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## The End Of Imagination

**"My world has died. I write to mourn its passing." Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy on India's Nuclear Bomb.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

"The desert shook," the Government of India informed us (its people).

"The whole mountain turned white," the Government of Pakistan replied.

*"By afternoon the wind had fallen silent over Pokhran. At 3.45 p.m., the timer detonated the three devices. Around 200 to 300 m deep in the earth, the heat generated was equivalent to a million degrees centigrade - as hot as temperatures on the sun. Instantly, rocks weighing around a thousand tons, a mini mountain underground, vapourized... shockwaves from the blast began to lift a mound of earth the size of a football field by several metres. One scientist on seeing it said, "I can now believe stories of Lord Krishna lifting a hill." - India Today.*

May 1998. It'll go down in history books, provided, of course, we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future. There's nothing new or original left to be said about nuclear weapons. There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably.

I am prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because, in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible. So those of you who are willing: let's pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes and speak our second-hand lines in this sad second-hand play. But let's not forget that the stakes we're playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. The end of our children and our children's children. Of everything we love. We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight.

Once again we are pitifully behind the times - not just scientifically and technologically (ignore the hollow claims), but more pertinently in our ability to grasp the true nature of nuclear weapons. Our Comprehension of the Horror Department is hopelessly obsolete. Here we are, all of us in India and in Pakistan, discussing the finer points of politics, and foreign policy, behaving for all the world as though our governments have just devised a newer, bigger bomb, a sort of immense hand grenade with which they will annihilate the enemy (each other) and protect us from all harm. How desperately we want to believe that. What wonderful, willing, well-behaved, gullible subjects we have turned out to be. The rest of humanity (Yes, yes, I know, I know, but let's ignore Them for the moment. They forfeited their votes a long time ago), the rest of the rest of humanity may not forgive us, but then the rest of the rest of humanity, depending on who fashions its views, may not know what a tired, dejected heart-broken people we are. Perhaps it doesn't realize how urgently we need a miracle. How deeply we yearn for magic.

If only, if only, nuclear war was just another kind of war. If only it was about the usual things - nations and territories, gods and histories. If only those of us who dread it are just worthless moral cowards who are not prepared to die in defence of our beliefs. If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements - the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water - will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible.

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animal and vegetable, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is.

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What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?

The Head of the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Bombay has a plan. He declared in an interview (The Pioneer, April 24, 1998) that India could survive nuclear war. His advice is that if there is a nuclear war, we take the same safety measures as the ones that scientists have recommended in the event of accidents at nuclear plants.

Take iodine pills, he suggests. And other steps such as remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. Infants should be given powdered milk. "People in the danger zone should immediately go to the ground floor and if possible to the basement."

What do you do with these levels of lunacy? What do you do if you're trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged?

Ignore it, it's just a novelist's naivete, they'll tell you, Doomsday Prophet hyperbole. It'll never come to that. There will be no war. Nuclear weapons are about peace, not war. 'Deterrence' is the buzz word of the people who like to think of themselves as hawks. (Nice birds, those. Cool. Stylish. Predatory. Pity there won't be many of them around after the war. Extinction is a word we must try and get used to.) Deterrence is an old thesis that has been resurrected and is being recycled with added local flavour. The Theory of Deterrence cornered the credit for having prevented the Cold War from turning into a Third World War. The only immutable fact about The Third World War is that if there's going to be one, it will be fought after the Second World War. In other words, there's no fixed schedule. In other words, we still have time. And perhaps the pun (The Third World War) is prescient. True, the Cold War is over, but let's not be hoodwinked by the ten-year lull in nuclear posturing. It was just a cruel joke. It was only in remission. It wasn't cured. It proves no theories. After all, what is ten years in the history of the world? Here it is again, the disease. More widespread and less amenable to any sort of treatment than ever. No, the Theory of Deterrence has some fundamental flaws.

Flaw Number One is that it presumes a complete, sophisticated understanding of the psychology of your enemy. It assumes that what deters you (the fear of annihilation) will deter them. What about those who are not deterred by that? The suicide bomber psyche - the 'We'll take you with us' school - is that an outlandish thought? How did Rajiv Gandhi die?

In any case who's the 'you' and who's the 'enemy'? Both are only governments. Governments change. They wear masks within masks. They moult and re-invent themselves all the time. The one we have at the moment, for instance, does not even have enough seats to last a full term in office, but demands that we trust it to do pirouettes and party tricks with nuclear bombs even as it scrabbles around for a foothold to maintain a simple majority in Parliament.

Flaw Number Two is that Deterrence is premised on fear. But fear is premised on knowledge. On an understanding of the true extent and scale of the devastation that nuclear war will wreak. It is not some inherent, mystical attribute of nuclear bombs that they automatically inspire thoughts of peace. On the contrary, it is the endless, tireless, confrontational work of people who have had the courage to openly denounce them, the marches, the demonstrations, the films, the outrage - that is what has averted, or perhaps only postponed, nuclear war. Deterrence will not and cannot work given the levels of ignorance and illiteracy that hang over our two countries like dense, impenetrable veils. (Witness the VHP wanting to distribute radioactive sand from the Pokhran desert as prasad all across India. A cancer yatra?) The Theory of Deterrence is nothing but a perilous joke in a world where iodine pills are prescribed as a prophylactic for nuclear irradiation.

India and Pakistan have nuclear bombs now and feel entirely justified in having them. Soon others will too. Israel, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Nepal (I'm trying to be eclectic here), Denmark, Germany, Bhutan, Mexico, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Burma, Bosnia, Singapore, North Korea, Sweden, South Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan... and why not? Every country in the world has a special case to make. Everybody has borders and beliefs. And when all our larders are bursting with shiny bombs and our bellies are empty (Deterrence is an exorbitant beast), we can trade bombs for food. And when nuclear technology goes on the market, when it gets truly competitive and prices fall, not just governments, but anybody who can afford it can have their own private arsenal - businessmen, terrorists, perhaps even the occasional rich writer (like myself). Our planet will bristle with beautiful

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missiles. There will be a new world order. The dictatorship of the pro-nuke elite. We can get our kicks by threatening each other. It'll be like bungee- jumping when you can't rely on the bungee cord, or playing Russian roulette all day long. An additional perk will be the thrill of Not Knowing What To Believe. We can be victims of the predatory imagination of every green card-seeking charlatan who surfaces in the West with concocted stories of imminent missile attacks. We can delight at the prospect of being held to ransom by every petty trouble-maker and rumour-monger, the more the merrier if truth be told, anything for an excuse to make more bombs. So you see, even without a war, we have a lot to look forward to.

But let us pause to give credit where it's due. Whom must we thank for all this?

The Men who made it happen. The Masters of the Universe. Ladies and gentlemen, The United States of America! Come on up here folks, stand up and take a bow. Thankyou for doing this to the world. Thankyou for making a difference. Thankyou for showing us the way. Thankyou for altering the very meaning of life.

From now on it is not dying we must fear, but living.

It is such supreme folly to believe that nuclear weapons are deadly only if they're used. The fact that they exist at all, their very presence in our lives, will wreak more havoc than we can begin to fathom. Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. They bury themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our brains. They are purveyors of madness. They are the ultimate coloniser. Whiter than any white man that ever lived. The very heart of whiteness.

All I can say to every man, woman and sentient child here in India, and over there, just a little way away in Pakistan, is: Take it personally. Whoever you are - Hindu, Muslim, urban, agrarian - it doesn't matter. The only good thing about nuclear war is that it is the single most egalitarian idea that man has ever had. On the day of reckoning, you will not be asked to present your credentials. The devastation will be indiscriminate. The bomb isn't in your backyard. It's in your body. And mine. Nobody, no nation, no government, no man, no god, has the right to put it there. We're radioactive already, and the war hasn't even begun. So stand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally.

### THE BOMB AND I

In early May (before the bomb), I left home for three weeks. I thought I would return. I had every intention of returning. Of course, things haven't worked out quite the way I had planned.

While I was away, I met a friend of mine whom I have always loved for, among other things, her ability to combine deep affection with a frankness that borders on savagery.

"I've been thinking about you," she said, "about The God of Small Things - what's in it, what's over it, under it, around it, above it..."

She fell silent for a while. I was uneasy and not at all sure that I wanted to hear the rest of what she had to say. She, however, was sure that she was going to say it. "In this last year - less than a year actually - you've had too much of everything - fame, money, prizes, adulation, criticism, condemnation, ridicule, love, hate, anger, envy, generosity - everything. In some ways it's a perfect story. Perfectly baroque in its excess. The trouble is that it has, or can have, only one perfect ending." Her eyes were on me, bright with a slanting, probing brilliance. She knew that I knew what she was going to say. She was insane.

She was going to say that nothing that happened to me in the future could ever match the buzz of this. That the whole of the rest of my life was going to be vaguely unsatisfying. And, therefore, the only perfect ending to the story would be death. My death.

The thought had occurred to me too. Of course it had. The fact that all this, this global dazzle - these lights in my eyes, the applause, the flowers, the photographers, the journalists feigning a deep interest in my life (yet struggling to get a single fact straight), the men in suits fawning over me, the shiny hotel bathrooms with endless towels - none of it was likely to happen again. Would I miss it? Had I grown to need it? Was I a fame-junkie? Would I have withdrawal symptoms?

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The more I thought about it, the clearer it became to me that if fame was going to be my permanent condition it would kill me. Club me to death with its good manners and hygiene. I'll admit that I've enjoyed my own five minutes of it immensely, but primarily because it was just five minutes. Because I knew (or thought I knew) that I could go home when I was bored and giggle about it. Grow old and irresponsible. Eat mangoes in the moonlight. Maybe write a couple of failed books - worstsellers - to see what it felt like. For a whole year I've cartwheeled across the world, anchored always to thoughts of home and the life I would go back to. Contrary to all the enquiries and predictions about my impending emigration, that was the well I dipped into. That was my sustenance. My strength.

I told my friend there was no such thing as a perfect story. I said in any case hers was an external view of things, this assumption that the trajectory of a person's happiness, or let's say fulfilment, had peaked (and now must trough) because she had accidentally stumbled upon 'success'. It was premised on the unimaginative belief that wealth and fame were the mandatory stuff of everybody's dreams.

You've lived too long in New York, I told her. There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible. Honourable. Sometimes even worth striving for. Worlds in which recognition is not the only barometer of brilliance or human worth. There are plenty of warriors that I know and love, people far more valuable than myself, who go to war each day, knowing in advance that they will fail. True, they are less 'successful' in the most vulgar sense of the word, but by no means less fulfilled.

The only dream worth having, I told her, is to dream that you will live while you're alive and die only when you're dead. (Prescience? Perhaps.)

"Which means exactly what?" (Arched eyebrows, a little annoyed.)

I tried to explain, but didn't do a very good job of it. Sometimes I need to write to think. So I wrote it down for her on a paper napkin. This is what I wrote: To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.

I've known her for many years, this friend of mine. She's an architect too.

She looked dubious, somewhat unconvinced by my paper napkin speech. I could tell that structurally, just in terms of the sleek, narrative symmetry of things, and because she loves me, her thrill at my 'success' was so keen, so generous, that it weighed in evenly with her (anticipated) horror at the idea of my death. I understood that it was nothing personal. Just a design thing.

Anyhow, two weeks after that conversation, I returned to India. To what I think/thought of as home. Something had died but it wasn't me. It was infinitely more precious. It was a world that has been ailing for a while, and has finally breathed its last. It's been cremated now. The air is thick with ugliness and there's the unmistakable stench of fascism on the breeze.

Day after day, in newspaper editorials, on the radio, on TV chat shows, on MTV for heaven's sake, people whose instincts one thought one could trust - writers, painters, journalists - make the crossing. The chill seeps into my bones as it becomes painfully apparent from the lessons of everyday life that what you read in history books is true. That fascism is indeed as much about people as about governments. That it begins at home. In drawing rooms. In bedrooms. In beds. "Explosion of self-esteem", "Road to Resurgence", "A Moment of Pride", these were headlines in the papers in the days following the nuclear tests. "We have proved that we are not eunuchs any more," said Mr Thackeray of the Shiv Sena. (Whoever said we were? True, a good number of us are women, but that, as far as I know, isn't the same thing.) Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb - "We have superior strength and potency." (This was our Minister for Defence after Pakistan completed its tests.)

"These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests," we were repeatedly told.

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This has been hammered home, over and over again. The bomb is India. India is the bomb. Not just India, Hindu India. Therefore, be warned, any criticism of it is not just anti-national, but anti-Hindu. (Of course, in Pakistan the bomb is Islamic. Other than that, politically, the same physics applies.) This is one of the unexpected perks of having a nuclear bomb. Not only can the Government use it to threaten the Enemy, they can use it to declare war on their own people. Us.

In 1975, one year after India first dipped her toe into the nuclear sea, Mrs Gandhi declared the Emergency. What will 1999 bring? There's talk of cells being set up to monitor anti-national activity. Talk of amending cable laws to ban networks 'harming national culture' (The Indian Express, July 3). Of churches being struck off the list of religious places because 'wine is served' (announced and retracted, The Indian Express, July 3, The Times of India, July 4). Artists, writers, actors, and singers are being harassed, threatened (and succumbing to the threats). Not just by goon squads, but by instruments of the government. And in courts of law. There are letters and articles circulating on the Net - creative interpretations of Nostradamus' predictions claiming that a mighty, all-conquering Hindu nation is about to emerge - a resurgent India that will "burst forth upon its former oppressors and destroy them completely." That "the beginning of the terrible revenge (that will wipe out all Moslems) will be in the seventh month of 1999." This may well be the work of some lone nut, or a bunch of arcane god-squadders. The trouble is that having a nuclear bomb makes thoughts like these seem feasible. It creates thoughts like these. It bestows on people these utterly misplaced, utterly deadly notions of their own power. It's happening. It's all happening. I wish I could say 'slowly but surely' - but I can't. Things are moving at a pretty fair clip.

Why does it all seem so familiar? Is it because, even as you watch, reality dissolves and seamlessly rushes forward into the silent, black and white images from old films - scenes of people being hounded out of their lives, rounded up and herded into camps. Of massacre, of mayhem, of endless columns of broken people making their way to nowhere? Why is there no sound-track? Why is the hall so quiet? Have I been seeing too many films? Am I mad? Or am I right? Could those images be the inevitable culmination of what we have set into motion? Could our future be rushing forward into our past? I think so. Unless, of course, nuclear war settles it once and for all.

When I told my friends that I was writing this piece, they cautioned me. "Go ahead," they said, "but first make sure you're not vulnerable. Make sure your papers are in order. Make sure your taxes are paid."

My papers are in order. My taxes are paid. But how can one not be vulnerable in a climate like this? Everyone is vulnerable. Accidents happen. There's safety only in acquiescence. As I write, I am filled with foreboding. In this country, I have truly known what it means for a writer to feel loved (and, to some degree, hated too). Last year I was one of the items being paraded in the media's end-of-the-year National Pride Parade. Among the others, much to my mortification, were a bomb-maker and an international beauty queen. Each time a beaming person stopped me on the street and said 'You have made India proud' (referring to the prize I won, not the book I wrote), I felt a little uneasy. It frightened me then and it terrifies me now, because I know how easily that swell, that tide of emotion, can turn against me. Perhaps the time for that has come. I'm going to step out from under the fairy lights and say what's on my mind.

It's this:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I'm female, but have nothing against eunuchs. My policies are simple. I'm willing to sign any nuclear non-proliferation treaty or nuclear test ban treaty that's going. Immigrants are welcome. You can help me design our flag.

My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing.

Admittedly it was a flawed world. An unviable world. A scarred and wounded world. It was a world that I myself have criticised unsparingly, but only because I loved it. It didn't deserve to die. It didn't deserve to be dismembered. Forgive me, I realise that sentimentality is uncool - but what shall I do with my desolation?

I loved it simply because it offered humanity a choice. It was a rock out at sea. It was a stubborn chink of light that insisted that there was a different way of living. It was a functioning possibility. A real option. All that's gone now. India's nuclear tests, the manner in which they were conducted, the



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euphoria with which they have been greeted (by us) is indefensible. To me, it signifies dreadful things. The end of imagination. The end of freedom actually, because, after all, that's what freedom is. Choice.

On the 15th of August last year we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence. Next May we can mark our first anniversary in nuclear bondage.

Why did they do it?

Political expediency is the obvious, cynical answer, except that it only raises another, more basic question: Why should it have been politically expedient?

The three Official Reasons given are: China, Pakistan and Exposing Western Hypocrisy.

Taken at face value, and examined individually, they're somewhat baffling. I'm not for a moment suggesting that these are not real issues. Merely that they aren't new. The only new thing on the old horizon is the Indian Government. In his appallingly cavalier letter to the U.S. President (why bother to write at all if you're going to write like this?) our Prime Minister says India's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests was due to a "deteriorating security environment". He goes on to mention the war with China in 1962 and the "three aggressions we have suffered in the last fifty years (from Pakistan). And for the last ten years we have been the victim of unremitting terrorism and militancy sponsored by it... especially in Jammu and Kashmir."

The war with China is thirty-five years old. Unless there's some vital state secret that we don't know about, it certainly seemed as though matters had improved slightly between us. Just a few days before the nuclear tests General Fu Quanyou, Chief of General Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, was the guest of our Chief of Army Staff. We heard no words of war.

The most recent war with Pakistan was fought twenty-seven years ago. Admittedly Kashmir continues to be a deeply troubled region and no doubt Pakistan is gleefully fanning the flames. But surely there must be flames to fan in the first place? Surely the kindling is crackling and ready to burn? Can the Indian State with even a modicum of honesty absolve itself completely of having a hand in Kashmir's troubles? Kashmir, and for that matter, Assam, Tripura, Nagaland - virtually the whole of the Northeast - Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and all the trouble that's still to come - these are symptoms of a deeper malaise. It cannot and will not be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan.

Even Pakistan can't be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan. Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi - then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves.

As for the third Official Reason: Exposing Western Hypocrisy - how much more exposed can they be? Which decent human being on earth harbours any illusions about it? These are people whose histories are spongy with the blood of others. Colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, chemical weapons - they virtually invented it all. They have plundered nations, snuffed out civilizations, exterminated entire populations. They stand on the world's stage stark naked but entirely unembarrassed, because they know that they have more money, more food and bigger bombs than anybody else. They know they can wipe us out in the course of an ordinary working day. Personally, I'd say it is more arrogance than hypocrisy.

We have less money, less food and smaller bombs. However, we have, or had, all kinds of other wealth. Delightful, unquantifiable. What we've done with it is the opposite of what we think we've done. We've pawned it all. We've traded it in. For what? In order to enter into a contract with the very people we claim to despise. In the larger scheme of things, we've agreed to play their game and play it their way. We've accepted their terms and conditions unquestioningly. The CTBT ain't nothin' compared to this.

All in all, I think it is fair to say that we're the hypocrites. We're the ones who've abandoned what was arguably a moral position, i.e.: We have the technology, we can make bombs if we want to, but we won't. We don't believe in them.

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We're the ones who have now set up this craven clamouring to be admitted into the club of Superpowers. (If we are, we will no doubt gladly slam the door after us, and say to hell with principles about fighting Discriminatory World Orders.) For India to demand the status of a Superpower is as ridiculous as demanding to play in the World Cup finals simply because we have a ball. Never mind that we haven't qualified, or that we don't play much soccer and haven't got a team.

Since we've chosen to enter the arena, it might be an idea to begin by learning the rules of the game. Rule number one is Acknowledge the Masters. Who are the best players? The ones with more money, more food, more bombs.

Rule number two is Locate Yourself in Relation to Them, i.e.: Make an honest assessment of your position and abilities. The honest assessment of ourselves (in quantifiable terms) reads as follows:

We are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms we rank No. 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP's Human Development Index. More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, over 600 million lack even basic sanitation and over 200 million have no safe drinking water.

So the three Official Reasons, taken individually, don't hold much water. However, if you link them, a kind of twisted logic reveals itself. It has more to do with us than them.

The key words in our Prime Minister's letter to the U.S. President were 'suffered' and 'victim'. That's the substance of it. That's our meat and drink. We need to feel like victims. We need to feel beleaguered. We need enemies. We have so little sense of ourselves as a nation and therefore constantly cast about for targets to define ourselves against. Prevalent political wisdom suggests that to prevent the State from crumbling, we need a national cause, and other than our currency (and, of course, poverty, illiteracy and elections), we have none. This is the heart of the matter. This is the road that has led us to the bomb. This search for selfhood. If we are looking for a way out, we need some honest answers to some uncomfortable questions. Once again, it isn't as though these questions haven't been asked before. It's just that we prefer to mumble the answers and hope that no one's heard.

Is there such a thing as an Indian identity?

Do we really need one?

Who is an authentic Indian and who isn't?

Is India Indian?

Does it matter?

Whether or not there has ever been a single civilization that could call itself 'Indian Civilization', whether or not India was, is, or ever will become a cohesive cultural entity, depends on whether you dwell on the differences or the similarities in the cultures of the people who have inhabited the subcontinent for centuries. India, as a modern nation state, was marked out with precise geographical boundaries, in their precise geographical way, by a British Act of Parliament in 1899. Our country, as we know it, was forged on the anvil of the British Empire for the entirely unsentimental reasons of commerce and administration. But even as she was born, she began her struggle against her creators. So is India Indian? It's a tough question. Let's just say that we're an ancient people learning to live in a recent nation.

What is true is that India is an artificial State - a State that was created by a government, not a people. A State created from the top down, not the bottom up. The majority of India's citizens will not (to this day) be able to identify her boundaries on a map, or say which language is spoken where or which god is worshipped in what region. Most are too poor and too uneducated to have even an elementary idea of the extent and complexity of their own country. The impoverished, illiterate agrarian majority have no stake in the State. And indeed, why should they, how can they, when they don't even know what the State is? To them, India is, at best, a noisy slogan that comes around during the elections. Or a montage of people on Government TV programmes wearing regional costumes and saying Mera Bharat Mahan.

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The people who have a vital stake (or, more to the point, a business interest) in India having a single, lucid, cohesive national identity are the politicians who constitute our national political parties. The reason isn't far to seek, it's simply because their struggle, their career goal, is - and must necessarily be - to become that identity. To be identified with that identity. If there isn't one, they have to manufacture one and persuade people to vote for it. It isn't their fault. It comes with the territory. It is inherent in the nature of our system of centralized government. A congenital defect in our particular brand of democracy. The greater the numbers of illiterate people, the poorer the country and the more morally bankrupt the politicians, the cruder the ideas of what that identity should be. In a situation like this, illiteracy is not just sad, it's downright dangerous. However, to be fair, cobbling together a viable pre-digested 'National Identity' for India would be a formidable challenge even for the wise and the visionary. Every single Indian citizen could, if he or she wants to, claim to belong to some minority or the other. The fissures, if you look for them, run vertically, horizontally, layered, whorled, circular, spiral, inside out and outside in. Fires when they're lit race along any one of these schisms, and in the process, release tremendous bursts of political energy. Not unlike what happens when you split an atom.

