there's no surfeit. You're left with an empty dam. And this defeats the purpose of irrigation, which is to store the monsoon water. It's like the riddle of trying to ford a river with a fox, a chicken and a bag of grain. The result of these mutually conflicts aims, studies says,

Is that when the Sardar
Sarovar project are completed,
And the Scheme is fully
Functional, it will end up

Producing only 3 percent of the
Power that its planners say
It will 50 mega watts.

"Big dams are to a nation's development what nuclear bombs are to its military arsenal," writes Roy in "The Greater Common Good". "They're both weapons of Mass destruction. They're both weapons government use to control their own people. Both twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival... they scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence."

But instead of a forest from which they gathered everything they needed – Food, Fuel, fodder, rope, gum, tobacco, tooth powder, medicinal herbs, housing material – they earth between ten and twenty rupees a day with which to feed and keep their families. Instead of a river, they have a hand-pump. Displacement causes untold misery to the people as it uproots them, destroys their culture, snatches education from children, taking away livelihoods from the men and forces women to work harder for their sustenance. In several resettlement sites, people have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in winter. Some of them are located in dry river beds which, during the monsoon, turn into fast flowing drifts when the water recede they leave ruin. Malaria, diarrhea, sick cattle stranded in slush. The ancient teak beams dismantled from their previous homes, carefully stacked away like postponed dreams, now spongy, rotten and unusable. Many of those who have been resettled are people who have lived all their lives deep in the forest with virtually no contact with money and the modern world. Suddenly they find themselves left with the option of starving to death several kilometers to the nearest town, sitting in the market place (both men and women), offering themselves as wage labour, like goods on sale. "In Vadaj, a resettlement site I visited near Baroda, the man who was talking to me rocked his stick baby in his arms, clumps of flies gathered on its sleeping eyelids children collected around us, taking care not to burn their bare skin on the scorching tin walls of the shed they call a home. The man's mind was far away from the troubles of his sick baby. He was making me a list of the fruit he used to pick in the forest. He counted 48 kinds. He told me that he didn't think he or his children would ever be able to afford to eat any fruit again. I asked him what was

wrong with his baby. He said it would be better for the baby to die than to have to live like this. I asked what the baby's mother thought about that. She didn't reply. She just stared."

In India over the last ten years the fight against the Sardar Sarovar Dam has come to represent for more than the fight for one river. This has been its strength as well as its weakness. Some years ago, it became a debate that captured the popular imagination. That's what raised the stakes and changed the complexion of the battle from being a fight over the fate of river valley it began to raise doubts about an entire political system. What is at issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its river? Its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. They are being taken hugely seriously by the state. They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command – the army, the police, the bureaucracy, the courts. And not just answered, but answered unambiguously in bitter, brutal ways.

For the people who've been resettled, everything has to be re-learned. Every little thing, every big thing: from shitting and pissing (where'd you do it when there's no jungle to hide you?) to buying a bus ticket, to learning a new language, to understanding money. And worst of all, learning to be supplicants. Learning to take orders. Learning to have masters. Learning to answer only when you're addressed. In addition to all this, they have to learn how to make written representations to the Grievance Redressal committee or the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam for any particular problems they might have. Recently 3,000 people came to Delhi to protest their situation – travelling overnight by train, living on the blazing streets. The president wouldn't meet them because he had an eye infection. Maneka Gandhi, the minister for social Justice and Empowerment, wouldn't meet them but asked for a written representation. When the representation was handed to her, she scolded the little delegation for not having written it in English.

But fighting people tire. They fall ill. Even the young age prematurely. For twenty years now, since the Tribunal's award the ragged army in the valley has lived with the fear of eviction. For twenty years in most areas there has been no sign of 'development' – no roads, no schools, no wells no medical help. For 20 years, it has borne the stigma 'slated for submergence' – so it's isolated from the rest of society (no marriage proposals, no land transactions). They're a bit like the Hibakushas in Japan (the victims and their descendants of the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki). The 'Fruits of modern development', when they finally came, brought only horror. Roads brought surveyors. Surveyors brought trucks.

Trucks brought policemen. Policemen brought bullets and beatings and rape and arrest and, in one case, murder.

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