It is this energy that Gandhi sought to harness when he rubbed the magic lamp and invited Ram and Rahim to partake of human politics and India's war of independence against the British. It was a sophisticated, magnificent, imaginative struggle, but its objective was simple and lucid, the target highly visible, easy to identify and succulent with political sin. In the circumstances, the energy found an easy focus. The trouble is that the circumstances are entirely changed now, but the genie is out of its lamp, and won't go back in. (It could be sent back, but nobody wants it to go, it's proved itself too useful.) Yes, it won us freedom. But it also won us the carnage of Partition. And now, in the hands of lesser statesmen, it has won us the Hindu Nuclear Bomb.

To be fair to Gandhi and to other leaders of the National Movement, they did not have the benefit of hindsight, and could not possibly have known what the eventual, long-term consequences of their strategy would be. They could not have predicted how quickly the situation would careen out of control. They could not have foreseen what would happen when they passed their flaming torches into the hands of their successors, or how venal those hands could be.

It was Indira Gandhi who started the real slide. It is she who made the genie a permanent State Guest. She injected the venom into our political veins. She invented our particularly vile local brand of political expediency. She showed us how to conjure enemies out of thin air, to fire at phantoms that she had carefully fashioned for that very purpose. It was she who discovered the benefits of never burying the dead, but preserving their putrid carcasses and trundling them out to worry old wounds when it suited her. Between herself and her sons she managed to bring the country to its knees. Our new Government has just kicked us over and arranged our heads on the chopping block.

The BJP is, in some senses, a spectre that Indira Gandhi and the Congress created. Or, if you want to be less harsh, a spectre that fed and reared itself in the political spaces and communal suspicion that the Congress nourished and cultivated. It has put a new complexion on the politics of governance. While Mrs Gandhi played hidden games with politicians and their parties, she reserved a shrill convent school rhetoric, replete with tired platitudes, to address the general public. The BJP, on the other hand, has chosen to light its fires directly on the streets and in the homes and hearts of people. It is prepared to do by day what the Congress would do only by night. To legitimize what was previously considered unacceptable (but done anyway). There is perhaps a fragile case to be made here in favour of hypocrisy. Could the hypocrisy of the Congress Party, the fact that they conduct their wretched affairs surreptitiously instead of openly, could that possibly mean there is a tiny glimmer of guilt somewhere? Some small fragment of remembered decency?

Actually, no.

No.

What am I doing? Why am I foraging for scraps of hope?

The way it has worked - in the case of the demolition of the Babri Masjid as well as in the making of the nuclear bomb - is that the Congress sowed the seeds, tended the crop, then the BJP stepped in and reaped the hideous harvest. They waltz together, locked in each other's arms. They're inseparable, despite their professed differences. Between them they have brought us here, to this dreadful, dreadful place.

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The jeering, hooting young men who battered down the Babri Masjid are the same ones whose pictures appeared in the papers in the days that followed the nuclear tests. They were on the streets, celebrating India's nuclear bomb and simultaneously 'condemning Western Culture' by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into public drains. I'm a little baffled by their logic: Coke is Western Culture, but the nuclear bomb is an old Indian tradition?

Yes, I've heard - the bomb is in the Vedas. It might be, but if you look hard enough, you'll find Coke in the Vedas too. That's the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them - as long as you know what you're looking for.

But returning to the subject of the non-vedic nineteen nineties: We storm the heart of whiteness, we embrace the most diabolical creation of western science and call it our own. But we protest against their music, their food, their clothes, their cinema and their literature. That's not hypocrisy. That's humour.

It's funny enough to make a skull smile.

We're back on the old ship. The S.S. Authenticity & Indianness.

If there is going to be a pro-authenticity/anti-national drive, perhaps the government ought to get its history straight and its facts right. If they're going to do it, they may as well do it properly.

First of all, the original inhabitants of this land were not Hindu. Ancient though it is, there were human beings on earth before there was Hinduism. India's tribal people have a greater claim to being indigenous to this land than anybody else, and how are they treated by the State and its minions? Oppressed, cheated, robbed of their lands, shunted around like surplus goods. Perhaps a good place to start would be to restore to them the dignity that was once theirs. Perhaps the Government could make a public undertaking that more dams like the Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada will not be built, that more people will not be displaced.

But, of course, that would be inconceivable, wouldn't it? Why? Because it's impractical. Because tribal people don't really matter. Their histories, their customs, their deities are dispensable. They must learn to sacrifice these things for the greater good of the Nation (that has snatched from them everything they ever had).

Okay, so that's out.

For the rest, I could compile a practical list of things to ban and buildings to break. It'll need some research, but off the top of my head, here are a few suggestions.

They could begin by banning a number of ingredients from our cuisine: chillies (Mexico), tomatoes (Peru), potatoes (Bolivia), coffee (Morocco), tea, white sugar, cinnamon (China)... they could then move into recipes. Tea with milk and sugar, for instance (Britain).

Smoking will be out of the question. Tobacco came from North America.

Cricket, English and Democracy should be forbidden. Either kabaddi or kho-kho could replace cricket. I don't want to start a riot, so I hesitate to suggest a replacement for English (Italian...? It has found its way to us via a kinder route: Marriage, not Imperialism). We have already discussed (earlier in this essay) the emerging, apparently acceptable alternative to democracy.

All hospitals in which western medicine is practised or prescribed should be shut down. All national newspapers discontinued. The railways dismantled. Airports closed. And what about our newest toy - the mobile phone? Can we live without it, or shall I suggest that they make an exception there? They could put it down in the column marked 'Universal'? (Only essential commodities will be included here. No music, art or literature.)

Needless to say, sending your children to university in the U.S., and rushing there yourself to have your prostate operated upon will be a cognizable offence.

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The building demolition drive could begin with the Rashtrapati Bhavan and gradually spread from cities to the countryside, culminating in the destruction of all monuments (mosques, churches, temples) that were built on what was once tribal or forest land.

It will be a long, long list. It would take years of work. I couldn't use a computer because that wouldn't be very authentic of me, would it?

I don't mean to be facetious, merely to point out that this is surely the shortcut to hell. There's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorized version of what India is or should be. There is no one religion or language or caste or region or person or story or book that can claim to be its sole representative. There are, and can only be, visions of India, various ways of seeing it - honest, dishonest, wonderful, absurd, modern, traditional, male, female. They can be argued over, criticized, praised, scorned, but not banned or broken. Not hunted down.

Railing against the past will not heal us. History has happened. It's over and done with. All we can do is to change its course by encouraging what we love instead of destroying what we don't. There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, re-invented and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it. Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn't matter whether we use them or not. They will destroy us either way.

India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people.

However many garlands we heap on our scientists, however many medals we pin to their chests, the truth is that it's far easier to make a bomb than to educate four hundred million people.

According to opinion polls, we're expected to believe that there's a national consensus on the issue. It's official now. Everybody loves the bomb. (Therefore the bomb is good.)

Is it possible for a man who cannot write his own name to understand even the basic, elementary facts about the nature of nuclear weapons? Has anybody told him that nuclear war has nothing at all to do with his received notions of war? Nothing to do with honour, nothing to do with pride. Has anybody bothered to explain to him about thermal blasts, radioactive fallout and the nuclear winter? Are there even words in his language to describe the concepts of enriched uranium, fissile material and critical mass? Or has his language itself become obsolete? Is he trapped in a time capsule, watching the world pass him by, unable to understand or communicate with it because his language never took into account the horrors that the human race would dream up? Does he not matter at all, this man? Shall we just treat him like some kind of a cretin? If he asks any questions, ply him with iodine pills and parables about how Lord Krishna lifted a hill or how the destruction of Lanka by Hanuman was unavoidable in order to preserve Sita's virtue and Ram's reputation? Use his own beautiful stories as weapons against him? Shall we release him from his capsule only during elections, and once he's voted, shake him by the hand, flatter him with some bullshit about the Wisdom of the Common Man, and send him right back in?

I'm not talking about one man, of course, I'm talking about millions and millions of people who live in this country. This is their land too, you know. They have the right to make an informed decision about its fate and, as far as I can tell, nobody has informed them about anything. The tragedy is that nobody could, even if they wanted to. Truly, literally, there's no language to do it in. This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. Not even a country.

Who the hell conducted those opinion polls? Who the hell is the Prime Minister to decide whose finger will be on the nuclear button that could turn everything we love - our earth, our skies, our mountains, our plains, our rivers, our cities and villages - to ash in an instant? Who the hell is he to reassure us that there will be no accidents? How does he know? Why should we trust him? What has he ever done to make us trust him? What have any of them ever done to make us trust them?

The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made.

If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God.

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It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that You have created.

If you're not (religious), then look at it this way. This world of ours is four thousand, six hundred million years old.

It could end in an afternoon.

## The Greater Common Good

**India has 3,600 big dams—they have devoured 50 million people already. Silently. Now it's the turn of the Narmada.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

*"If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country."*

Jawaharlal Nehru, speaking to villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud dam, 1948

I stood on a hill and laughed out loud.

I had crossed the Narmada by boat from Jalsindhi and climbed the headland on the opposite bank from where I could see, ranged across the crowns of low, bald hills, the tribal hamlets of Sikka, Surung, Neemgavan and Domkhedi. I could see their airy, fragile, homes. I could see their fields and the forests behind them. I could see little children with littler goats scuttling across the landscape like motorised peanuts. I knew I was looking at a civilisation older than Hinduism, slated—sanctioned (by the highest court in the land)—to be drowned this monsoon when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir will rise to submerge it.

Why did I laugh?

Because I suddenly remembered the tender concern with which the Supreme Court judges in Delhi (before vacating the legal stay on further construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam) had enquired whether tribal children in the resettlement colonies would have children's parks to play in. The lawyers representing the government had hastened to assure them that indeed they would, and, what's more, that there were seesaws and slides and swings in every park. I looked up at the endless sky and down at the river rushing past and for a brief, brief moment the absurdity of it all reversed my rage and I laughed. I meant no disrespect.

Let me say at the outset that I'm not a city-basher. I've done my time in a village. I've had first-hand experience of the isolation, the inequity and the potential savagery of it. I'm not an anti-development junkie, nor a proselytiser for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition. What I am, however, is curious. Curiosity took me to the Narmada valley. Instinct told me that this was the big one. The one in which the battle-lines were clearly drawn, the warring armies massed along them. The one in which it would be possible to wade through the congealed morass of hope, anger, information, disinformation, political artifice, engineering ambition, disingenuous socialism, radical activism, bureaucratic subterfuge, misinformed emotionalism and of course the pervasive, invariably dubious, politics of International Aid.

Instinct led me to set aside Joyce and Nabokov, to postpone reading Don DeLillo's big book and substitute it with reports on drainage and irrigation, with journals and books and documentary films about dams and why they're built and what they do.

My first tentative questions revealed that few people know what is really going on in the Narmada valley. Those who know, know a lot. Most know nothing at all. And yet, almost everyone has a passionate opinion. Nobody's neutral. I realised very quickly that I was straying into mined territory.

In India over the last 10 years the fight against the Sardar Sarovar Dam has come to represent far 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 a 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 rivers? 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 of the valley, the fact that the stakes were raised to this degree has meant that their most effective weapon—specific facts about specific issues in this specific valley—has been blunted

by the debate on the big issues. The basic premise of the argument has been inflated until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away. Occasionally a disconnected piece of the puzzle floats by—an emotionally charged account of the government's callous treatment of displaced people; an outburst at how the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), 'a handful of activists', is holding the nation to ransom; a legal correspondent reporting on the progress of the NBA's writ petition in the Supreme Court.

Though there's been a fair amount of writing on the subject, most of it is for a 'special interest' readership. News reports tend to be about isolated aspects of the project. Government documents are classified as 'Secret'. I think it's fair to say that public perception of the issue is pretty crude and is divided, crudely, into two categories:

On the one hand, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of 'Development' versus a sort of neo-Luddite impulse—an irrational, emotional 'Anti-Development' resistance, fuelled by an arcadian, pre-industrial dream. On the other, as a Nehru vs Gandhi contest. This lifts the whole sorry business out of the bog of deceit, lies, false promises and increasingly successful propaganda (which is what it's really about) and confers on it a false legitimacy. It makes out that both sides have the Greater Good of the Nation in mind—but merely disagree about the means to achieve it.

Both interpretations put a tired spin on the dispute. Both stir up emotions that cloud the particular facts of this particular story. Both are indications of how urgently we need new heroes, new kinds of heroes, and how we've overused our old ones (like we overbowl our bowlers).

The Nehru vs Gandhi argument pushes this very contemporary issue back into an old bottle. Nehru and Gandhi were generous men. Their paradigms for development are based on assumptions of inherent morality. Nehru's on the paternal, protective morality of the Soviet-style Centralised State. Gandhi's on the nurturing, maternal morality of romanticised Village Republics. Both would work perfectly, if only we were better human beings. If only we all wore khadi and suppressed our base urges—sex, shopping, dodging spinning lessons and being unkind to the less fortunate. Fifty years down the line, it's safe to say that we haven't made the grade. We haven't even come close. We need an updated insurance plan against our own basic natures.

It's possible that as a nation we've exhausted our quota of heroes for this century, but while we wait for shiny new ones to come along, we have to limit the damage. We have to support our small heroes. (Of these we have many. Many.) We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that's what the 21st century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it possibly be? It sounds finger-licking good to me.

I was drawn to the valley because I sensed that the fight for the Narmada had entered a newer, sadder phase. I went because writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to kills. My motive was not compassion. It was sheer greed. I was right. I found a story there.

And what a story it is.

"People say that the Sardar Sarovar Dam is an expensive project. But it's bringing drinking water to millions. This is our life-line. Can you put a price on this? Does the air we breathe have a price? We will live. We will drink. We will bring glory to the state of Gujarat."—Urmilaben Patel, wife of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, speaking at a public rally in Delhi in 1993.

"We will request you to move from your houses after the dam comes up. If you move it will be good. Otherwise we shall release the waters and drown you all."—Morarji Desai, speaking at a public meeting in the submergence zone of the Pong dam in 1961.

"Why didn't they just poison us? Then we wouldn't have to live in this shit-hole and the government could have survived alone with its precious dam all to itself."—Ram Bai, whose village was submerged when the Bargi dam was built on the Narmada. She now lives in a slum in Jabalpur.

In the 50 years since Independence, after Nehru's famous "Dams are the Temples of Modern India" speech (one he grew to regret in his own lifetime), his footsoldiers threw themselves into the business of building dams with unnatural fervour. Dam-building grew to be equated with Nation-building. Their



enthusiasm alone should have been reason enough to make one suspicious. Not only did they build new dams and new irrigation systems, they took control of small, traditional systems that village communities had managed for thousands of years, and allowed them to atrophy. To compensate the loss, the government built more and more dams. Big ones, little ones, tall ones, short ones. The result of its exertions is that India now boasts of being the world's third largest dam-builder. According to the Central Water Commission, we have 3,600 dams that qualify as Big Dams, 3,300 of them built after Independence. Some 1,000 more are under construction. Yet one-fifth of our population—200 million people—doesn't have safe drinking water and two-thirds—600 million—lack basic sanitation.

Big Dams started well, but have ended badly. There was a time when everybody loved them, everybody had them—the Communists, Capitalists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. There was a time when Big Dams moved men to poetry. Not any longer. All over the world there is a movement growing against Big Dams. In the First World they're being de-commissioned, blown up. The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big Dams are obsolete. They're uncool. They're undemocratic. They're a government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They're a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom away from him. They're a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich. Their reservoirs displace huge populations of people leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water-logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes.

Big Dams haven't really lived up to their role as the monuments of Modern Civilisation, emblems of Man's ascendancy over Nature. Monuments are supposed to be timeless, but dams have an all too finite lifetime. They last only as long as it takes Nature to fill them with silt. It's common knowledge now that Big Dams do the opposite of what their Publicity People say they do—the Local Pain for National Gain myth has been blown wide open.

For all these reasons, the dam-building industry in the First World is in trouble and out of work. So it's exported to the Third World in the name of Development Aid, along with their other waste like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers and banned pesticides.

On the one hand the Indian Government, every Indian Government, rails self-righteously against the First World, and on the other, actually pays to receive their gift-wrapped garbage. Aid is just another praetorian business enterprise. Like Colonialism was. It has destroyed most of Africa. Bangladesh is reeling from its ministrations. We know all this, in numbing detail. Yet in India our leaders welcome it with slavish smiles (and make nuclear bombs to shore up their flagging self-esteem).

Over the last 50 years India has spent Rs 80,000 crore on the irrigation sector alone. Yet there are more drought-prone areas and more flood-prone areas today than there were in 1947. Despite the disturbing evidence of irrigation disasters, dam-induced floods and rapid disenchantment with the Green Revolution (declining yields, degraded land), the government has not commissioned a post-project evaluation of a single one of its 3,600 dams to gauge whether or not it has achieved what it set out to achieve, whether or not the (always phenomenal) costs were justified, or even what the costs actually were.

The Government of India has detailed figures for how many million tonnes of foodgrain or edible oils the country produces and how much more we produce now than we did in 1947. It can tell you how much bauxite is mined in a year or what the total surface area of the National Highways adds up to. It's possible to access minute-to-minute information about the stock exchange or the value of the rupee in the world market. We know how many cricket matches we've lost on a Friday in Sharjah. It's not hard to find out how many graduates India produced, or how many men had vasectomies in any given year. But the Government of India does not have a figure for the number of people that have been displaced by dams or sacrificed in other ways at the altars of 'National Progress.' Isn't this astounding? How can you measure Progress if you don't know what it costs and who paid for it? How can the 'market' put a price on things—food, clothes, electricity, running water—when it doesn't take into account the real cost of production?

According to a detailed study of 54 Large Dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the average number of people displaced by a Large Dam is 44,182. Admittedly, 54 dams out of 3,300 is not a big enough sample. But since it's all we have, let's try and do some rough arithmetic. A first draft. To err on the side of caution, let's halve the number of people. Or, let's err on the side of

abundant caution and take an average of just 10,000 people per Large Dam. It's an improbably low figure, I know, but... never mind. Whip out your calculators.  $3,300 \times 10,000 = 33$  million. That's what it works out to. 33 million people. Displaced by big dams alone in the last 50 years. What about those that have been displaced by the thousands of other Development Projects? At a private lecture, N.C. Saxena, Secretary to the Planning Commission, said he thought the number was in the region of 50 million (of which 40 million were displaced by dams). We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It can't be, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. It can't be true. I barely have the courage to say it aloud. To run the risk of sounding like a '60s hippie dropping acid ("It's the System, man!"), or a paranoid schizophrenic with a persecution complex. But it is the System, man. What else can it be?

50 million people.

Go on, Government, quibble. Bargain. Beat it down. Say something.

I feel like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave.

Fifty million is more than the population of Gujarat. Almost three times the population of Australia. More than three times the number of refugees that Partition created in India. Ten times the number of Palestinian refugees. The Western world today is convulsed over the future of one million people who have fled from Kosovo.

A huge percentage of the displaced are tribal people (57.6 per cent in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Dam). Include Dalits and the figure becomes obscene. According to the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes it's about 60 per cent. If you consider that tribal people account for only eight per cent, and Dalits 15 per cent, of India's population, it opens up a whole other dimension to the story. The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation Builders. It's like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills. People from another country. Another world. India's poorest people are subsidising the life-styles of her richest.

Did I hear someone say something about the world's biggest democracy?

What has happened to all these millions of people? Where are they now? How do they earn a living? Nobody really knows. (Last month's papers had an account of how tribal people displaced from the Nagarjunasagar Dam Project are selling their babies to foreign adoption agencies. The government intervened and put the babies in two public hospitals where six babies died of neglect.) When it comes to Rehabilitation, the government's priorities are clear. India does not have a National Rehabilitation Policy. According to the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (amended in 1984), the government is not legally bound to provide a displaced person anything but a cash compensation. Imagine that. A cash compensation, to be paid by an Indian government official to an illiterate tribal man (the women get nothing) in a land where even the postman demands a tip for a delivery! Most tribal people have no formal title to their land and therefore cannot claim compensation anyway. Most tribal people, or let's say most small farmers, have as much use for money as a Supreme Court judge has for a bag of fertiliser.

The millions 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 and four times—a dam, an artillery proof range, another dam, a uranium mine, a power project. Once they start rolling there's no resting place. The great majority is eventually absorbed into slums on the periphery of our great cities, where it coalesces into an immense pool of cheap construction labour (that builds more projects that displace more people). True, they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they redefine the meaning of liberty.

And still the nightmare doesn't end. They continue to be uprooted even from their hellish hovels by government bulldozers that fan out on clean-up missions whenever elections are comfortably far away and the urban rich get twitchy about hygiene. In cities like Delhi, they run the risk of being shot by the police for shitting in public places—like three slum-dwellers were, not more than two years ago.

In the French Canadian wars of the 1770s, Lord Amherst exterminated most of Canada's Native Indians by offering them blankets infested with the small-pox virus. Two centuries on, we of the Real

## Arundhati Roy – The Greater Common Good -

India have found less obvious ways of achieving similar ends.

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war. And we, like the citizens of White America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condoning it by looking away. Why? Because we're told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it's being done in the name of Progress, in the name of National Interest (which, of course, is paramount). Therefore gladly, unquestioningly, almost gratefully, we believe what we're told. We believe that it benefits us to believe.

Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze. Do this, because it's important that you understand. If you find reason to disagree, by all means take the other side. But please don't ignore it, don't look away.

It isn't an easy tale to tell. It's full of numbers and explanations. Numbers used to make my eyes glaze over. Not any more. Not since I began to follow the direction in which they point.

Trust me. There's a story here.

It's true that India has progressed. It's true that in 1947, when Colonialism formally ended, India was food deficit. In 1950 we produced 51 million tonnes of food grain. Today we produce close to 200 million tonnes.

It's true that in 1995 the state granaries were overflowing with 30 million tonnes of unsold grain. It's also true that at the same time, 40 per cent of India's population—more than 350 million people—were living below the poverty line. That's more than the country's population in 1947.

Indians are too poor to buy the food their country produces. Indians are being forced to grow the kinds of food they can't afford to eat themselves. Look at what happened in Kalahandi district in western Orissa, best known for its starvation deaths. In the drought of 1996, people died of starvation (16 according to the state, over a 100 according to the press). Yet that same year rice production in Kalahandi was higher than the national average! Rice was exported from Kalahandi to the Centre.

Certainly India has progressed but most of its people haven't.

Our leaders say that we must have nuclear missiles to protect us from the threat of China and Pakistan. But who will protect us from ourselves?

What kind of country is this? Who owns it? Who runs it? What's going on?

It's time to spill a few State Secrets. To puncture the myth about the inefficient, bumbling, corrupt, but ultimately genial, essentially democratic, Indian State. Carelessness cannot account for 50 million disappeared people. Nor can Karma. Let's not delude ourselves. There is method here, precise, relentless and one hundred per cent man-made.

The Indian State is not a State that has failed. It is a State that has succeeded impressively in what it set out to do. It has been ruthlessly efficient in the way it has appropriated India's resources—its land, its water, its forests, its fish, its meat, its eggs, its air—and redistributed it to a favoured few (in return, no doubt, for a few favours). It is superbly accomplished in the art of protecting its cadres of paid-up elite. Consummate in its methods of pulverising those who inconvenience its intentions. But its finest feat of all is the way it achieves all this and emerges smelling nice. The way it manages to keep its secrets, to contain information that vitally concerns the daily lives of one billion people, in government files, accessible only to the keepers of the flame—ministers, bureaucrats, state engineers, defence strategists. Of course we make it easy for them, we, its beneficiaries. We take care not to dig too deep. We don't really want to know the grisly details.

Thanks to us, Independence came (and went), elections come and go, but there has been no shuffling of the deck. On the contrary, the old order has been consecrated, the rift fortified. We, the Rulers, won't pause to look up from our heaving table. We don't seem to know that the resources we're feasting on are finite and rapidly depleting. There's cash in the bank, but soon there'll be nothing left to buy with it. The food's running out in the kitchen. And the servants haven't eaten yet. Actually, the servants stopped eating a long time ago.

India lives in her villages, we're told, in every other sanctimonious public speech. That's bullshit. It's just another fig leaf from the government's bulging wardrobe. India doesn't live in her villages. India dies in her villages. India gets kicked around in her villages. India lives in her cities. India's villages live only to serve her cities. Her villagers are her citizens' vassals and for that reason must be controlled and kept alive, but only just.

This impression we have of an overstretched State, struggling to cope with the sheer weight and scale of its problems, is a dangerous one. The fact is that it's creating the problem. It's a giant poverty-producing machine, masterful in its methods of pitting the poor against the very poor, of flinging crumbs to the wretched, so that they dissipate their energies fighting each other, while peace (and advertising) reigns in the Master's Lodgings.

Until this process is recognised for what it is, until it is addressed and attacked, elections—however fiercely they're contested—will continue to be mock battles that serve only to further entrench unspeakable inequity. Democracy (our version of it) will continue to be the benevolent mask behind which a pestilence flourishes unchallenged. On a scale that will make old wars and past misfortunes look like controlled laboratory experiments. Already 50 million people have been fed into the Development Mill and have emerged as air-conditioners and popcorn and rayon suits—subsidised airconditioners and popcorn and rayon suits (if we must have these nice things, and they are nice, at least we should be made to pay for them).

There's a hole in the flag that needs mending.

It's a sad thing to have to say, but as long as we have faith—we have no hope. To hope, we have to break the faith. We have to fight specific wars in specific ways and we have to fight to win.

Listen then, to the story of the Narmada Valley. Understand it. And, if you wish, enlist. Who knows, it may lead to magic.

The Narmada wells up on the plateau of Amarkantak in the Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh, then winds its way through 1,300 kilometres of beautiful broad-leaved forest and perhaps the most fertile agricultural land in India. Twenty five million people live in the river valley, linked to the ecosystem and to each other by an ancient, intricate web of interdependence (and, no doubt, exploitation). Though the Narmada has been targeted for "water resource development" for more than 50 years now, the reason it has, until recently, evaded being captured and dismembered is because it flows through three states—Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. (Ninety per cent of the river flows through Madhya Pradesh; it merely skirts the northern border of Maharashtra, then flows through Gujarat for about 180 km before emptying into the Arabian sea at Bharuch).

As early as 1946, plans had been afoot to dam the river at Gora in Gujarat. In 1961, Nehru laid the foundation stone for a 49.8 metre high dam—the midget progenitor of the Sardar Sarovar. Around the same time, the Survey of India drew up new, modernised topographical maps of the river basin. The dam planners in Gujarat studied the new maps and decided that it would be more profitable to build a much bigger dam. But this meant hammering out an agreement first with neighbouring states.

The three states bickered and balked but failed to agree on a water-sharing formula. Eventually, in 1969, the Central Government set up the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal. It took the Tribunal 10 years to announce its Award. The people whose lives were going to be devastated were neither informed nor consulted nor heard.

To apportion shares in the waters, the first, most basic thing the Tribunal had to do, was to find out how much water there was in the river. Usually this can only be estimated accurately if there is at least 40 years of recorded data on the volume of actual flow in the river. Since this was not available, they decided to extrapolate from rainfall data. They arrived at a figure of 27.22 maf (million acre feet). This figure is the statistical bedrock of the Narmada Valley Projects. We are still living with its legacy. It more or less determines the overall design of the Projects—the height, location and number of dams. By inference, it determines the cost of the Projects, how much area will be submerged, how many people will be displaced and what the benefits will be. In 1992 actual observed flow data for the Narmada which was now available for 44 years (1948-1992) showed that the yield from the river was only 22.69 maf—18 per cent less! The Central Water Commission admits that there is less water in the Narmada than had previously been assumed. The Government of India says: It may be noted that

clause II (of the Decision of the Tribunal) relating to determination of dependable flow as 28 maf is non-reviewable.(!)

In other words, the Narmada is legally bound by human decree to produce as much water as the Government of India commands it to produce.

It's proponents boast that the Narmada Valley Project is the most ambitious river valley project ever conceived in human history. They plan to build 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 multi-purpose 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 subcontinent.

Whichever way you look at it, the Narmada Valley Development Project is Big. It will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India's biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of 25 million people who live in the valley. Yet, even before the Ministry of Environment cleared the project, the World Bank offered to finance the lynchpin of the project—the Sardar Sarovar dam (whose reservoir displaces people in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, but whose benefits go to Gujarat). The Bank was ready with its cheque-book before any costs were computed, before any studies had been done, before anybody had any idea of what the human cost or the environmental impact of the dam would be!

The \$450-million loan for the Sardar Sarovar Projects was sanctioned and in place in 1985. The Ministry of Environment clearance for the project came only in 1987! Talk about enthusiasm. It fairly borders on evangelism. Can anybody care so much?

Why were they so keen?

Between 1947 and 1994 the Bank received 6,000 applications for loans from around the world. They didn't turn down a single one. Not a single one. Terms like 'Moving money' and 'Meeting loan targets' suddenly begin to make sense.

Today, India is in a situation where it pays back more money to the Bank in interest and repayment instalments than it receives from it. We are forced to incur new debts in order to be able to repay our old ones. According to the World Bank Annual Report, last year (1998), after the arithmetic, India paid the Bank \$478 million more than it received. Over the last five years ('93 to '98) India paid the Bank \$1.475 billion more than it received. The relationship between us is exactly like the relationship between a landless labourer steeped in debt and the local Bania—it is an affectionate relationship, the poor man loves his Bania because he's always there when he's needed. It's not for nothing that we call the world a Global Village. The only difference between the landless labourer and the Government of India is that one uses the money to survive. The other just funnels it into the private coffers of its officers and agents, pushing the country into an economic bondage that it may never overcome.

The International Dam Industry is worth \$20 billion a year. If you follow the trails of big dams the world over, wherever you go—China, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Brazil, Guatemala—you'll rub up against the same story, encounter the same actors: the Iron Triangle (dam-jargon for the nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and dam construction companies), the racketeers who call themselves International Environmental Consultants (who are usually directly employed by or subsidiaries of dam-builders), and, more often than not, the friendly, neighbourhood World Bank. You'll grow to recognise the same inflated rhetoric, the same noble 'Peoples' Dam' slogans, the same swift, brutal repression that follows the first sign of civil insubordination. (Of late, especially after its experience in the Narmada Valley, the Bank is more cautious about choosing the countries in which it finances projects that involve mass displacement. At present, China is their Most Favoured client. It's the great irony of our times—American citizens protest the massacre in Tiananmen square, but the Bank will use their money to fund the Three Gorges Dam in China which is going to displace 1.3 million people.)

It's a skilful circus and the acrobats know each other well. Occasionally they'll swap parts—a bureaucrat will join the Bank, a Banker will surface as a Project Consultant. At the end of play, a huge percentage of what's called 'Development Aid' is re-channelled back to the countries it came from, masquerading as equipment cost or consultants' fees or salaries to the agencies' own staff. Often 'Aid' is openly 'tied'. (As in the case of the Japanese loan for the Sardar Sarovar Dam, tied to a contract for purchasing turbines from Sumitomo Corporation.) Sometimes the connections are more sleazy. In

1993 Britain financed the Pergau Dam in Malaysia with a subsidised loan of £234 million, despite an Overseas Development Administration report that said that the dam would be a 'bad buy' for Malaysia. It later emerged that the loan was offered to 'encourage' Malaysia to sign a £1.3 billion contract to buy British Arms.

In 1994, UK consultants earned \$2.5 billion on overseas contracts. The second biggest sector of the market after Project Management was writing what are called eias (Environmental Impact Assessments). In the Development racket, the rules are pretty simple. If you get invited by a government to write an eia for a big dam project and you point out a problem (say, for instance, you quibble about the amount of water available in a river, or, God forbid, you suggest that perhaps the human costs are too high) then you're history. You're an oowc. An Out Of Work Consultant. And Oops! There goes your Range Rover. There goes your holiday in Tuscany. There goes your children's private boarding school. There's good money in poverty. Plus Perks.

In keeping with Big Dam tradition, concurrent with the construction of the 138.68 metre high Sardar Sarovar dam, began the elaborate government pantomime of conducting studies to estimate the actual project costs and the impact it would have on people and the environment. The World Bank participated whole- heartedly in the charade—occasionally they knitted their brows and raised feeble requests for more information on issues like the resettlement and rehabilitation of what they call paps—Project Affected Persons. (They help, these acronyms, they manage to mutate muscle and blood into cold statistics. paps soon cease to be people.)

The merest crumbs of information satisfied The Bank and they proceeded with the project.

The implicit, unwritten but fairly obvious understanding between the concerned agencies was that whatever the costs—economic, environmental or human—the project would go ahead. They would justify it as they went along. They knew full well that eventually, in a courtroom or to a committee, no argument works as well as a *Fait Accompli*. (Mi' lord, the country is losing two crores a day due to the delay). The government refers to the Sardar Sarovar Projects as the 'Most Studied Project in India', yet the game goes something like this:

When the Tribunal first announced its award, and the Gujarat government announced its plan of how it was going to use its share of water, there was no mention of drinking water for villages in Kutch and Saurashtra, the arid areas of Gujarat. When the project ran into political trouble, the government suddenly discovered the emotive power of Thirst. Suddenly, quenching the thirst of parched throats in Kutch and Saurashtra became the whole point of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (Never mind that water from two rivers—the Sabarmati and the Mahi, both of which are miles closer to Kutch and Saurashtra than the Narmada, have been dammed and diverted to Ahmedabad, Mehsana and Kheda. Neither Kutch nor Saurashtra have seen a drop of it.) Officially the number of people who will be provided drinking water by the Sardar Sarovar Canal fluctuates from 28 million (1983) to 32.5 million (1989)—nice touch, the decimal point!—to 40 million (1992) and down to 25 million (1993).

The number of villages that would receive drinking water was zero in 1979, 4,719 in the early '80s, 7,234 in 1990 and 8,215 in '91. When challenged, the government admitted that the figures for 1991 included 236 uninhabited villages!

Every aspect of the project is approached in this almost cavalier manner, as if it's a family board game. Even when it concerns the lives and futures of vast numbers of people.

In 1979 the number of families that would be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar reservoir was estimated to be a little over 6,000. In 1987 it grew to 12,000. In 1991 it surged to 27,000. In 1992 the government declared that 40,000 families would be affected. Today, it hovers between 40,000 and 41,500. (Of course even this is an absurd figure, because the reservoir isn't the only thing that displaces people. According to the NBA the actual figure is 85,000 families—about half a million people.)

The estimated cost of the project bounced up from Rs 6,000 crore to Rs 20,000 crore (officially). The NBA says it will cost Rs 40,000 crore. (Half the entire irrigation budget of the whole country over the last fifty years.)

The government claims the Sardar Sarovar Projects will produce 1,450 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 of water. 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 conflicting aims, studies say, is that when the Sardar Sarovar Projects are completed, and the scheme is fully functional, it will end up producing only 3 per cent of the power that its planners say it will. 50 Mega Watts.

In an old war, everybody has an axe to grind. So how do you pick your way through these claims and counter-claims? How do you decide whose estimate is more reliable? One way is to take a look at the track record of Indian dams.

The Bargi Dam near Jabalpur was the first dam on the Narmada to be completed (1990). It cost 10 times more than was budgeted and submerged three times more land than the engineers said it would. About 70,000 people from 101 villages were supposed to be displaced, but when they filled the reservoir (without warning anybody), 162 villages were submerged. Some of the resettlement sites built by the government were submerged as well. People were flushed out like rats from the land they had lived on for centuries. They salvaged what they could, and watched their houses being washed away. 114,000 people were displaced. There was no rehabilitation policy. Some were given meagre cash compensations. Many got absolutely nothing. A few were moved to government rehabilitation sites. The site at Gorakhpur is, according to government publicity, an 'ideal village'. Between 1990 and 1992, five people died of starvation there. The rest either returned to live illegally in the forests near the reservoir, or moved to slums in Jabalpur. The Bargi Dam irrigates only as much land as it submerged in the first place—and only 5 per cent of the area that its planners claimed it would irrigate. Even that is water-logged.

Time and again, it's the same story—the Andhra Pradesh Irrigation II scheme claimed it would displace 63,000 people. When completed, it displaced 150,000 people. The Gujarat Medium Irrigation II scheme displaced 140,000 people instead of 63,600. The revised estimate of the number of people to be displaced by the Upper Krishna irrigation project in Karnataka is 240,000 against its initial claims of displacing only 20,000.

These are World Bank figures. Not the NBA's. Imagine what this does to our conservative estimate of 33 million.

Construction work on the Sardar Sarovar dam site, which had continued sporadically since 1961, began in earnest in 1988. At the time, nobody, not the government, nor the World Bank were aware that a woman called Medha Patkar had been wandering through the villages slated to be submerged, asking people whether they had any idea of the plans the government had in store for them. When she arrived in the valley all those years ago, opposing the construction of the dam was the furthest thing from her mind. Her chief concern was that displaced villagers should be resettled in an equitable, humane way. It gradually became clear to her that the government's intentions towards them were far from honourable. By 1986 word had spread and each state had a peoples' organisation that questioned the promises about resettlement and rehabilitation that were being bandied about by government officials. It was only some years later that the full extent of the horror—the impact that the dams would have, both on the people who were to be displaced and the people who were supposed to benefit—began to surface. The Narmada Valley Development Project came to be known as India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster. The various peoples' organisations massed into a single organisation and the Narmada Bachao Andolan—the extraordinary NBA—was born.

In 1988 the NBA formally called for all work on the Narmada Valley Development Projects to be stopped. People declared that they would drown if they had to, but would not move from their homes. Within two years, the struggle had burgeoned and had support from other resistance movements. In September 1989, some 50,000 people gathered in the Valley at Harsud from all over India to pledge to fight Destructive Development. The Dam site and its adjacent areas, already under the Indian Official Secrets Act, was clamped under Section 144 which prohibits the gathering of groups of more than five people. The whole area was turned into a police camp. Despite the barricades, one year later, on September 28, 1990, thousands of villagers made their way on foot and by boat to a little town called Badwani, in Madhya Pradesh, to reiterate their pledge to drown rather than agree to move from their homes. News of the peoples' opposition to the Projects spread to other countries. The Japanese arm of Friends of the Earth mounted a campaign in Japan that succeeded in getting the Government of Japan to withdraw its 27 billion yen loan to finance the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (The contract for the

turbines still holds.) Once the Japanese withdrew, international pressure from various Environmental Activist groups who supported the struggle began to mount on the World Bank.

This of course led to an escalation of repression in the valley. Government policy, described by a particularly articulate minister, was to 'flood the valley with khaki'.

On Christmas Day in 1990, about 6,000 men and women walked over a hundred kilometres, carrying their provisions and their bedding, accompanying a seven-member sacrificial squad who had resolved to lay down their lives for the river. They were stopped at Ferkuwa on the Gujarat border by battalions of armed police and crowds of people from the city of Baroda, many of whom were hired, some of whom perhaps genuinely believed that the Sardar Sarovar was 'Gujarat's life-line'. It was an interesting confrontation. Middle Class Urban India versus a Rural, predominantly Tribal Army. The marching people demanded they be allowed to cross the border and walk to the dam-site. The police refused them passage. To stress their commitment to non-violence, each villager had his or her hands bound together. One by one, they defied the battalions of police. They were beaten, arrested and dragged into waiting trucks in which they were driven off and dumped some miles away, in the wilderness. They just walked back and began all over again.

The confrontation continued for almost two weeks. Finally, on January 7, 1991, the seven members of the sacrificial squad announced they were going on an indefinite hunger strike. Tension rose to dangerous levels. The Indian and International Press, TV camera crews and documentary film-makers were present in force. Reports appeared in the papers almost every day. Environmental Activists stepped up the pressure in Washington. Eventually, acutely embarrassed by the glare of unfavourable media coverage, the World Bank announced that it would institute an Independent Review of the Sardar Sarovar Projects—unprecedented in the history of Bank Behaviour.

When the news reached the valley, it was received with distrust and uncertainty. The people had no reason to trust the World Bank. But still, it was a victory of sorts. The villagers, understandably upset by the frightening deterioration in the condition of their comrades who had not eaten for 22 days, pleaded with them to call off the fast. On January 28, the fast at Ferkuwa was called off, and the brave, ragged army returned to their homes shouting "Hamare Gaon Mein Hamara Raj!" (Our Rule in Our Villages).

There has been no army quite like this one, anywhere else in the world. In other countries—China (Chairman Mao got a Big Dam for his 77th birthday), Brazil, Malaysia, Guatemala, Paraguay—every sign of revolt has been snuffed out almost before it began. Here in India, it goes on and on. Of course, the State would like to take credit for this too. It would like us to be grateful to it for not crushing the movement completely, for allowing it to exist. After all what is all this, if not a sign of a healthy functioning democracy in which the State has to intervene when its people have differences of opinion?

I suppose that's one way of looking at it. (Is this my cue to cringe and say 'Thankyou, thankyou, for allowing me to write the things I write?')

We don't need to be grateful to the State for permitting us to protest. We can thank ourselves for that. It is we who have insisted on these rights. It is we who have refused to surrender them. If we have anything to be truly proud of as a people, it is this.

The struggle in the Narmada valley lives, despite the State.

The Indian State makes war in devious ways. Apart from its apparent benevolence, its other big weapon is its ability to wait. To roll with the punches. To wear out the opposition. The State never tires, never ages, never needs a rest. It runs an endless relay.

But fighting people tire. They fall ill, they grow old. Even the young age prematurely. For 20 years now, since the Tribunal's award, the ragged army in the valley has lived with the fear of eviction. For 20 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 of the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their descendants). 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



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rape and arrest and, in one case, murder. The only genuine 'fruit' of modern development that reached them, reached them inadvertently—the right to raise their voices, the right to be heard. But they have fought for 20 years now. How much longer will they last?

The struggle in the valley is tiring. It's no longer as fashionable as it used to be. The international camera crews and the radical reporters have moved (like the World Bank) to newer pastures. The documentary films have been screened and appreciated. Everybody's sympathy is all used up. But the dam goes on. It's getting higher and higher...

Now, more than ever before, the ragged army needs reinforcements. If we let it die, if we allow the struggle to be crushed, if we allow the people to be punished, we will lose the most precious thing we have: Our spirit, or what's left of it.

"India will go on," they'll tell you, the sage philosophers who don't want to be troubled by piddling Current Affairs. As though 'India' is somehow more valuable than her people.

Old Nazis probably soothe themselves in similar ways.

The war for the Narmada valley is not just some exotic tribal war, or a remote rural war or even an exclusively Indian war. It's a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forests of the world. All sorts of warriors from all over the world, anyone who wishes to enlist, will be honoured and welcomed. Every kind of warrior will be needed. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers, lovers.... The borders are open, folks! Come on in.

Anyway, back to the story.

In June 1991, The World Bank appointed Bradford Morse, a former head of the United Nations Development Program, as Chairman of the Independent Review. His brief was to make a thorough assessment of Sardar Sarovar Projects. He was guaranteed free access to all secret Bank documents relating to the Projects.

In September 1991, Bradford Morse and his team arrived in India. The NBA, convinced that this was yet another set-up, at first refused to meet them. The Gujarat government welcomed the team with a red carpet (and a nod and a wink) as covert allies.

A year later, in June 1992, the historic Independent Review (known also as the Morse Report) was published.

It unpeels the project delicately, layer by layer, like an onion. Nothing was too big, and nothing too small for them to enquire into. They met ministers and bureaucrats, they met ngos working in the area, went from village to village, from resettlement site to resettlement site. They visited the good ones. The bad ones. The temporary ones, the permanent ones. They spoke to hundreds of people. They travelled extensively in the submergence area and the command area. They went to Kutch and other drought-hit areas in Gujarat. They commissioned their own studies. They examined every aspect of the project: hydrology and water management, the upstream environment, sedimentation, catchment area treatment, the downstream environment, the anticipation of likely problems in the command area—water-logging, salinity, drainage, health, the impact on wildlife.

What the Morse Report reveals, in temperate, measured tones (which I admire, but cannot achieve) is scandalous. It is the most balanced, unbiased, yet damning indictment of the relationship between the Indian State and the World Bank. Without appearing to, perhaps even without intending to, the report cuts through to the cosy core, to the space where they live together and love each other (somewhere between what they say and what they do).

The core recommendation of the 357-page Independent Review was unequivocal and wholly unexpected:

"We think the Sardar Sarovar Projects as they stand are flawed, that resettlement and rehabilitation of all those displaced by the Projects is not possible under prevailing circumstances, and that environmental impacts of the Projects have not been properly considered or adequately addressed. Moreover we believe that the Bank shares responsibility with the borrower for the situation that has developed.... It seems clear that engineering and economic imperatives have driven the Projects to the

exclusion of human and environmental concerns.... India and the states involved...have spent a great deal of money. No one wants to see this money wasted. But we caution that it may be more wasteful to proceed without full knowledge of the human and environmental costs. We have decided that it would be irresponsible for us to patch together a series of recommendations on implementation when the flaws in the Projects are as obvious as they seem to us. As a result, we think that the wisest course would be for the Bank to step back from the Projects and consider them afresh. The failure of the Bank's incremental strategy should be acknowledged."

Four committed, knowledgeable, truly independent men—they do a lot to make up for faith eroded by hundreds of other venal ones who are paid to do similar jobs.

The Bank, however, was still not prepared to give up. It continued to fund the project. Two months after the Independent Review, it sent out the Pamela Cox Committee which did exactly what the Morse Review had cautioned the Bank against. It suggested a sort of patchwork remedy to try and salvage the operation. In October 1992, on the recommendation of the Pamela Cox Committee, the Bank asked the Indian Government to meet some minimum, primary conditions within a period of six months. Even that much, the government couldn't do. Finally, on March 30, 1993, the World Bank pulled out of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (Actually, technically, on March 29, one day before the deadline they'd been given, the Indian Government asked the World Bank to withdraw). Details. Details.

No one has ever managed to make the World Bank step back from a project before. Least of all a rag-tag army of the poorest people in one of the world's poorest countries. A group of people whom Lewis Preston, then President of the Bank, never managed to fit into his busy schedule when he visited India. Sacking The Bank was and is a huge moral victory for the people in the valley.

The euphoria didn't last. The government of Gujarat announced that it was going to raise the \$200 million shortfall on its own and continue with the project. During the period of the Review, and after it was published, confrontation between people and the Authorities continued unabated in the valley—humiliation, arrests, lathicharges. Indefinite fasts terminated by temporary promises and permanent betrayals. People who had agreed to leave the valley and be resettled had begun returning to their villages from their resettlement sites. In Manibeli, a village in Maharashtra and one of the nerve-centres of the resistance, hundreds of villagers participated in a Monsoon Satyagraha. In 1993, families in Manibeli remained in their homes as the waters rose. They clung to wooden posts with their children in their arms and refused to move. Eventually policemen prised them loose and dragged them away. The NBA declared that if the government did not agree to review the project, on August 6, 1993, a band of activists would drown themselves in the rising waters of the reservoir. On August 5, the Union Government constituted yet another committee called the Five Member Group (fmg) to review the Sardar Sarovar Projects.

The government of Gujarat refused them entry into Gujarat. The fmg report (a "desk report") was submitted the following year. It tacitly endorsed the grave concerns of the Independent Review. But it made no difference. Nothing changed. This is another of the State's tested strategies. It kills you with committees.

In February 1994, the government of Gujarat ordered the permanent closure of the sluice-gates of the dam.

In May 1994, the NBA filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court questioning the whole basis of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and seeking a stay on the construction.

That monsoon, when the water level in the reservoir rose and smashed down on the other side of the dam, 65,000 cubic metres of concrete and 35,000 cubic metres of rock were torn out of a stilling basin, leaving a 65-metre crater. The riverbed powerhouse was flooded. The damage was kept secret for months. Reports started appearing about it in the press only in January 1995.

In early 1995, on the grounds that the rehabilitation of displaced people had not been adequate, the Supreme Court ordered work on the dam to be suspended until further notice. The height of the dam was 80 metres above Mean Sea Level.

Meanwhile, work had begun on two more dams in Madhya Pradesh: the Narmada Sagar (without which the Sardar Sarovar loses 17 to 30 per cent of its efficiency) and the Maheshwar Dam. The

Maheshwar Dam is next in line, upstream from the Sardar Sarovar. The government of Madhya Pradesh has signed a Power Purchase contract with a private company—S. Kumars, one of India's leading textile magnates.

Tension in the Sardar Sarovar area abated temporarily and the battle moved upstream to Maheshwar, in the fertile plains of Nimad.

The case pending in the Supreme Court led to a palpable easing of repression in the valley. Construction work had stopped on the dam, but the rehabilitation charade continued. Forests (slated for submergence) continued to be cut and carted away in trucks, forcing people who depended on them for a livelihood to move out.

Even though the dam is nowhere near its eventual, projected height, its impact on the environment and the people living along the river is already severe.

Around the dam site and the nearby villages, the number of cases of malaria has increased six-fold.

Several kilometres upstream from the Sardar Sarovar dam, huge deposits of silt, hip-deep and over two hundred metres wide, has cut off access to the river. Women carrying water pots, now have to walk miles, literally miles, to find a negotiable entry point. Cows and goats get stranded in it and die. The little single- log boats that tribal people use have become unsafe on the irrational circular currents caused by the barricade downstream.

Further upstream, where the silt deposits have not yet become a problem, there's another problem. Landless people, (predominantly tribals and Dalits) have traditionally cultivated rice, fruit and vegetables on the rich, shallow silt banks the river leaves when it recedes in the dry months. Every now and then, the engineers manning the Bargi Dam (way upstream, near Jabalpur) release water from the reservoir without warning. Downstream, the water level in the river suddenly rises. Hundreds of families have had their crops washed away several times, leaving them with no livelihood.

Suddenly they can't trust their river anymore. It's like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing. But I'll be rapped on the knuckles if I continue in this vein. When we're discussing the Greater Common Good there's no place for sentiment. One must stick to facts. Forgive me for letting my heart wander.

The governments of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra continue to be completely cavalier in their dealings with displaced people. The government of Gujarat has a rehabilitation policy (on paper) that makes the other two states look medieval. It boasts of being the best rehabilitation package in the world. It offers land for land to displaced people from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and recognises the claims of 'encroachers' (usually tribal people with no papers). The deception, however, lies in its definition of who qualifies as 'Project Affected'.

In point of fact, the government of Gujarat hasn't even managed to rehabilitate people from its own 19 villages slated for submergence, let alone the rest of the 226 in the other two states. The inhabitants of these 19 villages have been scattered to 175 separate rehabilitation sites. Social links have been smashed, communities broken up.

In practice, the resettlement story (with a few 'ideal village' exceptions) continues to be one of callousness and broken promises. Some people have been given land, others haven't. Some have land that is stony and uncultivable. Some have land that is irredeemably water-logged. Some have been driven out by landowners who sold land to the government but haven't been paid yet.

Some who were resettled on the peripheries of other villages have been robbed, beaten and chased away by their host villagers. There have been occasions when displaced people from two different dam projects have been allotted contiguous lands. In one case, displaced people from three dams—the Ukai Dam, the Sardar Sarovar Dam and the Karjan Dam—were resettled in the same area. In addition to fighting amongst themselves for resources—water, grazing land, jobs—they had to fight a group of landless labourers who had been sharecropping the land for absentee landlords who had subsequently sold it to the government.

## Arundhati Roy – The Greater Common Good -

There's another category of displaced people—people whose lands have been acquired by the government for Resettlement Sites. There's a pecking order even amongst the wretched—Sardar Sarovar 'oustees' are more glamorous than other 'oustees' because they're occasionally in the news and have an ongoing case in court. (In other development projects, where there's no press, no NBA, no court case, there are no records. The displaced leave no trail at all.)

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. I've been to some of these 'sites'. I've seen film footage of others: shivering children, perched like birds on the edges of charpais, while swirling waters enter their tin homes. Frightened, fevered eyes watch pots and pans carried through the doorway by the current, floating out into the flooded fields, thin fathers swimming after them to retrieve what they can.

When the waters recede they leave ruin. Malaria, diarrhoea, sick cattle stranded in the slush. The ancient teak beams dismantled from their previous homes, carefully stacked away like postponed dreams, now spongy, rotten and unusable.

Forty households were moved from Manibeli to a resettlement site in Maharashtra. In the first year, 38 children died.

In today's papers (Indian Express, April 26, '99) there's a report about nine deaths in a single rehabilitation site in Gujarat. In the course of a week. That's 1.2875 paps a day, if you're counting.

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 or walking several kilometres to the nearest town, sitting in the marketplace (both men and women), offering themselves as wage labour, like goods on sale.

Instead of a forest from which they gathered everything they needed—food, fuel, fodder, rope, gum, tobacco, tooth powder, medicinal herbs, housing material—they earn between 10 and 20 rupees a day with which to feed and keep their families. Instead of a river, they have a hand-pump. In their old villages, they had no money, but they were insured. If the rains failed, they had the forests to turn to. The river to fish in. Their livestock was their fixed deposit. Without all this, they're a heartbeat away from destitution.

In Vadaj, a resettlement site I visited near Baroda, the man who was talking to me rocked his sick 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. Not unless he stole it. 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.

For the people who've been resettled, everything as 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 (in triplicate) 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 (Dear Maneka, Please don't build the dam, Love, The People). When the representation was handed to her she scolded the little delegation for not having written it in English.

From being self-sufficient and free, to being impoverished and yoked to the whims of a world you know nothing, nothing about—what d'you suppose it must feel like? Would you like to trade your beach house in Goa for a hovel in Paharganj? No? Not even for the sake of the Nation?

Truly, it is just not possible for a State Administration, any State Administration, to carry out the rehabilitation of a people as fragile as this, on such an immense scale. It's like using a pair of hedge-shears to trim an infant's fingernails. You can't do it without shearing its fingers off. Land for land sounds like a reasonable swap, but how do you implement it? How do you uproot 200,000 people (the official blinkered estimate) of which 117,000 are tribal people, and relocate them in a humane fashion? How do you keep their communities intact, in a country where every inch of land is fought over, where almost all litigation pending in courts has to do with land disputes?

Where is all this fine, unoccupied but arable land that is waiting to receive these intact communities?

The simple answer is that there isn't any. Not even for the 'officially' displaced of this one dam.

What about the rest of the 3,299 dams?

What about the remaining thousands of paps earmarked for annihilation? Shall we just put the Star of David on their doors and get it over with?

Jalud, in the Nimad plains of Madhya Pradesh, is the first of 60 villages that will be submerged by the reservoir of the Maheshwar dam. Jalud is not a tribal village, and is therefore riven with the shameful caste divisions that are the scourge of every ordinary Hindu village. A majority of the land-owning farmers (the ones who qualify as paps) are Rajputs. They farm some of the most fertile soil in India. Their houses are piled with sacks of wheat and daal and rice. They boast so much about the things they grow on their land that if it weren't so tragic, it could get on your nerves. Their houses have already begun to crack with the impact of the dynamiting on the dam site.

The 12 predominantly Dalit families who had small holdings in the vicinity of the dam site had their land acquired. They told me how when they objected, cement was poured into their water pipes, their standing crops were bulldozed and the police occupied the land by force. All 12 families are now landless and work as wage labour.

The area that the people of Jalud are going to be moved to is a few kilometres inland, away from the river, adjoining a predominantly Dalit and tribal village called Samraj. I saw the huge tract of land that had been marked off for them. It was a hard, stony hillock with stubby grass and scrub, on which truckloads of silt was being unloaded and spread out in a thin layer to make it look like rich, black cotton soil. The story goes like this: on behalf of the S. Kumars (Textile Tycoons turned Nation Builders) the District Magistrate acquired the hillock, which was actually village common grazing land that belonged to the people of Samraj. In addition to this, the land of 10 Dalit villagers was acquired. No compensation was paid.

The villagers, whose main source of income was their livestock, had to sell their goats and buffalos because they no longer had anywhere to graze them. Their only remaining source of income lies (lay) on the banks of a small lake on the edge of the village. In summer, when the water level recedes, it leaves a shallow ring of rich silt on which the villagers grow (grew) rice, melons and cucumber.

The S. Kumars have excavated this silt, to cosmetically cover the stony grazing ground (that the Rajputs of Jalud don't want). The banks of the lake are now steep and uncultivable.

The already impoverished people of Samraj have been left to starve, while this photo-opportunity is being readied for German funders and Indian courts and anybody else who cares to pass that way.

This is how India works. This is the genesis of the Maheshwar dam. The story of the first village. What will happen to the other 59? May bad luck pursue this dam. May bulldozers turn upon the Textile Tycoons.

Nothing can justify this kind of behaviour.

In circumstances like these, to even entertain a debate about Rehabilitation is to take the first step towards setting aside the Principles of Justice. Resettling 200,000 people in order to take (or pretend to take) drinking water to 40 million—there's something very wrong with the scale of operations here. This is Fascist Maths. It strangles stories. Bludgeons detail. And manages to blind perfectly reasonable people with its spurious, shining vision.

## Arundhati Roy – The Greater Common Good -

When I arrived on the banks of the Narmada in late March (1999), it was a month after the Supreme Court suddenly vacated the stay on construction work of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. I had read pretty much everything I could lay my hands on (all those 'secret' Government documents). I had a clear idea of the lay of the land—of what had happened where and when and to whom. The story played itself out before my eyes like a tragic film whose actors I'd already met. Had I not known its history, nothing would have made sense. Because in the valley there are stories within stories and it's easy to lose the clarity of rage in the sludge of other peoples' sorrow.

I ended my journey in Kevadia Colony, where it all began. Thirty-eight years ago, this is where the government of Gujarat decided to locate the infrastructure it would need for starting work on the dam: guest houses, office blocks, accommodation for engineers and their staff, roads leading to the dam site, warehouses for construction material.

It is located on the cusp of what is now the Sardar Sarovar reservoir and the Wonder Canal, Gujarat's 'life-line', which is going to quench the thirst of millions.

Nobody knows this, but Kevadia Colony is the key to the World. Go there, and secrets will be revealed to you.

In the winter of 1961, a government officer arrived in a village called Kothie and informed the villagers that some of their land would be needed to construct a helipad. In a few days a bulldozer arrived and flattened standing crops. The villagers were made to sign papers and were paid a sum of money, which they assumed was payment for their destroyed crops. When the helipad was ready, a helicopter landed on it, and out came Prime Minister Nehru. Most of the villagers couldn't see him because he was surrounded by policemen. Nehru made a speech. Then he pressed a button and there was an explosion on the other side of the river. After the explosion he flew away. That was the inauguration of the earliest avatar of the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Could Nehru have known when he pressed that button that he had unleashed an incubus?

After Nehru left, the government of Gujarat arrived in strength. It acquired 1,600 acres of land from 950 families from six villages. The people were Tadvi tribals, but because of their proximity to the city of Baroda, not entirely unversed in the ways of a market economy. They were sent notices and told that they would be paid cash compensations and given jobs on the dam site. Then the nightmare began. Trucks and bulldozers rolled in. Forests were felled, standing crops destroyed. Everything turned into a whirl of jeeps and engineers and cement and steel. Mohan Bhai Tadvi watched eight acres of his land with standing crops of jowar, toovar and cotton being levelled. Overnight he became a landless labourer. Three years later he received his cash compensation of Rs 250 an acre in three instalments.

Dersukh Bhai Vesa Bhai's father was given Rs 3,500 for his house and five acres of land with its standing crops and all the trees on it. He remembers walking all the way to Rajpipla (the district headquarters) as a little boy, holding his father's hand. He remembers how terrified they were when they were called into the Tehsildar's office. They were made to surrender their compensation notices and sign a receipt. They were illiterate, so they didn't know how much the receipt was made out for.

Everybody had to go to Rajpipla but they were always summoned on different days, one by one. So they couldn't exchange information or compare amounts.

Gradually, out of the dust and bulldozers, an offensive, diffuse configuration emerged. Kevadia Colony. Row upon row of ugly cement flats, offices, guest houses, roads. All the graceless infrastructure of Big Dam construction. The villagers' houses were dismantled and moved to the periphery of the colony, where they remain today, squatters on their own land. Those that created trouble were intimidated by the police and the Construction Company. The villagers told me that in the Contractor's headquarters they have a 'lock-up' like a police lock-up, where recalcitrant villagers are incarcerated and beaten.

The people who were evicted to build Kevadia Colony do not qualify as 'Project-Affected' in Gujarat's Rehabilitation package.

Some of them work as servants in the officers' bungalows and waiters in the guest house built on the land where their own houses once stood. Can anything be more poignant?

Those who had some land left, tried to cultivate it, but the Kevadia municipality introduced a scheme in which they brought in pigs to eat uncollected refuse on the streets. The pigs stray into the villagers' fields and destroy their crops.

In 1992, after 30 years, each family has been offered a sum of Rs 12,000 per hectare, upto a maximum of Rs 36,000, provided they agree to leave their homes and go away! Yet 40 per cent of the land that was acquired is lying unused. The government refuses to return it. The 11 acres acquired from Deviben, who is a widow now, have been given over to the Swami Narayan Trust (a big religious sect). On a small portion of it, the Trust runs a little school. The rest it cultivates, while Deviben watches through the barbed wire fence. On the 200 acres acquired in the village of Gora, villagers were evicted and blocks of flats were built. They lay empty for years. Eventually the government hired it for a nominal fee to Jai Prakash Associates, the dam contractors, who, the villagers say, sub-let it privately for Rs 32,000 a month. (Jai Prakash Associates, the biggest dam contractors in the country, the real nation-builders, own the Siddharth Continental and the Vasant Continental in Delhi.)

On an area of about 30 acres there is an absurd cement pwd 'replica' of the ancient Shoolpaneshwar temple that was submerged in the reservoir. The same political formation that plunged a whole nation into a bloody, medieval nightmare because it insisted on destroying an old mosque to dig up a non-existent temple, thinks nothing of submerging a hallowed pilgrimage route and hundreds of temples that have been worshipped in for centuries.

It thinks nothing of destroying the sacred hills and groves, the places of worship, the ancient homes of the gods and demons of tribal people.

It thinks nothing of submerging a valley that has yielded fossils, microliths and rock paintings, the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age.

What can one say?

In Kevadia Colony, the most barbaric joke of all is the wildlife museum. The Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary Interpretation Centre gives you a quick, comprehensive picture of the government's commitment to Conservation.

The Sardar Sarovar reservoir, when the dam is at its full height, is going to submerge about 13,000 hectares of prime forest land. (In anticipation of submergence, the forest began to be felled many greedy years ago). Environmentalists and conservationists were quite rightly alarmed at the extent of loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitat that the submergence would cause. To mitigate this loss, the government decided to expand the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary that straddles the dam on the south side of the river. There is a hare-brained scheme that envisages drowning animals from the submerged forests swimming their way to 'wildlife corridors' that will be created for them, and setting up home in the New! Improved! Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary. Presumably wildlife and biodiversity can be protected and maintained only if human activity is restricted and traditional rights to use forest resources curtailed. About 40,000 tribal people from 101 villages within the boundaries of the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary depend on the forest for a livelihood. They will be 'persuaded' to leave. They are not included in the definition of Project Affected.

Where will they go? I imagine you know by now.

Whatever their troubles in the real world, in the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary Interpretation Centre (where an old stuffed leopard and a mouldy sloth bear have to make do with a shared corner) the tribal people have a whole room to themselves. On the walls there are clumsy wooden carvings—government approved tribal art, with signs that say 'Tribal Art'. In the centre, there is a life-sized thatched hut with the door open. The pot's on the fire, the dog is asleep on the floor and all's well with the world. Outside, to welcome you, are Mr and Mrs Tribal. A lumpy, papier mache couple, smiling.

Smiling. They're not even permitted the grace of rage. That's what I can't get over.

Oh, but have I got it wrong? What if they're smiling voluntarily, bursting with National Pride? Brimming with the joy of having sacrificed their lives to bring drinking water to thirsty millions in Gujarat?

For 20 years now, the people of Gujarat have waited for the water they believe the Wonder Canal will bring them. For years the government of Gujarat has invested 85 per cent of the state's irrigation budget into the Sardar Sarovar Projects. Every smaller, quicker, local, more feasible scheme has been set aside for the sake of this. Election after election has been contested and won on the 'water ticket'. Everyone's hopes are pinned to the Wonder Canal. Will she fulfil Gujarat's dreams?

From the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the Narmada flows through 180 km of rich lowland, into the Arabian sea in Bharuch. What the Wonder Canal does, more or less, is to re-route most of the river, turning it almost 90 degrees northward. It's a pretty drastic thing to do to a river. The Narmada estuary in Bharuch is one of the last known breeding place of the Hilsa, probably the hottest contender for India's favourite fish. The Stanley Dam wiped out Hilsa from the Cauvery River in South India, and Pakistan's Ghulam Mohammed dam destroyed its spawning area on the Indus. Hilsa, like the salmon, is an anadromous fish—born in freshwater, migrating to the ocean as a smolt and returning to the river to spawn. The drastic reduction in water flow, the change in the chemistry of the water because of all the sediment trapped behind the dam, will radically alter the ecology of the estuary and modify the delicate balance of fresh water and sea water which is bound to affect the spawning. At present, the Narmada estuary produces 13,000 tonnes of Hilsa and freshwater prawn (which also breed in brackish water). About 10,000 fisher families depend on it for a living.

The Morse Committee was appalled to discover that no studies had been done of the downstream environment—no documentation of the riverine ecosystem, its seasonal changes, biological species or the pattern of how its resources are used. The dam builders had no idea what the impact of the dam would be on the people and the environment downstream, let alone any ideas on what steps to take to mitigate it.

The government simply says that it will alleviate the loss of Hilsa fisheries by stocking the reservoir with hatchery-bred fish. (Who'll control the reservoir? Who'll grant the commercial fishing to its favourite paying customers?) The only hitch is that so far, scientists have not managed to breed Hilsa artificially. The rearing of Hilsa depends on getting spawn from wild adults, which will, in all likelihood, be eliminated by the dam. Dams have either eliminated or endangered one-fifth of the world's freshwater fish.

So! Quiz question—where will the 40,000 fisherfolk go?

E-mail your answers to the Government that Cares dot com.

At the risk of losing readers, (I've been warned several times—'How can you write about irrigation? Who the hell is interested?') let me tell you what the Wonder Canal is—and what she's meant to achieve. Be interested, if you want to snatch your future back from the sweaty palms of the Iron Triangle.

Most rivers in India are monsoon-fed. 80-85 per cent of the flow takes place during the rainy months—usually between June and September. The purpose of a dam, an irrigation dam, is to store monsoon water in its reservoir and then use it judiciously for the rest of the year, distributing it across dry land through a system of canals. The area of land irrigated by the canal network is called the command area. How will the command area, accustomed only to seasonal irrigation, its entire ecology designed for that single pulse of monsoon rain, react to being irrigated the whole year round? Perennial canal irrigation does to soil roughly what anabolic steroids do to the human body. Steroids can turn an ordinary athlete into an Olympic medal-winner, perennial irrigation can convert soil which produced only a single crop a year into soil that yields several crops a year. Lands on which farmers traditionally grew crops that don't need a great deal of water (maize, millet, barley, a whole range of pulses) suddenly yield water-guzzling cash crops—cotton, rice, soya bean, and the biggest guzzler of all (like those finned '50s cars), sugarcane. This completely alters traditional crop-patterns in the command area. People stop growing things they can afford to eat; start growing things they can only afford to sell. By linking themselves to the 'market' they lose control over their lives.

Unfortunately, ecologically, this is a poisonous payoff. Even if the markets hold out, the soil doesn't. Over time it becomes too poor to support the extra demands made on it. Gradually, in the way the steroid-using athlete becomes an invalid, the soil becomes depleted and degraded, the agricultural yields begin to wind down. In India, land irrigated by well water is now almost twice as productive as land irrigated by canals. Certain kinds of soil are less suitable for perennial irrigation than others. Perennial canal irrigation raises the level of the water-table. As the water moves up through the soil, it



absorbs salts. Saline water is drawn to the surface by capillary action, and the land becomes water-logged. The 'logged' water (to coin a phrase) is then breathed into the atmosphere by plants, causing an even greater concentration of salts in the soil. When the concentration of salts in the soil reaches one per cent, that soil becomes toxic to plant life. This is what's called salinisation.

A study by the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University says that one-fifth of the world's irrigated land is salt-affected.

By the mid-'80s, 25 million of the 37 million hectares under irrigation in Pakistan was estimated to be either salinised or water-logged or both. In India the estimates vary between 6 and 10 million hectares. According to 'secret' government studies, more than 52 per cent of the Sardar Sarovar command area is prone to water-logging and salinisation.

And that's not the end of the bad news.

The 460-km long, concrete-lined Sardar Sarovar Wonder Canal and its 75,000 km network of branch canals and sub-branch canals is designed to irrigate a total of two million hectares of land spread over 12 districts. The districts of Kutch and Saurashtra (the billboards of Gujarat's Thirst campaign) are at the very tail end of this network.

The system of canals superimposes an arbitrary concrete grid on the existing pattern of natural drainage in the command area. It's a little like reorganising the pattern of reticulate veins on the surface of a leaf. When a canal cuts across the path of a natural drain, it blocks the natural flow of the seasonal water and leads to water-logging. The engineering solution to this is to map the pattern of natural drainage in the area and replace it with an alternate, artificial drainage system that is built in conjunction with the canals. The problem, as you can imagine, is that doing this is enormously expensive. The cost of drainage is not included as part of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. It usually isn't, in most irrigation projects. Here's why.

David Hopper, the World Bank vice-president for South Asia, has admitted that the Bank does not usually include the cost of drainage in its irrigation projects in South Asia because irrigation projects with adequate drainage are not economically viable. It costs five times as much to provide adequate drainage as it does to irrigate the same amount of land. The Bank's solution to the problem is to put in the irrigation system and wait for salinity and water-logging to set in. When all the money's spent, and the land is devastated, and the people are in despair, who should pop by? Why, the friendly neighbourhood Banker! And what's that bulge in his pocket? Could it be a loan for a Drainage Project?

In Pakistan the World Bank financed the Tarbela (1977) and Mangla Dam (1967) Projects on the Indus. The command areas are water-logged. Now The Bank has given Pakistan a \$785 million loan for a drainage project. In India, in Punjab and Haryana it's doing the same.

Irrigation without drainage is like having a system of arteries and no veins. Pretty damn pointless.

Since the World Bank stepped back from the Sardar Sarovar Projects, it's a little unclear where the money for the drainage is going to come from. This hasn't deterred the government from going ahead with the Canal work. The result is that even before the dam is ready, before the Wonder Canal has been commissioned, before a single drop of irrigation water has been delivered, water-logging has set in. Among the worst affected areas are the resettlement colonies.

There is a difference between the planners of the Sardar Sarovar irrigation scheme and the planners of previous projects. At least they acknowledge that water-logging and salinisation are real problems, and need to be addressed.

Their solutions, however, are corny enough to send a Hoollock Gibbon to a hooting hospital.

They plan to have a series of electronic groundwater sensors placed in every 100 sq km of the command area. (That works out to about 1,800 ground sensors). These will be linked to a central computer which will analyse the data and send out commands to the canal heads to stop water flowing into areas that show signs of water-logging. A network of 'Only-irrigation', 'Only-drainage' and 'Irrigation-cum-drainage' tubewells will be sunk, and electronically synchronised by the central computer. The saline water will be pumped out, mixed with mathematically computed quantities of freshwater and recirculated into a network of surface and sub-surface drains (for which more land will

be acquired). To achieve the irrigation efficiency that they claim they'll achieve, according to a study done by Dr Rahul Ram for Kalpavriksh, 82 per cent of the water that goes into the Wonder Canal network will have to be pumped out again!

They've never implemented an electronic irrigation scheme before, not even as a pilot project. It hasn't occurred to them to experiment with some already degraded land, just to see if it works. No, they'll use our money to install it over the whole of the 2 million hectares and then see if it works. What if it doesn't? If it doesn't, it won't matter to the planners. They'll still draw the same salaries. They'll still get their pension and their gratuity and whatever else you get when you retire from a career of inflicting mayhem on a people.

How can it possibly work? It's like sending in a rocket scientist to milk a troublesome cow. How can they manage a gigantic electronic irrigation system when they can't even line the walls of the canals without having them collapse and cause untold damage to crops and people?

When they can't even prevent the Big Dam itself from breaking off in bits when it rains?

To quote from one of their own studies: "The design, the implementation and management of the integration of groundwater and surface water in the above circumstance is complex."

Agreed. To say the least. Their recommendation of how to deal with the complexity: "It will only be possible to implement such a system if all groundwater and surface water supplies are managed by a single authority."

Aha!

It's beginning to make sense now. Who'll own the water? The Single Authority. Who'll sell the water? The Single Authority. Who'll profit from the sales? The Single Authority. The Single Authority has a scheme whereby it will sell water by the litre, not to individuals but to farmers' cooperatives (which don't exist just yet, but no doubt the Single Authority can create Cooperatives and force farmers to cooperate?). Computer water, unlike ordinary river water, is expensive. Only those who can afford it will get it.

Gradually, small farmers will get edged out by big farmers, and the whole cycle of uprootment will begin all over again.

The Single Authority, because it owns the computer water, will also decide who will grow what. It says that farmers getting computer water will not be allowed to grow sugarcane because they'll use up the share of the thirsty millions at the tail end of the canal. But the Single Authority has already given licences to 10 large sugar mills right near the head of the canal. On an earlier occasion, the Single Authority said only 30 per cent of the command area of the Ukai Dam would be used for sugarcane. But sugarcane grows on 75 per cent of it (and 30 per cent is water-logged). In Maharashtra, thanks to a different branch of the Single Authority, the politically powerful sugar lobby that occupies one-tenth of the state's irrigated land uses half the state's irrigation water.

In addition to the sugar growers, the Single Authority has recently announced a scheme that envisages a series of five-star hotels, golf-courses and water parks that will come up along the Wonder Canal. What earthly reason could possibly justify this?

The Single Authority says it's the only way to raise money to complete the project!

I really worry about those millions of good people in Kutch and Saurashtra.

Will the water ever reach them?

First of all, we know that there's a lot less water in the river than the Single Authority claims there is.

Second of all, in the absence of the Narmada Sagar Dam, the irrigation benefits of the Sardar Sarovar drop by a further 17-30 per cent.

Third of all, the irrigation efficiency of the Wonder Canal (the actual amount of water delivered by the system) has been arbitrarily fixed at 60 per cent. The highest irrigation efficiency in India, taking into

account system leaks and surface evaporation, is 35 per cent. This means it's likely that only half of the command area will be irrigated. Which half? The first half.

Fourth, to get to Kutch and Saurashtra, the Wonder Canal has to negotiate its way past the 10 sugar mills, the golf-courses, the five-star hotels, the water parks and the cash-crop growing, politically powerful, Patel- rich districts of Baroda, Ahmedabad, Kheda, Gandhinagar and Mehsana. (Already, in complete contravention of its own directives, the Single Authority has allotted the city of Baroda a sizeable quantity of water. When Baroda gets, can Ahmedabad be left behind? The political clout of powerful urban centres in Gujarat will ensure they get their share.)

Fifth, even in the (one hundred per cent) unlikely event that water gets there, it has to be piped and distributed to those 8,000 waiting villages.

It's worth knowing that of the one billion people in the world who have no access to safe drinking water, 855 million live in rural areas. This is because the cost of installing an energy-intensive network of thousands of kilometres of pipelines, aqueducts, pumps and treatment plants that are needed to provide drinking water to scattered rural populations is prohibitive. Nobody builds Big Dams to provide drinking water to rural people. Nobody can afford to.

When the Morse Committee first arrived in Gujarat they were impressed by the Gujarat government's commitment to taking drinking water to such distant, rural outposts. They asked to see the detailed drinking water plans.

There weren't any. (There still aren't any.)

They asked if any costs had been worked out. "A few thousand crores," was the breezy answer. A billion dollars is an expert's calculated guess. It's not included as part of the project cost. So where is the money going to come from?

Never mind. Jus' askin'.

It's interesting that the Farakka Barrage that diverts water from the Ganga to Calcutta Port has reduced the drinking water availability for 40 million people who live downstream in Bangladesh.

At times there's something so precise and mathematically chilling about nationalism.

Build a dam to take water away from 40 million people. Build a dam to pretend to bring water to 40 million people.

Who are these gods that govern us? Is there no limit to their powers?

The last person I met in the valley was Bhajji Bhai. He is a Tadvi tribal from Undava, one of the first villages where the government began to acquire land for the Wonder Canal and its 75,000 km network. Bhajji Bhai lost 17 of his 19 acres to the Wonder Canal. It crashes through his land, 700 feet wide including its walkways and steep, sloping embankments, like a velodrome for giant bicyclists.

The Canal network affects more than 200,000 families. People have lost wells and trees, people have had their houses separated from their farms by the canal, forcing them to walk two or three kms to the nearest bridge and then two or three kms back along the other side. About 23,000 families, let's say 100,000 people, will be, like Bhajji Bhai, seriously affected. They don't count as 'Project-affected' and are not entitled to rehabilitation.

Like his neighbours in Kevadia Colony, Bhajji Bhai became a pauper overnight.

Bhajji Bhai and his people, forced to smile for photographs on government calendars. Bhajji Bhai and his people, denied the grace of rage. Bhajji Bhai and his people, squashed like bugs by this country they're supposed to call their own.

It was late evening when I arrived at his house. We sat down on the floor and drank over-sweet tea in the dying light. As he spoke, a memory stirred in me, a sense of *deja vu*. I couldn't imagine why. I knew I hadn't met him before. Then I realised what it was. I didn't recognise him, but I remembered his story. I'd seen him in an old documentary film, shot more than 10 years ago, in the valley. He was frailer

now, his beard softened with age. But his story hadn't aged. It was still young and full of passion. It broke my heart, the patience with which he told it. I could tell he had told it over and over and over again, hoping, praying, that one day, one of the strangers passing through Undava would turn out to be Good Luck. Or God.

Bhaji Bhai, Bhaji Bhai, when will you get angry? When will you stop waiting? When will you say 'That's enough!' and reach for your weapons, whatever they may be? When will you show us the whole of your resonant, terrifying, invincible strength? When will you break the faith? Will you break the faith? Or will you let it break you?

To slow a beast, you break its limbs. To slow a nation, you break its people. You rob them of volition. You demonstrate your absolute command over their destiny. You make it clear that ultimately it falls to you to decide who lives, who dies, who prospers, who doesn't. To exhibit your capability you show off all that you can do, and how easily you can do it. How easily you could press a button and annihilate the earth. How you can start a war, or sue for peace. How you can snatch a river away from one and gift it to another. How you can green a desert, or fell a forest and plant one somewhere else. You use caprice to fracture a peoples' faith in ancient things—earth, forest, water, air. Once that's done, what do they have left? Only you. They'll turn to you, because you're all they have. They'll love you even while they despise you. They'll trust you even though they know you well. They'll vote for you even as you squeeze the very breath from their bodies. They'll drink what you give them to drink. They'll breathe what you give them to breathe. They'll live where you dump their belongings. They have to. What else can they do? There's no higher court of redress. You're their mother and their father. You're the judge and the jury. You're the World. You're God.

Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also by what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives. And Powerlessness reaffirmed not just by the helplessness of those who have lost, but also by the gratitude of those who have (or think they have) gained.

This cold, contemporary cast of power is couched between the lines of noble-sounding clauses in democratic-sounding constitutions. It's wielded by the elected representatives of an ostensibly free people. Yet no monarch, no despot, no dictator in any other century in the history of human civilisation has had access to weapons like these.

Day by day, river by river, forest by forest, mountain by mountain, missile by missile, bomb by bomb—almost without our knowing it, we are being broken.

Big Dams are to a Nation's 'Development' what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They're both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons governments 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're both malignant indications of civilisation turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link—the understanding—between human beings and the planet they live on. 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.

Can we unscramble it?

Maybe. Inch by inch. Bomb by bomb. Dam by dam. Maybe by fighting specific wars in specific ways. We could begin in the Narmada valley.

This July will bring the last monsoon of the Twentieth Century. The ragged army in the Narmada valley has declared that it will not move when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir rise to claim its lands and homes. Whether you love the dam or hate it, whether you want it or you don't, it is in the fitness of things that you understand the price that's being paid for it. That you have the courage to watch while the dues are cleared and the books are squared.

Our dues. Our books. Not theirs.

Be there

## A Poetic Licence

**Although Arundhati Roy denies any neo-Luddite impulse or pre-industrial, anti-development dreams, this is what seems to drive her argument, says columnist B.G. Verghese, now with the Centre for Policy Research, in a rebuttal to 'The Greater Common Good'**

### B.G. VERGHESE

THE poetry was charming; the facts wrong; more rhyme than reason. Arundhati Roy, the poet laureate of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (nba), allowed poetic licence to run away with her in writing about the ssp or the Sardar Sarovar Project (The Greater Common Good in Outlook, May 24). Having denuclearised herself in an earlier article, she is here at the barricades as 'Big Dams are to a Nation's Development' what nuclear arms are to its Military Arsenal...both weapons of mass destruction'. The Indian state/democracy is a pestilential 'poverty-producing machine' made to order by rich urban elites to grind down the rural poor.

This 'state secret' unearthed, Arundhati sounds a clarion call to the wretched to 'break faith' with the system that has operated Big Dams to 'devour', displace and devastate 50 million of them. She would 'unscramble' the 'malignant' conspiracy, 'Bomb by bomb; Dam by dam... begin(ning) with the Narmada valley'. Strong stuff, this.

Arundhati denies any neo-Luddite impulse or arcadian, pre-industrial, anti-development dream. Yet this is what appears to drive her argument. Let's unscramble it.

Dams displace. So does acute deprivation, as in the Narmada Valley, but in a far higher ratio. The ssp displaced are a charge on the project with a generous plan, budget and organisation for their rehabilitation. The distressed migrants are just damned.

'Words,' exclaims Arundhati, echoing the Andolan's petition on the basis of which it won a stay from the Supreme Court more than four years ago. However, in February '99, the court permitted raising the height of Sardar Sarovar above 80 metres (where it had been frozen) in five-metre slabs to 85 metres and more, pari passu with actual resettlement of those displaced at each incremental five-metre contour. Justice P.B. Desai was appointed by the court as the Grievance Authority to report on the ground realities of relief and rehabilitation (r&r).

Why not await these findings? They have been submitted and will soon be made known. But it might be inconvenient if his conclusions do not match the nba's prejudices. Who knows? And so, preempt the court and the Authority. The nba has charged the Sardar Sarovar Nigam with making false claims before the court; there have been hunger strikes and dharnas against the dam and other upstream projects; and citizens, more eminent than informed like Arundhati, have petitioned the President of India to stop the dam.

The nba has made rehabilitation the major issue. Yet an ssp official, Madhavbhai Raval, was reportedly stripped, beaten and paraded by nba activists on March 21 in Barda village in Madhya Pradesh, while on r&r duty. This is not the first time the nba has resorted to violence and subterfuge to enforce its will. The implications of such coercion become apparent against the ssp's statement that of the 3,143 project-affected families who would need rehabilitation at 85 metres, 88 per cent have been resettled. The others have not responded despite being given due notice to move and offered land at any of the 61 sites equipped with the stipulated civic amenities.

Indeed, the Centre's r&r sub-group has certified that land and facilities are available for resettlement of all project-affected peoples (paps) up to Elevation 90 metres. Who is holding them back and why? Is it because once the dam attains a height of 110 metres " and this could happen by the end of 2000 " irrigation and power benefits would begin to flow, transforming promises into reality and exposing the hollowness of claims that Sardar Sarovar will not work? Have the poor become a constituency that some are afraid to lose?

The paps are receiving far more and more productive irrigable land of their own choice in the ssp command on relocation " two hectare at a minimum, or more than the median holding in Gujarat. With

the superior amenities provided at the new locations, they are beginning to enjoy an enhanced quality of life. Regular r&r monitoring and evaluation reports by the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, show a rising curve of production, income generation and social consumption despite delayed irrigation from the project. There are problems; but also a mechanism for dealing with such teething troubles.

Ah, but the paps 'have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in winter ' in place of their original spacious, airy tribal homes, says Arundhati. Wrong. This temporary accommodation has been provided at their own request to enable displaced persons (DPs) to cultivate allocated lands at the new site even before they are statutorily bound to move from their old site. So, the favour sought becomes an accusation when conceded.

'People stop growing things they can afford to eat; start growing things they can only afford to sell. By linking themselves with the market they lose control over their lives. ' So speaks Arundhati who idealises the tribals' 'self-sufficient and free ' lifestyle as hunter-gatherers, 'insured ' by the forest and river when the rains fail, protected from money and hand-pumps which would 'yoke them to the whims of a world you know, nothing, nothing about ' . Yes, there it is, the glorification of the noble savage. That is what Arundhati ordains for 80 million tribal Indians " the joy of grubbing for roots, deprived, impoverished, 'protected ' by the nba from a 'world ' which 'they ' must not enter so that 'we ' can continue to champion them.

The National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) was criticised for years on similar grounds: that the rural poor were being encouraged to market their milk instead of feeding it to their sickly babies. Would anybody suggest that Operation Flood has impoverished India?

Arundhati laments traditional crops being replaced by water-guzzlers like cotton, rice, soya and, especially, sugarcane. Alongside low irrigation efficiency and the demands of rich Patels, urban elites, five-star hotels and golf courses en route, this must preclude water reaching drought-prone North Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch. Waterlogging and salinity will destroy farming. As for the promise of drinking water, this is an utter hoax. Altogether, a picture of shameful thuggery and incompetence.

Sorry Arundhati. The planned irrigation delta will not permit cane farming, which is discouraged. The 14 existing sugar factories are outside the ssp command. However, she predicts waterlogging and salinity and scoffs at the measures taken to monitor and prevent this happening. The idea of automated systems linked to observation wells to control the water table is 'corny enough to send a Hoollock Gibbon to a hooting hospital ' . Ha, ha. Conjunctive use is derided as foolish and expensive. And how can these mutts manage anything so sophisticated when they cannot even build the dam or line the canal without its breaking and collapsing in turn? Splendid satire, were it not so mendacious. But don't spoil the chorus: 'Dammed if you do and dammed if you don't.'

We have it on Arundhati's supreme authority that only half the ssp command can be irrigated for lack of water. And that half, she suspects, will not be the tail-end in distant Saurashtra and Kutch. Really! Why not wait and see?

Worse, when the Narmada Tribunal announced its award 'there was no mention of drinking water ' . It was only when the project ran into political trouble that the government 'suddenly discovered the emotive power of thirst ' . False. Gujarat had sought and the tribunal allocated it 0.86 million acre feet (maf) of drinking water and 0.20 maf for industrial use. No afterthought that.

But then, how can anyone take the drinking water project seriously when the government comes up with different figures of the population and number of villages to be covered? Arundhati laughs at the inclusion of 236 uninhabited villages. Lack of water has compelled migration from Kutch and provision of water supply could bring deserted villages back to life. Every project looks at several options before the final parameters are frozen. Perhaps Hoollock Gibbons do things differently.

The master plan prepared by the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board caters to 8,215 villages and 135 urban centres in Saurashtra, Gujarat and Kutch. This will cover a population of 20 million rising to 30 million or more over the next 30 years. Work has commenced.

Yes, this will be a separate project, separately funded, to construct an elaborate pipeline and delivery network. That is standard practice. Further, thousands of village tanks en route will be replenished by the Narmada canals. The ssp was never intended to build and operate a water supply scheme. Its

canals will, however, provide the primary carrier systems and deliver stipulated supplies at designated points.

Arundhati probably does not know that about 60 per cent of the water she drinks or uses in Delhi comes from the Bhakra system. Sceptics like her who insisted that the Indira Gandhi Canal would never reach the far end of the Rajasthan desert now gratefully drink the water brought from 600 to 800 km away to Barmer, Jaisalmer, Pokhran, Jodhpur and Bikaner.

Okay, but then of course the Farakka Barrage 'has reduced drinking water availability for 40 million people who live downstream in Bangladesh' . More nonsense. Does Arundhati know about the massive dredging project under way in Bangladesh to channelise water releases under the acclaimed Ganga Treaty into the Gorai river whose intake on the Ganga was choked even prior to the construction of the Farakka Barrage? Even Bangladesh has not made such an allegation.

Energy output is confused with the ssp's 1,450 MW installed capacity in asserting that the ssp 'will end up producing only three per cent of the power that its planners say it will. 50 MW' . Let that gaffe pass. This, Arundhati says, is inevitable because of the mutual conflict between irrigation and power. Wrong again. The 250 MW canal-head powerhouse will keep generating to the extent of the releases made for irrigation. So a steady output is assured here. The 1,200 MW riverbed powerhouse will also not suffer a diminution of output as abstractions from the Narmada steadily increase over the years. Reversible turbines are being installed to provide pumped storage with the Garudeshwar weir, 12 km below the Sardar Sarovar dam, providing the necessary pondage.

Yes, yes, but then the hilsa and the freshwater prawn will surely be destroyed by ecological changes below the dam throwing 40,000 fisherfolk out of work. The Morse Commission, we are told, was appalled at the lack of studies on downstream effects. A '95 report on 'Environmental Assessment of Changes Downstream of Sardar Sarovar Dam' by Wallingford found that while Gujarat and Rajasthan could be utilising their full 9.5 maf allocations by 2024, the slower pace of development in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh would entail no more than 70 per cent utilisation of total stream flows by 2024. A situation of zero flow below Sardar Sarovar might only prevail by 2067 before which it is recommended that a compensatory release of 28.3 m cubic metres (0.72 maf) per annum be provided for, as originally proposed by Gujarat.

Quite apart from the controversy over the Narmada's hydrology, additional sources of water will be available in the medium term.

The Sardar Sarovar dam will not affect hilsa and prawn migration as it is situated upstream of their breeding sites. But reduced discharges below the dam and corresponding changes in water quality some decades hence could matter. However, the value and volume of reservoir fishery and the employment that generates will be far larger than from traditional fishing.

As for the Morse report, this has been fully answered by several commentators, including this writer in his *Winning the Future* (Konark, 1994).

Then there is the tired and empty taunt of the ssp and other Narmada valley dams being the country's 'Greatest Planned Environment Disaster' . Twenty years ago, one heard of the Mitti Bachao Andolan at the Tawa project which was then labelled a disaster. Ask today.

However, Arundhati tells us, 13,000 ha of 'prime forest' is going to be submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam. As usual, no distinction is made between forest lands " an administrative term " and forests or tree cover. It is officially estimated that the dam will submerge 4,523 ha of mostly degraded forests bearing 981,000 trees. As against this, the project plans to plant over 11 million trees in forest upgradation, compensatory afforestation and canal bank plantations. So the replacement ratio will exceed 100:1. Millions of these trees are already standing tall. Narmada will actually give Gujarat considerable additional green cover. Six wildlife and marine sanctuaries are also being developed.

The tendency to denigrate engineers and engineering projects as necessarily venal, exploitative and anti- poor is fashionable in some quarters. The ssp is a considerable engineering feat, and no crime for that. The cost will be considerable, but nothing like the nba's Rs 40,000 crore that Arundhati cites. Costs have little meaning unless weighed against corresponding benefits. These will be far greater on any count. It is not for nothing that the ssp has been labelled Gujarat's lifeline. Tribals, marginal farmers and women will be among major beneficiaries of the transformation it effects.

Arundhati takes a sideswipe at the upstream Maheshwar dam in Madhya Pradesh (400 MW for peaking power) being built by a private entrepreneur, S. Kumars. Stipulated norms are being followed for rehabilitating 2,252 fully and partially affected families at a cost of Rs 130 crore. Here too, the nba has taken to disruption and coercion.

'No one has been consulted or informed,' parrots Arundhati, taking her cue from the nba. Yes, some of these things could and should certainly be done better. The country is on a learning curve and things are improving. But to suggest that there has been absolutely no consultation or information would be a gross exaggeration.

Arundhati and the nba can play a watchdog role, educate and inform the affected people and ensure that they are given their due. Other ngos in Gujarat are playing such a catalytic role. But if the object is to obstruct and spread disinformation, conjuring up two problems for every solution, then they do no service to themselves or their 'cause' - the underprivileged in whose name they claim to speak.

#### NARMADA

1. Once the dam is 110 m high, irrigation and power benefits would flow. And that could expose the hollowness of the NBA's claims.

2. Arundhati asserts traditional crops are being replaced by water guzzlers like cane. But the planned irrigation delta won't permit its farming and the existing factories are outside the SSP command

3. The NBA: Conjuring up two problems for every solution Why's the NBA playing an obstructive and not a catalytic role on the Narmada project? Is it because facts may soon contradict their prejudices? Are the poor a constituency some can't afford to lose? Arundhati's idealisation of the tribal lifestyle reeks of glorification of the noble savage. This is what she ordains for them: grubbing for roots, deprived, impoverished, and 'protected' by the NBA. Does Arundhati know 60% of the water she drinks in Delhi comes from the Bhakra system; even sceptics who thought the Rajasthan canal would never reach the far end of the desert have been belied.



## The Greater Common Good II

*Arundhati Roy accepts B.G. Verghese's compliments on her poetic writing, but refutes his rebuttal of the randomly selected facts from her argument*

ARUNDHATI ROY

I am glad it's none other than B.G.Verghese who has written an (official?) rejoinder in Outlook (A Poetic Licence, July 5) to my essay The Greater Common Good. Glad, only because I trust that he is an honourable man defending long-held beliefs and not a venal one seeking to line his wallet. So at least we have the semblance of a debate on our hands. What more can one ask for?

Almost everyone who wants to rubbish my argument begins by paying me extravagant, back-handed compliments about my 'poetic writing'. Almost as though poetry by definition is imprecise, unsubstantiated mush. Not something that Real Men who build Big Dams dabble in.

"The poetry was charming. The facts wrong," Mr Verghese says. The poetry may have been charming (though it's not an adjective that I would choose), but the facts are right.

I won't restate my case, let me simply say that I stand by every single fact that Mr Verghese has tried to dispute. Every single argument. The Greater Common Good is now available as a book. Each fact is backed up by sources independent of the nba (whose cause he accuses me of "parroting") and listed in the end-notes of the book.

I don't expect someone like Mr Verghese who has served on the Narmada Planning Group and spent a good part of his life advocating Big Dams to suddenly screech to a halt and jettison his point of view. But it's bad strategy on his part to try and derail a huge, and hugely necessary, national debate by picking out at random facts from the tail end of the argument, turning it into techno-jargon, stirring in some personal invective and serving it up as a whole new kind of soup.

The Sardar Sarovar dam, I continue to maintain, is an economic, technological, ecological, and human disaster in the making. The benefits that its proponents promise it'll bring-both in terms of power generation and irrigation-have been exaggerated to laughable levels. In my essay I have shown how the politically powerful lobbies-sugar farmers, five-star hotels, water-parks and urban centres-are already poised to siphon off the irrigation water from the main canal long before it reaches Kutch and Saurashtra-the billboards of the Gujarat government's Thirst Campaign.

Mr Verghese says that the "planned irrigation delta will not permit cane farming which is discouraged". (There's a difference between 'not permitting' and 'discouraging'.) He says that the 14 existing sugar factories are outside the command area. What he doesn't mention is that licences have been issued for about a dozen new ones, many of them in the command area. The chief promoter of one of them, the Sardar Sugar Factory, is Sanat Mehta, who was chairman of the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam for several years. The chief promoter of another was Chimanbhai Patel, former chief minister of Gujarat, who (along with his wife) was the most vocal, ardent proponent of the Sardar Sarovar dam. He liked to call himself 'Chhota Sardar'.

The people of Kutch and Saurashtra, who have endured water-shortages for years, have begun to recognise government propaganda for what it is. Civil unease is stirring as realisation dawns that the Sardar Sarovar is mopping up their money but is not going to solve their water problems. That the solution lies not with the government but with themselves. The Gujarat Land Development Corporation estimates that there is at least 15 to 20 million acre feet of rainwater that can be harvested by local watershed harvesting schemes in Kutch and Saurashtra. (The Sardar Sarovar promises, on paper, 3 million acre feet to these areas.) In several villages, entirely through peoples' initiatives, successful water harvesting schemes are already under way. Hundreds of thousands of wells are being recharged with rainwater that was flowing away unused. So much for the government of Gujarat's claims that there are no alternatives to the Sardar Sarovar.

Recently, a people's organisation-the Kutch Jalsankatan Nivaran Samiti-filed a case against the government of Gujarat and the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam in the Gujarat High Court, asking for clarification of when, where and how much water will be delivered to the districts of Kutch.

Meanwhile, what does Mr Verghese suggest we do about the fact that there's a possibility that the people who are supposed to benefit from the project-the people in whose name the frenzy is being drummed up- may not, after all, get any water at all?

"Why not wait and see?" he says!

You bet. Why not submerge a civilisation, uproot a few hundred thousand people, make the people of Kutch and Saurashtra linger on in hope for a couple more decades, shell out another few thousand crores of rupees of public money and see how it all pans out. Is this an argument?

Mr Verghese was upset about the fact that I scoffed at the government's scheme of a centralised electronic irrigation system to deal with problems of potential water-logging. I admit I scoffed. How can one not?

But that apart, I did suggest that they try it out in a pilot scheme before using public money to experiment on the 1.8 million hectares of the Sardar Sarovar command area.

Why not, for instance, experiment in the Bargi command area where the dam irrigates only five per cent of the area it promised it would?

Or in the Tawa command, where after 27 years, the capacity utilisation (the amount of area it actually irrigates compared to the amount of area it was designed to irrigate) is 54 per cent (government figures)?

Or pick any section of the millions of hectares of water-logged land all over India-in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan.

If you include the costs of command area drainage and drinking water distribution systems so that the Sardar Sarovar Projects can at least pretend to achieve what they promise, we're talking about thousands of crores of rupees of public money. Enough, probably, to fund local water harvesting schemes in every village in Gujarat.

As for his defence of 'compensatory afforestation' as a way of atoning for schemes that destroy natural, old growth forest-it sounds quite reasonable doesn't it? Cut down a forest and plant one somewhere else. Except that to assume that a natural forest is the sum of its trees is an absurd notion. You don't need a PhD in ecology to tell you-not in the '90s-that you cannot cut down millions of years of evolutionary adaptation and conjure it up somewhere else. It's like trying to compensate the loss of a wildlife reserve with a poultry farm. The submontane dry deciduous forests that clothe the Satpuras and the Vindhyas are among the most endangered sub-tropical ecosystems. I'm afraid canal plantations just don't make the cut.

Mr Verghese also keeps very quiet about where all the land for compensatory afforestation is going to come from. Whose land will it be, I wonder?

This brings me to the saddest, most cruel part of his 'Rejoinder'-Mr Verghese's attitude towards the human price that is being paid for Big Dams in general and the Sardar Sarovar in particular. It's chilling to see a private citizen, a thinking private citizen, so readily regurgitate State Publicity. It's ludicrous to portray the nba as a terrorist organisation that parades government officers naked and obstructs justice. There is a full-blown civil disobedience movement in the Narmada Valley. And it's happening on a scale that cannot be artificially staged, or manipulated.

Please Mr Verghese. Come to the valley with us in July. Open your eyes and try and see like a subject instead of a spokesperson of the State.

If it's all true, this vision of sunshine and roses that Mr Verghese and the Gujarat government want us to believe in, then what's all the secrecy about? Why not release all the studies that have been done into the public domain (including the unfavourable ones)? Why not have them peer reviewed? Why not publish a detailed break-up of the costs? Why not account for the amount spent so far? Why not clarify where the remaining money is going to come from, on what terms? Why block every attempt at a review? Why prevent the fmg Committee from entering Gujarat? Why ransack the nba office and burn its documents? Why prevent the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes from going to the

dam site? Why refuse permission to the World Commission on Dams to visit the dam site? Why prevent a committee appointed by the Central government from investigating the impact of the closure of the sluice gates? Why prevent the Union welfare ministry from assessing the r&r situation? What's the paranoia all about?

After all, the government of Madhya Pradesh (the state through which 90 per cent of the river flows, and the state in which the remaining 3,199 dams envisaged by the Narmada Valley Development Project are going to be built) is willing to listen. It has filed a case in the Supreme Court admitting that there is less water in the river than when the plan was first conceived. It has agreed to review all the projects that are still on the anvil (except, strangely, the Maheshwar dam). It is actively funding and encouraging local water-harvesting schemes.

Why is the government of Gujarat (and its spokesperson) so stubborn? Why do they insist on repeating their old, obsolete illogic?

"Dams displace," B.G. Verghese says. "So does acute deprivation in the Narmada Valley, but in a far higher ratio."

He then goes on to suggest that displacement is the government's way of relieving acute deprivation! That the major beneficiaries of the Sardar Sarovar dam are "tribals, marginal farmers and women". (As though being a woman precludes you from being a tribal or a marginal farmer.)

Mr Verghese wants us to believe that the State is actually doing people a favour by uprooting them, taking them away from their forests and their river, submerging their lands and homes, drowning their sacred sites, smashing their ancient community links and resettling them against their will.

He doesn't just want to destroy a civilisation. He wants to spit in its face while he's at it.

Anybody who argues against this, according to him, is "glorifying the noble savage". I, for one, am accused of wanting them to spend their lives "grubbing for roots, deprived, impoverished and 'protected' by the nba".

Why not add the word "grunting", Mr Verghese? "Grunting and grubbing for roots"-doesn't that sound more like it? Suitably bestial?

The tribal people whose villages are slated to be submerged by the Sardar Sarovar Reservoir are very, very poor people. But they have enough to eat. They are self-sufficient. They have a river that gives them water and fish and fertile land, they have a forest that provides them with fruit, medicine and fodder for their cattle. They don't have pinstriped suits, but they are at least insured against famine and drought. Resettlement will rend the social and ecological links that help them survive. It can only impoverish them further. Is it possible that Mr Verghese really believes that they can be better off in a city slum?

If Mr Verghese is right about the State having the well-being of tribal people uppermost in its mind, why is it that for 50 years there have been no roads, no schools, no clinics, no wells, no hospitals in the areas where they live? Why is it that for all these years the State didn't bother to take steps to equip the people they care so deeply about, for the world they were going to be dumped in? Why is it that the first sign of 'development'-a road-brought only terror, police, beatings, rape, murder? Why must the offer of 'development' always be conditional, ie: you give up your lands, your homes, your fields, your language, your gods, and we'll give you 'development'. Why doesn't the State help people in the Narmada Valley and the people of Kutch and Saurashtra to harvest their rainwater and recharge their groundwater?

Let's not be coy. Let's give this a name. It's not social engineering that Mr Verghese is after. It's garbage disposal. It's not even a particularly sanitary method. Occasionally people die in the bins they've been dumped in. Like the seven not so long ago, in the Rameshwarpuram site. Of contaminated drinking water. Of chronic malnutrition. (Publish the report!)

He claims that 88 per cent of the families that will be affected when the dam is 85 metres high have already been resettled. (This, when the governments of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh are giving out mixed, muddled signals about the availability of land for this purpose). Never mind that the dam is already 88 metres high if you include the hump. Never mind that in May '99, two months before the

monsoons, the Narmada Control Authority was still waiting for the various states to report to it on the progress they had made on assessing land availability for those whose villages are likely to be submerged! Never mind that the calculations of which village will be submerged when, are invariably wrong. For instance in the monsoon of '94, when the dam was only 69 metres high, a village that was slated for submergence at 90 metres, came under water.

Here we are, 15 years after the project began, still scrabbling around for land to offer people being displaced by this one dam when it's still far from its final projected height. What about the rest of the three thousand several hundred serial dams planned on the same river? What about the millions of potential 'oustees'? Are our cities ready to receive them?

It's so sad to see a man of Mr Verghese's stature work so hard to elide the main argument of the essay he takes issue with. His silence on the big things is more eloquent than his specious arguments about the small ones. How gratefully he grasps at government statements, government statistics, government promises. This when dam after dam has shown how benefits are inflated, costs deflated and the number of displaced people consistently, grossly, underestimated.

He doesn't even address the issue I raised about the government's definition of who it considers 'project- affected'-of how the number of people actually affected is more than double what they say it is.

The truth is that our differences have little to do with technical data. They have to do with a fundamental difference in worldview. Here is a man who believes that mammoth, State-supervised engineering projects are the solution to human problems.

I disagree. With its philosophy and method. With the scale of the operation. With its fundamental premise.

Fifty years on, hard as it may be for some of us, we have to admit that Big Dams have let this country down. They are monuments to political corruption and social inequity. Big Dams are just not what they promised to be when B.G. Verghese was a young man.

India is the world's third largest dam builder with 3,600 large dams, 3,300 of them built after independence, a 1,000 more are under way. Yet today, there are more drought-prone and flood-prone areas than there were in 1947!

Big Dams have generated electricity, certainly. Yet more than 80 per cent of rural households have no electricity. 250 million people have no access to safe drinking water, and over 350 million live below the poverty line.

Food production has risen, but according to a paper presented to the World Commission on Dams by Himanshu Thakker, Big Dams can claim the credit for only 12 per cent of this.

Since Independence, Big Dams alone have displaced between 33 and 40 million people. Most of them are either Dalits or tribal people. (Yet India does not have a National Rehabilitation Policy).

What Big Dams have done is to sequester resources from the vast majority of the people who live in rural India and divert them to the cream of the crop that lives in urban India.

Anybody who wants to defend this position should not hold back.

Let them say that this is the way things ought to be. That villages should subsidise cities. That the poor must subsidise the rich. Let them say that it's acceptable for forty million people to be driven from their homes in order that we, the metropolitan elite, continue to have an unlimited supply of electricity and running water. Let whoever wants to defend Big Dams drop this comfortable mask-this civilise-the-savage missionary position-and come right out and stand up for feudal values.

The climate seems terrifyingly right. Soon somebody just might. The savagery of the civilised.

I can't let this go without commenting on Mr Verghese's snide remarks about my essay on the nuclear tests. I don't know this for a fact, but I'm assuming from his tone that he doesn't lose sleep over the bjp government's programme of nuclear weaponisation. To a man who is comfortable with the idea of a wasted world, what's a wasted val

## "A Venal, Dangerous Lie"

**Is the NBA doing more harm than good in trying to protect two lakh people as against the 40 million intended beneficiaries of the Sardar Sarovar Dam?**

**ARUNDHATI ROY**

Is the NBA doing more harm than good in trying to protect two lakh people as against the 40 million intended beneficiaries of the Sardar Sarovar Dam? Especially since it has been technically established that water can be delivered to the tail-end, Kutch and Saurashtra?

After all that's happened, after everything that's been written and said, to be asked this is one of the saddest, hardest things I've had to face in a long time. It reminds me of how small and ineffectual a dent one makes when one argues against an article of faith, and that, unfortunately is what the Sardar Sarovar has become to some people—a religious edifice, a deity, a god. And what a twisted, cruel god it is. Let me just give you some bald facts.

Let's get one thing straight. The drought is not the reason for the water policies pursued by the State. It is the result of the policies they have pursued over the last 15 years. You can't and won't be able to solve the problem unless you understand what caused it. Contrary to what the government would like you to believe, the drought is not a natural calamity. It is man-made. Or should I say State-made? The drought is not due to a lack of rainfall. Saurashtra had 11 inches of rainfall this year. Seven of the 10 talukas in Kutch had 75% of their average rainfall. Yet the reservoirs are empty because they are silted up, and the groundwater levels have dropped to their lowest in a 100 years because of deforestation, and the unrestricted, mechanised exploitation of groundwater. The price for this, of course, is paid by the poorest of the poor who have no access to either tubewells or political clout. Faced with this scale of human misery, they suggest the drought is somehow caused by the absence of the Sardar Sarovar Dam (and the evil NBA) and that the only solution is the dam! What's the implication? That other states which are also suffering a drought but haven't planned mega dams ought to conjure them up? Are we in for a rash of Sardar Sarovar clones? According to Central Water Commission data, of India's 3,200 Big Dams, over 500 are in Gujarat. Dams on the Mahi and the Sabarmati (both miles closer to Kutch and Saurashtra than the Narmada) haven't solved the drought, but they've yielded enough cotton and sugarcane to create a glut, they've kept the water parks and the Pepsi-swalling, Mickey Mouse-minded tourists happy even as we speak (Hindustan Times, April 28). But we are expected to believe that what 500 dams could not do, the 501st will—the amazing, astonishing, all-purpose Sardar Sarovar. This is a lie, a venal, dangerous lie that uses human misery to further its own ends.

For the last 15 years, Gujarat has allocated over 80% of its entire irrigation budget to Sardar Sarovar. It has done this to the exclusion of other smaller, more local, more immediate schemes. In Gujarat's Eighth Plan (1992-97), out of an irrigation budget of Rs 3,436 crore, 85%—Rs 2,900 crore—was allocated to it. In order to justify this, it says the project will take water to Kutch and Saurashtra. That it will provide drinking water to 40 million people. Take a closer look at the facts. For the sake of argument, let's for a moment believe all the absurd, computerised, boyzworld pyrotechnics, that claim the Narmada Canal will take water to Kutch and Saurashtra. Let's overlook the sugar factories, the golf courses, water parks and five-star hotels planned along the way. Let's believe everything they say. If you look at the project documents, you'll see, that even on paper, even if everything were to go as planned, the command area irrigates only 1.8% of the cultivable land of Kutch and 9% in Saurashtra. The rest of the water will go to already water-rich areas of central Gujarat. This is the extent of the deceit and cynicism we are up against.

When will the water reach this 1.8% of Kutch and 9% of Saurashtra? In the year of our Lord 2025 (by which time the dam reservoir will be well on its way to being silted up). This can be confirmed from a water resources ministry document dated October '92, filed in the Supreme Court. (This again, if the project is completed as scheduled, not taking into account any delays, such as the four-year SC stay). So what is 1.8% of Kutch and 9% of Saurashtra expected to do until then? What of the rest of the 98.2% of Kutch and 91% of Saurashtra? Should they stand around and watch while the Sardar Sarovar soaks up the state's irrigation budget, in their name, while the water actually goes somewhere else?

The claim that Sardar Sarovar will bring drinking water to 40 million—that figure yo-yos around for no apparent reason. It swings between 10 million and 40 million. The fact is providing drinking water to villages was never part of the vision of the planners. Even today, the costs aren't included in the project costs. When the World Bank commissioned the Independent Review, this was one fact that

appalled the Morse Committee. It was one among the many reasons that led to the Bank pulling out of the project. The tenders for doing a feasibility study of the drinking water scheme for Sardar Sarovar were invited only in '98. In '93 the Narmada Pipeline project was proposed. It envisaged transporting drinking water from the Narmada to Kutch and Saurashtra even without the Sardar Sarovar. The project cost was Rs 300 crore. It could have been completed in three years. Seven years have gone by. Nothing's been done. Even the dead storage of the dam at its present height has enough water to meet the drinking water needs of Kutch and Saurashtra. The only thing lacking is political will and the funds being used up by the project.

The important thing to keep in mind now, as this crisis comes to a head, is how do we crawl out of the hole we've dug ourselves into? It is encouraging to see, all over the media, the first signs of recognition that something is seriously wrong with what has been happening so far. A lot of attention has been given to the positive peoples' initiatives, that have demonstrated in a small, but stubbornly successful manner that the way out of this morass is smaller, more local, decentralised projects. The wonderful work of the Tarun Bharat Sangh in Alwar has been recognised, and rightly so, by the President. More power to them. In Kutch and Saurashtra there is a movement called the 'well-recharging movement' where thousands of wells have been recharged. Even hardened politicians, the prime minister and the Gujarat chief minister, have begun to talk of rainwater harvesting. This is wonderful. Perhaps the time has come when we will see Big Dams as not the first, but the very last resort. It would mean an end to thirst in Gujarat. It would mean a victory for the principles of democracy. It would mean that we still have hope.

## Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin

**Arundhati Roy explores the power politics that unites the Indian elite, its big business and the Multinationals, endangering in the process not only the country's economy but also its real people.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

*Remember him? The gnome who could turn straw into gold? Well he's back now, but you wouldn't recognise him. To begin with, he's not an individual gnome anymore. I'm not sure how best to describe him. Let's just say he's metamorphosed into an accretion, a cabal, an assemblage, a malevolent, incorporeal, transnational multi-gnome. Rumpelstiltskin is a notion (gnotion), a piece of deviant, insidious, white logic that will eventually self-annihilate. But for now he's more than okay. He's cock of the walk. King of All That Really Counts (Cash). He's decimated the competition, killed all the other kings, the other kinds of kings. He's persuaded us that he's all we have left. Our only salvation.*

What kind of potentate is Rumpelstiltskin? Powerful, pitiless and armed to the teeth. He's a kind of king the world has never known before. His realm is raw capital, his conquests emerging markets, his prayers profits, his borders limitless, his weapons nuclear. To even try and imagine him, to hold the whole of him in your field of vision, is to situate yourself at the very edge of sanity, to offer yourself up for ridicule. King Rumpel reveals only part of himself at a time. He has a bank-account heart. He has television eyes and a newspaper nose in which you see only what he wants you to see and read only what he wants you to read. (See what I mean about the edge of sanity?) There's more: a Surround Sound stereo mouth which amplifies his voice and filters out the sound of the rest of the world so that you can't hear it even when it's shouting (or starving, or dying) and King Rumpel is only whispering, rolling his r's in his North American way.

Listen carefully, this is most of the rest of his story. (It hasn't ended yet, but it will. It must.) It ranges across seas and continents, sometimes majestic and universal, sometimes confining and local. Now and then I'll peg it down with disparate bits of history and geography that could mar the gentle art of storytelling. So please bear with me.

In March this year (2000 AD), the President of the United States (His Excellency the most exalted plenipotentiary of Rumpeldom) visited India. He brought his own bed, the feather pillow he hugs at night and a merry band of businessmen. He was courted and fawned over by the genuflecting representatives of this ancient civilisation with a fervour that can only be described as indecent. Whole cities were superficially spruced up. The poor were herded away, hidden from the presidential gaze. Streets were soaped and scrubbed and festooned with balloons and welcome banners. In Delhi's dirty sky, vindicated nuclear hawks banked and whistled: Dekho ji dekho! Bill is here because we have the Bomb. Those Indian citizens with even a modicum of self-respect were so ashamed they stayed in bed for days. Some of us had puzzled furrows on our brows. Since everybody behaved like a craven, happy slave when Master visited, we wondered why we hadn't gone the whole distance. Why hadn't we just crawled under Master's nuclear umbrella in the first place? Then we could spend our pocket money on other things (instead of bombs) and still be all safe and slavey. No?

Just before The Visit, the Government of India lifted import restrictions on 1,400 commodities including milk, grain, sugar and cotton (even though this year there was a glut of sugar and cotton in the market, even though 42.5 million tonnes of grain was rotting in government storehouses). During The Visit, contracts worth about US \$3 (some say 4) billion were signed.

For reasons of my own, I was particularly interested in a Memorandum of Intent signed between the Ogden Energy Group, a company that specialises in operating garbage incinerators in the US, and the S.Kumars, an Indian textile company that manufactures what it calls 'suing blends'. Now what might garbage incineration and suing blends possibly have in common? Suit-incineration? Guess again. Garbage-blends? Nope. A big hydel dam on the river Narmada in central India.

Neither Ogden nor the S.Kumars has ever built or operated a large dam before. The 400 MW Shri Maheshwar Hydel Project being promoted by the S.Kumars is part of the Narmada Valley Development Project, which boasts of being the most ambitious river valley project in the world. It envisages building 3,200 dams (30 big dams, 135 medium dams and the rest small) that will

reconstitute the Narmada and her 41 tributaries into a series of step reservoirs—an immense staircase of enslaved water. It will alter the ecology of an entire river basin, affect the lives of 25 million people who live in the valley, submerge 4,000 sq km of old growth, deciduous forest, hundreds of temples, as well as archaeological sites dating back to the lower Palaeolithic age.

The dams that have been built on the river so far are all government projects. The Maheshwar Dam is slated to be India's first major private hydel power project.

What is interesting about it is not only that it's part of the most bitterly opposed river valley project in India, but also that it is a strand in the skein of a mammoth global enterprise. Understanding what is happening in Maheshwar, decoding the nature of the deals that are being struck between two of the world's great democracies, will go a long way towards gaining a rudimentary grasp of what is being done to us, while we, poor fools, stand by and clap and cheer and hasten things along. (When I say 'us', I mean people, human beings. Not countries, not governments.)

Personally, I took the first step towards arriving at this understanding when, over a few days in March this year (2000 AD), I lived through a writer's bad dream. I witnessed the ritualistic slaughter of Language as I know and understand it. Let me explain.

On the very days that President Clinton was in India, in far away Holland, the World Water Forum was convened. Three thousand and five hundred bankers, businessmen, government ministers, policy writers, engineers, economists (and, in order to pretend that the 'other side' was also represented—a handful of activists, indigenous dance troupes, impoverished street theatre groups and half a dozen young girls dressed as inflatable silver faucets) gathered at The Hague to discuss the future of the world's water. Every speech was generously peppered with phrases like 'women's empowerment', 'people's participation' and 'deepening democracy'. Yet it turned out that the whole purpose of the Forum was to press for the privatisation of the world's water. There was pious talk of having access to drinking water declared a Basic Human Right. How would this be implemented, you might ask. Simple. By putting a market value on water. By selling it at its 'true' price. (It's common knowledge that water is becoming a scarce resource. One billion people in the world have no access to drinking water.) The 'market' decrees that the scarcer something is, the more expensive it becomes. So the talk of connecting human rights to a 'true price' was more than a little baffling. At first I didn't quite get their drift—did they believe in human rights for the rich, or that only the rich are human or that all humans are rich? But I see it now. A shiny, climate-controlled human rights supermarket with a clearance sale on Christmas day. (A small but necessary clarification: there is a difference between valuing water and putting a market value on water. No one values water more than a village woman who has to walk miles to fetch it. No one values it less than urban folk who pay for it to flow endlessly at the turn of a tap.)

One marrowy American panelist put it rather nicely—"God gave us the rivers," he drawled, "but he didn't put in the delivery systems. That's why we need private enterprise." No doubt with a little Structural Adjustment to the rest of the things God gave us, we could all live in a simpler world (If all the seas were one sea, what a big sea it would be...)—Evian could own the water, Rand the earth, Enron the air. Old Rumpelstiltskin could be the handsomely paid supreme CEO.

When all the rivers and valleys and forests and hills of the world have been priced, packaged, bar-coded and stacked in the local supermarket, when all the hay and coal and earth and wood and water has been turned to gold, what then shall we do with all the gold? Make nuclear bombs to obliterate what's left of the ravaged landscapes and the notional nations in our ruined world?

As a writer one spends a lifetime journeying into the heart of language, trying to minimise, if not eliminate, the distance between language and thought. 'Language is the skin on my thought', I remember saying to someone who once asked what language meant to me. At The Hague I stumbled on a denomination, a sub-world, whose life's endeavour was entirely the opposite of mine. For them the whole purpose of language was to mask intent. They earn their abundant livings by converting bar graphs that plot their companies' profits into consummately written, politically exemplary, socially just policy documents that are impossible to implement and designed to remain forever on paper, secret even (especially) from the people they're written for. They breed and prosper in the space that lies between what they say and what they sell. What they're lobbying for is not simply the privatisation of natural resources and essential infrastructure, but the privatisation of policy-making itself. Dam-builders want to control public water policies. Power utility companies want to draft power policies and financial institutions want to supervise government disinvestment.



## Arundhati Roy – The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin -

Let's begin at the beginning. What does privatisation really mean? Essentially, it is the transfer of public productive assets from the State to private companies. Productive assets include natural resources. Earth, forest, water, air. These are assets that the State holds in trust for the people it represents. In a country like India, 70 per cent of the population lives in rural areas. That's 700 million people. Their lives depend directly on access to natural resources. To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history.

What happens when you 'privatise' something as essential to human survival as water? What happens when you commodify water and say that only those who can come up with the cash to pay the 'market price' can have it? In 1999, the government of Bolivia privatised the public water supply system in the city of Cochacomba, and signed a 40-year lease with Bechtel, a giant US engineering firm. The first thing Bechtel did was to triple the price of water. Hundreds of thousands of people simply couldn't afford it any more. Citizens came out on the streets to protest. A transport strike brought the entire city to a standstill. Hugo Banzer, the former Bolivian dictator (now the President) ordered the police to fire at the crowds. Six people were killed, 175 injured and two children blinded. The protest continued because people had no options— what's the option to thirst? In April 2000, Banzer declared Martial Law. The protest continued. Eventually Bechtel was forced to flee its offices. Now it's trying to extort a \$12-million exit payment from the Bolivian government.

Cochacomba has a population of half a million people. Think of what would happen in an Indian city. Even a small one.

Rumpelstiltskin thinks big. Today he's stalking mega-game: dams, mines, armaments, power plants, public water supply systems, telecommunication systems, the management and dissemination of knowledge, biodiversity, seeds (he wants to own life and the very process of reproduction) and the industrial infrastructure that supports all this. His minions arrive in Third World countries masquerading as missionaries come to redeem the wretched. They have a completely different dossier in their briefcases. To understand what they're really saying (selling), you have to teach yourself to unscramble their vernacular.

Recently, John Welch, chairman of General Electric (GE), was on TV in India. "I beg and pray to the Indian Government to improve infrastructure," he said, and added touchingly, "Don't do it for GE's sake, do it for yourselves." He went on to say that privatising the power sector was the only way to bring India's one billion people into the digital network. "You can talk about information and intellectual capital, but without the power to drive it, you will miss the next revolution."

What he meant, of course, was: "You are a market of one billion customers. If you don't buy our equipment, we will miss the next revolution."

Will someone please tell him that of his one billion 'customers', 400 million are illiterate and live without even one square meal a day, and 200 million have no access to safe drinking water? Being brought into the 'digital framework' is hardly what's uppermost on their minds.

The story behind the story is as follows: there are six corporations that dominate the production of power generation equipment in the world. GE is one of them. Together, each year they manufacture (and therefore need to sell) equipment that can generate 20,000 MW of power. For a variety of reasons there is little (read almost zero) additional demand for power equipment in the First World. This leaves these mammoth multinationals with a redundant capacity that they desperately need to offload. India and China are their big target markets, because between these two countries, the demand for power-generating equipment is 10,000 MW per year.

The First World needs to sell, the Third World needs to buy—it ought to be a reasonable business proposition. But it isn't. For many years, India has been more or less self sufficient in power equipment. The Indian public sector company, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL), manufactured and even exported world-class power equipment. All that's changed now. Over the years, our own government has starved it of orders, cut off funds for research and development and more or less edged it out of a dignified existence. Today BHEL is no more than a sweatshop. It is being forced into 'joint ventures' (one with GE and one with Siemens) where its only role is to provide cheap, unskilled labour while they provide the equipment and the technology. Why? Why does more expensive, imported foreign equipment suit our bureaucrats and politicians better? We all know why. Because

graft is factored into the deal. Buying equipment from your local store is just not the same thing. It's not surprising that almost half the officials named in the Jain Hawala scandal were officials from the power sector involved with the selection and purchase of power equipment.

The privatisation of power (felicitous phrase!) is at the top of the Indian government's agenda. The US is the single largest foreign investor in the power sector (which, to some extent, explains The Visit). The argument being advanced (both by the government and by the private sector) in favour of privatisation is that over the last 50 years the government has bungled its brief. It has failed to deliver. The State Electricity Boards (SEBS) are insolvent. Inefficiency, corruption, theft and heavy subsidies have run them into the ground.

In the push for privatisation, the customary depiction of the corrupt, oily, Third World government official, selling his country's interests for personal profit, fits perfectly into the scheme of things. The private sector bristles accusingly. The government coyly acknowledges the accusation and pleads its inability to reform itself. In fact it goes out of its way to exaggerate its own inefficiencies. This is meant to come across as refreshing candour. In a speech he made just before he died, P.R. Kumaramangalam, minister for power, said that the overall figure of loss and deficit in the power sector was Rs 37,000 crore. He went on to say that India's transmission and distribution (T&D) losses are between 35 and 40 per cent. Of the remaining 60 per cent, according to the minister, billing is restricted to only 40 per cent. His conclusion: that only about a quarter of the electricity that is produced in India is metered. Official sources say that this is a somewhat exaggerated account. The situation is bad enough, it doesn't need to be exaggerated. According to figures put out by the power ministry, the national average T&D losses are 23 per cent. (In 1947 it was 14.39 per cent). Even without the minister's hyperbole, this puts India in the same league as countries with the worst T&D losses in the world, like the Dominican Republic, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The solution to this malaise, we discover, is not to improve our housekeeping skills, not to try and minimise our losses, not to force the State to be more accountable, but to permit it to abdicate its responsibility altogether and privatise the power sector. Then magic will happen. Economic viability and Swiss-style efficiency will kick in like clockwork.

But there's a sub-plot missing in this narrative. Over the years, the SEBS have been bankrupted by massive power thefts. Who's stealing the power? Some of it no doubt is stolen by the poor—slum dwellers, people who live in unauthorised colonies on the fringes of big cities. But they don't have the electrical gadgetry to consume the quantum of electricity we're talking about. The big stuff, the megawatt thievery, is orchestrated by the industrial sector in connivance with politicians and government officers.

Consider as an example the state of Madhya Pradesh in which the Maheshwar Dam is being built. Seven years ago it was a power surplus state. Today it finds itself in an intriguing situation. Industrial demand has declined by 30 per cent. Power production has increased from 3,813 MW to 4,025 MW. And the State Electricity Board is showing a loss of Rs 1,200 crore. An inspection drive solved the puzzle. It found that 70 per cent of the industrialists in the state steal electricity! The theft adds up to a loss of nearly Rs 500 crore. That's 41 per cent of the total deficit. Madhya Pradesh is by no means an unusual example. States like Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Delhi have T&D losses of between 30 and 50 per cent (way over the national average) which indicate massive power theft.

No one talks very much about this. It's so much nicer to blame the poor. The average economist, planner or drawing room intellectual will tell you that the SEBS have gone belly up for two reasons: (a) Because 'political compulsions' ensure that domestic power tariffs are kept unviably low, and (b) Because subsidies given to the farm sector result in enormous hidden losses.

The first step that a 'reformed' privatised power sector is expected to take is to cut agricultural subsidies and put a 'realistic' tariff (market value) on power. What are political compulsions? Why are they considered such a bad thing? Basically, it seems to me, 'political compulsions' is a phrase that describes the fancy footwork that governments have to perform in order to strike a balance between redeeming a sinking economy and serving an impoverished electorate. Striking a balance between what the 'market' demands and what people can afford, is—or certainly ought to be—the primary, fundamental responsibility of any democratic government. Privatisation seeks to disengage politics from the 'market'. To do that would be to blunt the very last weapon that India's poor still have—their vote. Once that's gone, elections will become (even more of) a charade than they already are and

democracy will just become the name of a new rock band. The poor will be absent from the negotiating table. They will simply cease to matter.

But the cry has already gone up. The demand to cut subsidies has almost become a blood sport. It's a small world. Bolivia's only a short walk down the road from here. When it recommends 'privatising the power sector', does the government mean that it is going to permit just anybody who wishes to generate power to come in and compete in a free market? Of course not. There's nothing free about the market in the power sector. Reforming the Power Sector in India means that the concerned state government underwrites preposterously one-sided Power Purchase Agreements with select companies, preferably huge multinationals. Essentially, it is the transfer of assets and infrastructure from bribe-taker to bribe-giver, which involves more bribery than ever. Once the agreements are signed, they are free to produce power at exorbitant rates that no one can afford. Not even, ironically enough, the Indian industrialists who have been rooting for them all along. They, poor chaps, end up like vultures on a carcass that get chased off by a visiting hyena.

Nothing illustrates this process better than the story of Enron of the US, the first private power project in India. The first Power Purchase Agreement between Enron and the Congress-ruled state government of Maharashtra for a 695 MW power plant was signed in 1993. The opposition parties, the BJP and the Shiv Sena, set up a howl of 'swadeshi' protest, and filed legal proceedings against Enron and the state government. They alleged malfeasance and corruption at the highest level. A year later, when state elections were announced, it was the only campaign issue of the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance.

In February 1995, this combine won the elections. True to their word, they "scrapped" the project. In a savage, fiery statement, Mr Advani attacked the phenomenon of what he called "loot-through-liberalisation". He more or less directly accused the Congress government of having taken a Rs 62-crore bribe from Enron. Following the annulling of the contract, the US government began to pressurise the Maharashtra government. US Ambassador Frank Wisner made several statements deploring the cancellation. (The day he completed his term as Ambassador, he joined Enron as a director). In November 1995, the BJP-Shiv Sena government of Maharashtra announced a 're-negotiation' committee. In May 1996, a minority government headed by the BJP was sworn in at the Centre. It lasted for exactly 13 days and then resigned before facing a vote of no-confidence in the Lok Sabha. On its last day in office, even as the no-confidence motion was in progress, the Cabinet met for a hurried 'lunch' and re-ratified the Central Government's counter-guarantee (that had become void because of the earlier 'cancelled' contract with Enron). In August 1996, the government of Maharashtra signed a fresh contract with Enron on terms that would astound the most hardboiled cynic.

The impugned contract had involved annual payments to Enron of US \$430 million for phase I (695 MW) of the project, with phase II (2,015 MW) being optional. The 're-negotiated' Power Purchase Agreement makes phase II of the project mandatory and legally binds the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) to pay Enron a sum of US \$30 billion! It constitutes the largest contract ever signed in the history of India. In effect, for an increase in installed capacity of 18 per cent, the MSEB has to set aside 70 per cent of its revenue to be able to pay Enron. There is, of course, no record of what mathematical formula was used to compute the 're-negotiated' bribe. Nor any trace of how much trickled up or down or sideways and to whom.

But there's more: in one of the most extraordinary decisions in its not entirely pristine history, in April 1997, the Supreme Court of India refused to entertain an appeal against Enron.

Today, four years later, everything that critics of the project predicted has come true with an eerie vengeance. The power that the Enron plant produces is twice as expensive as its nearest competitor and seven times as expensive as the cheapest electricity available in Maharashtra. In May 2000, the Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Committee (MERC) ruled that temporarily, until as long as was absolutely necessary, no power should be bought from Enron. It was based on a calculation that it would be cheaper to just pay Enron the mandatory fixed charges for the maintenance and administration of the plant that they are contractually obliged to pay than to actually buy any of its exorbitant power. The fixed charges alone work out to Rs 1,000 crore a year for phase I of the project. Phase II will be nearly twice the size.

A thousand crore a year for the next 40 years.

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Meanwhile, industrialists in Maharashtra have begun to generate their own power at a much cheaper rate, with private generators. The demand for power from the industrial sector has begun to decline rapidly. The State Electricity Board, strapped for cash, with Enron hanging like an albatross around its neck, will now have no choice but to make private gensets illegal. That's the only way that industrialists can be coerced into buying Enron's exorbitant electricity.

Now, what was that again, Mr Advani? Looting through liberalisation? What a fine, upstanding leader you are.

Here's to the Hindutva brand of Swadeshi. Here's to the 'free' market. Here's to forked tongues.

Having said all this, there's no doubt that there is a power-shortage crisis in India. But there's another, more serious crisis on hand.

Planners in India boast that India consumes 20 times more electricity today than it did 50 years ago. They use it as an index of progress. They omit to mention that 70 per cent of rural households still have no electricity. In the poorest states, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan, over 85 per cent of the poorest people, mostly Dalit and Adivasi households, have no electricity. What a shameful, shocking record for the world's biggest democracy.

Unless this crisis is acknowledged and honestly addressed, generating "lots and lots of power" (as Mr Welch put it) will only mean that it will be siphoned off by the rich with their endless appetites. It will require a very imaginative, very radical form of 'structural adjustment' to right this.

'Privatisation' is presented as being the only alternative to an inefficient, corrupt State. In fact, it's not a choice at all. It's only made to look like one. Essentially, privatisation is a mutually profitable business contract between the private (preferably foreign) company/ financial institution, and the ruling elite of the Third World. (One of the fallouts is that it makes corruption an elitist affair. Your average small-fry government official is in grave danger of losing his or her bit on the side).

India's politicians have virtually mortgaged their country to the World Bank. Today India pays back more money in interest and repayment instalments than it receives. It is forced to incur new debts in order to repay old ones. In other words, it's exporting capital. Of late, however, institutions like the World Bank and the IMF that have bled the Third World all these years, look like benevolent saints compared to the new mutants in the market. These are known as ECAs—Export Credit Agencies. If the World Bank is a colonising army hamstrung by red tape and bureaucracy, the ECAs are freewheeling, marauding mercenaries. Basically, ECAs insure private companies operating in foreign countries against commercial and political risks. The device is called an export credit guarantee. It's quite simple, really. No First World private company wants to export capital or goods or services to a politically and/or economically unstable country without insuring itself against unforeseen contingencies. So the private company covers itself with an export credit guarantee. The ECA, in turn, has an agreement with the government of its own country. The government of its own country has an agreement with the government of the importing country. The upshot of this fine imbrication is that if a situation does arise in which the ECA has to pay its client, its own government pays the ECA and recovers its money by adding it to the bilateral debt owed by the importing country. (So the real guarantors are actually, once again, the Third World poor). Complicated, but cool. And foolproof.

The quadrangular private company-ECA-government-government formation neatly circumvents political accountability. Though they're all actually business associates, flak from noisy, tiresome NGOs and activist groups can be diverted and funnelled to the ECA, where, like noxious industrial effluent, it lies in cooling ponds before being disposed of. The attraction of the ECAs (for both governments and private companies) is that they are secretive and don't bother with tedious details like human rights violations and environmental guidelines. (The rare ones that do, like the US Exim Bank, are under pressure to change). It short-circuits lumbering World Bank-style bureaucracy. It makes projects like Big Dams (which involve the displacement and impoverishment of large numbers of people, which in turn is politically risky) that much easier to finance. With an ECA guarantee, 'developers' can go ahead and dig and quarry and mine and dam the hell out of peoples' lives without having to even address, never mind answer, embarrassing questions.

Now, coming back to Maheshwar...

In order to place India's first private Big Dam in perspective, I need to briefly set out the short, vulgar history of Big Dams in India in general and on the Narmada in particular.

The international dam industry alone is worth US \$20 billion a year. In the First World, dams are being de-commissioned, blown up. That leaves us with another industry threatened with redundancy desperately in search of dumping grounds. Fortunately (for the industry), most Third World countries, India especially, are deeply committed to Big Dams.

India has the third-largest number of Big Dams in the world. Three thousand and six hundred Indian dams qualify as Big Dams under the ICOLD (International Committee on Large Dams) definition. Six hundred and ninety five more are under construction. This means that 40 per cent of all the Big Dams being built in the world are being built in India. For reasons more cynical than honourable, politicians and planners have successfully portrayed Big Dams to an unquestioning public as symbols of nationalism—huge, wet, cement flags. Nehru's speech about Big Dams being "the temples of modern India" has made its way into primary school text-books in every Indian language. Every schoolchild is taught that Big Dams will deliver the people of India from hunger and poverty.

Will they? Have they?

To merely ask these questions is to invite accusations of sedition, of being anti-national, of being a spy, and, most ludicrous of all—of receiving 'foreign funds'. The distinguished Mr Advani (home minister now), while speaking at the inauguration of construction at the Sardar Sarovar Dam site on the 31st of October, said that the three greatest achievements of his government were: the nuclear tests in 1998, the Kargil war in 1999, and the Supreme Court verdict in favour of the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in 2000. He called it a victory for "development nationalism" (a twisted variation of cultural nationalism). For the home minister to call a Supreme Court verdict a victory for his government doesn't say much for the Supreme Court. I have no quarrel with his clubbing together nuclear bombs, big dams and wars. However, calling them 'achievements' is sinister. Mr Advani then went on to make farcical allegations about how those of us who were against the dam were the 'same people' who protested against the nuclear tests and implied that we were in league with 'foreign agencies who don't want India to develop'. Unfortunately, this is not imbecilic paranoia. It's a deliberate, dangerous attempt to suppress outrageous facts by whipping up mindless mob frenzy. He did it in the run up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. He's doing it again. He has given notice that he will stop at nothing. Those who come in his way will be dealt with by any methods he deems necessary.

Nevertheless, there is too much at stake to remain silent. After all, we don't want to be like good middle-class Germans in the '30s, who drove their children to piano classes and never noticed the concentration camps springing up around them—or do we? There are questions that must be asked. And answered. There is space here for no more than a brief summary of the costs and benefits of Big Dams. A brief summary is all we need. Ninety per cent of the Big Dams in India are irrigation dams. They are the key, according to planners, of India's 'food security'.

So how much food do Big Dams produce?

The extraordinary thing is that there is no official government figure for this.

The India Country Study section in the World Commission on Dams Report, (released in London on the 16th of November by Mr Nelson Mandela) was prepared by a team of experts—the former secretary of water resources, the former director of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, a former secretary of the Central Water Commission and two members of the faculty of the Indian Institute of Public Administration.

One of the chapters in the study deduces that the contribution of large dams to India's foodgrain produce is less than 10. Less Than Ten Percent!

Ten per cent of the total produce currently works out to 20 million tonnes. This year, more than double that amount (42.5 million tonnes) is rotting in government storehouses while at the same time 350 million Indian citizens live below the poverty line (and while grain is actually being imported!). The ministry of food and civil supplies says that 10 per cent of India's total foodgrain produce is eaten every year by rats. India must be the only country in the world that builds dams, uproots millions of people, submerges thousands of hectares of forest, in order to feed rats.

It's hard to believe that things can go so grievously, so perilously wrong. But they have. It's understandable that those who are responsible find it hard to own up to their mistakes, because Big Dams did not start out as a cynical enterprise. They began as a dream. They have ended as grisly nightmare. It's time to wake up.

So much for the benefits of India's Big Dams. Let's take a look at the costs. How many people have been displaced by Big Dams?

Once again, there is no official record.

In fact there's no record at all. This is unpardonable on the part of the Indian State. And unpardonable on the part of planners, economists, funding agencies and the rest of the urban intellectual community who are so quick to rise up in defence of Big Dams. Last year, just in order to do a sanity check, I extrapolated an average from a study of 54 dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration. After quartering the average they arrived at, my very conservative estimate of the number of people displaced by Big Dams in India over the last 50 years was 33 million people.

This was jeered at by some economists and planners as being a preposterously exaggerated figure.

India's secretary for Rural Development put the figure at 40 million.

Today, a chapter in the India Country Study says the figure could be as high as 56 million people.

That's twice the population of Canada. More than three times the population of Australia.

Think about it: 56 million people displaced by Big Dams in the last 50 years. And India still does not have a national rehabilitation policy.

When the history of India's miraculous leap to the forefront of the Information Revolution is written, let it be said that 56 million Indians (and their children and their children's children) paid for it with everything they ever had. Their homes, their lands, their languages, their histories.

You can see them from your car window when you drive home every night. Try not to look away. Try to meet their eyes. Fifty-six million displaced, impoverished, pulverised people. Over 60 per cent of them are Dalit and Adivasi. (There is devastating meaning couched in this figure.) There's a saying in the villages of the Narmada Valley— "You can wake someone who's sleeping. But you can't wake someone who's pretending to be asleep". When it comes to the politics of forced, involuntary displacement, there's a deafening silence in this country. People's eyes glaze over. They behave as though it's just a blip in the democratic process. The nicer ones say, 'Oh, but it's such a pity. People must be resettled'. (Where? I want to scream, Where's the land? Has someone invented a Land-manufacturing machine?)

The nasties say, 'Someone has to pay the price for National Development'.

The point is that 56 million is more than a blip, folks. It's civil war.

Quite apart from the human cost of Big Dams, there are the staggering environmental costs. More than five million hectares of submerged forest, ravaged ecosystems, destroyed rivers, defunct, silted up reservoirs, endangered wildlife, disappearing biodiversity, and 10 million hectares of agricultural land that is now waterlogged and saline. Today there are more drought-prone and flood-prone areas in India than there were in 1947. Not a single river in the plains has potable water. Remember, 200 million Indians have no access to safe drinking water.

Planners, when confronted with past mistakes, say sagely, "Yes, it's true that mistakes have been made. But we're on a learning curve." The lives and livelihoods of 56 million people and all this environmental mayhem serves only to extend the majestic arc of their learning curve. When will they get off the curve and actually learn?

The evidence against Big Dams is mounting alarmingly. None of it appears on the balance sheet. There is no balance sheet. There has not been an official audit, a comprehensive, post-project evaluation, of a single Indian Big Dam to see whether or not it has achieved what it set out to achieve.

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This is what is hardest to believe. That the Indian government's unshakeable faith in Big Dams is based on nothing. No studies. No system of checks and balances. Nothing at all. And of course, those of us who question it are spies.

Is it unreasonable to call for a moratorium on the construction of Big Dams until "past mistakes" have been rectified and the millions of uprooted people have been truly recompensed and rehabilitated? It is the only way an industry that has so far been based on lies and false promises can redeem itself.

Now let me tell you about the Narmada Valley.

Of the series of 30 Big Dams proposed on the main river, four are mega-dams. Of these, only one—the Bargi Dam—has been completed. Three are under construction.

The Bargi Dam was completed in 1990. It cost 10 times more than was budgeted and submerged three times more land than engineers said it would. To save the cost and effort of doing a detailed survey, in order to mark the Full Reservoir Level, one monsoon the government closed the sluice gates and filled the reservoir without warning anybody. Water entered villagers' homes at night. They had to take their children, their cattle, their pots and pans and flee up the hillside. The Narmada Control Authority had estimated that 70,000 people from 101 villages would be displaced. Instead, when they filled the reservoir, 114,000 people from 162 villages were displaced. In addition, 26 government 'resettlement colonies' (which consisted of house plots but no agricultural land) were also submerged. Eventually there was no rehabilitation. Some 'oustees' got a meagre cash compensation. Most got nothing. Some died of starvation. Others moved to slums in Jabalpur where they work as rickshaw-pullers and construction labour.

Today, 10 years after it was completed, the Bargi Dam irrigates only as much land as it submerged. Only 5 per cent of the land its planners claimed it would irrigate. The government says it has no money to make the canals. Yet work has begun downstream, on the mammoth Narmada Sagar Dam which will submerge 251 villages, on the Maheshwar Dam and of course, on the most controversial dam in history, the Sardar Sarovar.

The Sardar Sarovar Dam is currently 90 metres high. Its final projected height is 138 metres. It is located in Gujarat, but most of the villages that will be submerged by its gigantic reservoir are in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The Sardar Sarovar Dam has become the showcase of India's Violation of Human Rights initiative. It has ripped away the genial mask of Dams-as-Development and revealed its brutish innards. I have written about it extensively in a previous essay (The Greater Common Good, Outlook, June 1999) so I'll be brief. The Sardar Sarovar Dam will displace close to half a million people. More than half of them do not officially qualify as "project-affected" and are not entitled to rehabilitation. It will submerge 13,000 hectares of deciduous forest.

In 1985, before a single study had been done, before anyone had any idea what the human cost or environmental impact of the dam would be, the World Bank sanctioned a \$450-million loan for the dam. The ministry of environment's conditional clearance (without any studies being done) came in 1987! At no point in the decision-making process were the people to be affected consulted or even informed about the project. In 1993, after a spectacular struggle by the extraordinary Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the people of the valley forced the Bank to withdraw from the project. The Gujarat government decided to go ahead with the project. In 1994, the NBA filed a petition in the Supreme Court. For six years the court put a legal injunction on further construction of the dam. On October 18, 2000, in a shocking 2-1 majority judgement, the Supreme Court lifted the injunction. After having seen it fit to hold up the construction for six years, the court chastised (using unseemly, insulting language) the people of the Narmada Valley for approaching it too late and said that on these grounds alone their petition should be dismissed. It permitted construction to continue according to the guidelines laid down by the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal.

It did this despite the fact that it was aware that the Tribunal Award has been consistently violated for 13 years. Despite the fact that none of the conditions of the environment ministry's clearance have been met. Despite the fact that 13 years have passed and the government hasn't even produced a resettlement plan. Despite the fact that not a single village has been resettled according to the directives of the Tribunal. Despite the fact that the Madhya Pradesh (MP) Government has stated on oath that it has no land to resettle 'oustees' (80 per cent of them live in MP). Despite the fact that since construction began, the MP government has not given a single hectare of agricultural land to

displaced families. Despite the fact that the court was fully aware that even families displaced by the dam at its current height have not been rehabilitated.

In other words, the Supreme Court has actually ordered and sanctioned the violation of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award.

"But this is the problem with the government", Mr and Mrs Well-Meaning say. "These things wouldn't happen with a private company. Things like resettlement and rehabilitation of poor people will be so much better managed."

The Maheshwar experience teaches you otherwise. In a private project, the only thing that's better managed is the corruption, the lies and the swiftness and brutality of repression. And, of course, the escalating costs.

In 1994, the project cost of the Maheshwar Dam was estimated at Rs 465 crore. In 1996, following the contract with the S.Kumars, it rose to Rs 1,569 crore. Today it stands at Rs 2,200 crore. Initially, 80 per cent of this money was to be raised from foreign investors. There has been a procession of them—Pacgen of the US, Bayernwerk, VEW, Siemens and the Hypovereinsbank of Germany. And now, the latest in the line of ardent suitors, Ogden of the US.

According to the NBA's calculations, the cost of the electricity at the factory gate will be Rs 6.55 per unit, which is 26 times more expensive than existing hydel power in the state, five-and-a-half times more expensive than thermal power and four times more expensive than power from the central grid. (It's worth mentioning here that Madhya Pradesh today generates 1,500 MW more power than it can transmit and distribute.)

Though the installed capacity of the Maheshwar project is supposed to be 400 MW, studies using 28 years of actual river flow data show that 80 per cent of the electricity will be generated only during the monsoon months when the river is full. What this means is that most of the supply will be generated when it's least needed.

The S.Kumars have no worries on this count. They have Enron as a precedent. They have an escrow clause in their contract, which guarantees them first call on government funds. This means that however much (or however little) electricity they produce, whether anybody buys it or not, for the next 35 years they are guaranteed a minimum payment from the government of approximately Rs 600 crore a year. This money will be paid to them even before the employees of the bankrupt SEB get their salaries. What did the S.Kumars do to deserve this largesse?

It isn't hard to guess.

So who's actually paying for this dam that nobody needs?

According to government surveys, the reservoir of the Maheshwar Dam will submerge 61 villages. Thirteen will be wholly submerged, the rest will lose their farmlands. As usual, none of the villagers were informed about the dam or their impending eviction. (Of course, if they go to court now they'll be told it's too late since construction has already begun.) The first surveys were done under a ruse that a railway line was being constructed. It was only in 1997, when blasting began at the dam site, that realisation dawned on the people and the NBA became active in Maheshwar. The agency in charge of the survey is the same one that was in charge of the surveys for the Bargi reservoir. We know what happened there.

People in the submergence zone of the Maheshwar dam say that the surveys are completely wrong. Some villages marked for submergence are at a higher level than villages that are not counted as project affected. Since the Maheshwar dam is located in the broad plains of Nimad, even a small miscalculation in the surveys will lead to huge discrepancies between what is marked for submergence and what is actually submerged. The consequences of these errors will be far worse than what happened at Bargi.

There are other egregious assumptions in the 'survey'. Annexure 6 of the resettlement plan states that there are 176 trees and 38 wells in all the affected 61 villages combined. The villagers point out that in just a single village—Pathrad—there are 40 wells and over 4,000 trees.



As with trees and wells, so with people. There is no accurate estimate of how many people will be affected by the dam. Even the project authorities admit that new surveys must be done. So far they've managed to survey only one out of the 61 villages. The number of affected households rose from 190 (in the preliminary survey) to 300 (in the new one).

In circumstances like these, it's impossible for even the NBA to have an accurate idea of the numbers of project-affected people. Their rough guess is about 50,000. More than half of them are Kevats, Kahars and other Dalits...ancient communities of ferrymen, fisherfolk, sand quarriers and cultivators of the riverbed when the waters recede in the dry season. Most of them own no land, but the river sustains them and means more to them than anyone else. If the dam is built, thousands of them will lose their only source of livelihood. Yet simply because they are landless, they do not qualify as project-affected and will not be eligible for rehabilitation.

Jalud is the first of the 61 villages that is slated for submergence in the reservoir of the dam. As early as 1985, 12 families, mostly Dalit, who had small holdings near the dam site, had their land acquired. When they protested, cement was poured into their water pipes, their standing crops were bulldozed, and the police occupied the land by force. All 12 families are now landless and work as wage labour. The new 'private' initiative has made no effort to help them.

According to the environmental clearance from the Central government, the people affected by the project ought to have been resettled three years ago, in 1997. To date, the S.Kumars haven't even managed to produce a list of project-affected people, let alone land on which they are to be resettled. Yet, construction continues. The S.Kumars are so well entrenched with the state government that they don't need to even pretend to cover their tracks.

This is how India works.

This is the genesis of the Maheshwar Dam. This is the legacy that the Ogden Energy Group of the US is so keen to inherit. What they don't realise is that the fight is on. Over the last three years, the struggle against the Maheshwar Dam has grown into a veritable civil disobedience movement, though you wouldn't know it if you read the papers. The mainstream media is hugely dependent on revenue from advertising. The S.Kumars sponsor massive advertisements for their blended suitings. After their James Bond campaign with Pierce Brosnan, they've signed India's biggest film star—Hrithik Roshan—as their star campaigner. It's extraordinary how much silent admiration and support a hunk in a blended suit can evoke.

Over the last two years, tens of thousands of villagers have captured the dam site several times and halted construction work. Protests in the region forced two companies, Bayernwerk and vew of Germany, to withdraw from the project. The German company Siemens remained in the fray (angling for an export credit guarantee from Hermes, the German ECA). In the summer of 2000, the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development sent in a team of experts headed by Richard Bissell (former chairman of the inspection panel of the World Bank) to do an independent review of the Resettlement and Rehabilitation aspects of the project. The report published on the 15th of June this year, was unambiguous that resettlement and rehabilitation of people displaced by the Maheshwar Dam was simply not possible.

At the end of August, Siemens withdrew its application for a Hermes guarantee. The people of the valley don't get much time to recover between bouts of fighting. In September, the S.Kumars were part of the Indian prime minister's business entourage when he visited the US. Desperate to replace Siemens, they were hoping to convert their memorandum of understanding with Ogden into a final contract. That, fortunately (for Ogden as much as the people of Maheshwar), hasn't happened yet.

The only time I have ever felt anything close to what most people would describe as national pride was when I walked one night with 4,000 people towards the Maheshwar dam site, where we knew hundreds of armed policemen were waiting for us. From the previous evening, people from all over the valley had begun to gather in a village called Sulgaon. They came in tractors, in bullock carts and on foot. They came prepared to be beaten, humiliated and taken to prison.

We set out at three in the morning. We walked for three hours—farmers, fishermen, sandminers, writers, painters, film-makers, lawyers, journalists. All of India was represented. Urban, rural, touchable, untouchable. This alliance is what gives the movement its raw power, its intellectual rigour and its phenomenal tenacity. As we crossed fields and forded streams, I remember thinking—this is

## Arundhati Roy – The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin -

my land, this is the dream to which the whole of me belongs, this is worth more to me than anything else in the world. We were not just fighting against a dam. We were fighting for a philosophy. For a worldview.

We walked in utter silence. Not a throat was cleared. Not a bidi lit. We arrived at the dam site at dawn. Though the police were expecting us, they didn't know exactly where we would come from. We captured the dam site. People were beaten, humiliated and arrested. I was arrested and pushed into a private car that belonged to the S.Kumars. I remember feeling a hot stab of shame—as quick and sharp as my earlier sense of pride. This was my land too. My feudal land. Where even the police is privatised. (On the way to the police station, they complained that the S.Kumars had given them nothing to eat all day.) That evening, there were so many arrests, the jail could not contain the people. The administration broke down and abandoned the jail. The people locked themselves in and demanded answers to their questions. So far, none have been forthcoming.

A Dutch documentary film-maker recently asked me a very simple question: What can India teach the world?

A documentary film-maker needs to see to understand. I thought of three places I could take him to.

First, to a 'Call Centre College' in Gurgaon on the outskirts of Delhi. I thought it would be interesting for a filmmaker to see how easily an ancient civilisation can be made to abase itself completely. In a Call Centre College, hundreds of young English-speaking Indians are being groomed to man the backroom operations of giant transnational companies. They are trained to answer telephone queries from the US and the UK (on subjects ranging from a credit card enquiry to advice about a malfunctioning washing machine.) On no account must the caller know that his or her enquiry is being attended to by an Indian, sitting at a desk on the outskirts of Delhi. The Call Centre Colleges train their students to speak in American and British accents. They have to read foreign papers so that they can chit chat about the news or the weather. On duty they have to change their given names. Sushma becomes Susie, Govind becomes Jerry, Advani becomes Andy. (Hi! I'm Andy, gee, hot day innit? Shoot, how can I help ya?)

They're paid exactly one-tenth of the salaries of their counterparts abroad. From all accounts, call centres are billed to become a trillion-dollar industry. Recently the Tatas announced their plans to redeploy 20,000 of their retrenched workers in call centres after a brief 'period of training' for the business, such as 'picking up the American accent and slang'. The news report said that the older employees may find it difficult to work at night—a requirement for US-based companies, given the time difference between India and the US.

The second place I thought I'd take the film-maker to is an RSS shakha where the terrible backlash to this enforced abasement is being nurtured and groomed. Where ordinary people march around in khaki shorts and learn that amassing nuclear weapons, religious bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, book burning and outright hatred are the ways in which to retrieve a nation's lost dignity. Here he might see for himself how the two arms of government work in synergy. How they have evolved and pretty near perfected an extraordinary pincer action—while one arm is busy selling the nation off in chunks, the other, to divert attention, is orchestrating a baying, howling, deranged chorus of cultural nationalism. It would be fascinating to actually see how the inexorable ruthlessness of one process results in the naked, vulgar, terrorism perpetrated by the other. They're Siamese twins—Advani and Andy. They share organs. They have the ability to say two entirely contradictory things simultaneously, to hold all positions at all times. There's no separating them.

The third place I thought I'd take him to is the Narmada Valley. To witness the ferocious, magical, magnificent, tenacious and above all non-violent resistance that has grown on the banks of that beautiful river.

What is happening to our world is almost too colossal for human comprehension to contain. But it is a terrible, terrible thing. To contemplate its girth and circumference, to attempt to define it, to try and fight it all at once, is impossible. The only way to combat it is by fighting specific wars in specific ways. A good place to begin would be the Narmada Valley. In the present circumstances, the only thing in the world worth globalising, is dissent.

Dissent with options. Dissent with imagination.

You'll find it in the Narmada Valley. The borders are open. Come on in. Let's bury Rumpelstiltskin.

## Defence Of Dissent

**On January 2, 2001, five advocates filed a petition in the Supreme Court for contempt of court and 'attempt to murder', among other charges, against Arundhati Roy, Prashant Bhushan, lawyer for the NBA, and Medha Patkar. The SC has admitted the petition and directed the three accused to appear before it. Outlook has obtained Arundhati Roy's affidavit in reply.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

*IN THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA  
ORIGINAL JURISDICTION  
CONTEMPT PETITION (CR) NO: 2/2001  
IN THE MATTER OF:  
J.R. PARASHAR & ORS  
Versus  
PRASANT BHUSHAN & ORS  
AFFIDAVIT IN REPLY FILED BY RESPONDENT NO: 3*

I, Arundhati Roy, daughter of Mary Roy, resident of 2A Kautilya Marg, New Delhi 110021, do solemnly state and affirm as under. I have received the showcause notice issued by the Supreme Court and I have read and understood the contents of the contempt petition in which this notice has been issued.

My reply is as under:

The gravamen of the charges in the petition against me are contained in the FIR that the petitioners say they lodged in the Tilak Marg police station on the 14th of December 2000. The FIR is annexed to the main petition and is reproduced verbatim below.

First Information Report dated 14.12.2000

I, Jagdish Prasar, with colleagues Shri Umed Singh and Rajender were going out from Supreme Court at 7.00 pm and saw that Gate No. C was closed.

We came out from the Supreme Court premises from other path and inquired why the gate is close. The were surrounded by Prasant Bhusan, Medha Patekar and Arundhanti Roy alongwith their companion and they told Supreme Court your father's property. On this we told them they could not sit on Dharna by closing the gate. The proper place of Dharna is parliament. In the mean time Prasant Bhusan said."You Jagdish Prasar are the tout of judiciary. Again medha said "SALE KO JAAN SE MAAR DO (kill him). Arundhanti Roy commanded the crow that Supreme Court of India is the thief and all these are this touts. Kill them, Prasant Bhushan pulled by having caught my haired and said that if you would be seen in the Supreme Court again he would get them killed. But they were shouting inspite of the presence of S.H.O and ACP Bhaskar Tilak marg. We ran away with great with great hardship otherwise their goonda might have done some mischief because of their drunken state. Therefore, it is requested to you that proper action may be taken after registering our complaint in order to save on lives and property. We complainants will be highly obliged.

Sd. Complainants

The main petition is as shoddily drafted as the FIR. The lies, the looseness, the ludicrousness of the charges displays more contempt for the Apex Court than any of the offences allegedly committed by Prashant Bhushan, Medha Patkar and myself. Its contents are patently false and malicious. The police station in Tilak Marg, where the FIR was lodged, has not registered a case. No policeman ever contacted me, there was no police investigation, no attempt to verify the charges, to find out whether the people named in the petition were present at the dharna, and whether indeed the incident described in the FIR (on which the entire contempt petition is based) occurred at all.

Under the circumstances, it is distressing that the Supreme Court has thought it fit to entertain this petition and issue notice directing me and the other respondents to appear personally in court on the 23rd of April 2001, and to "continue to attend the Court on all the days thereafter to which the case against you stands and until final orders are passed on the charges against you. WHEREIN FAIL NOT."

For the ordinary working citizen, these enforced court appearances mean that in effect, the punishment for the uncommitted crime has already begun.

The facts relating to the petition are as follows:

Contrary to everything the petition says, insinuates and implies, I am not a leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. I am a writer, an independent citizen with independent views who supports and admires the cause of the Andolan. I was not a petitioner in the Public Interest Litigation petition in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project. I am not an 'interested party'. Prashant Bhushan is not my lawyer and has never represented me.

Furthermore in all humility I aver that I do not know who the petitioners are. That I never tried to murder anybody, or incite anybody to murder anybody, in broad daylight outside the gates of the Supreme Court in full view of the Delhi police. That I did not raise any slogans against the court. That I did not see Prashant Bhushan pulled anyone by having caught their hair and said that if you would be seen in the Supreme Court again he would get them killed. That I did not see Medha Patkar, leader of India's most prominent non-violent resistance movement, metamorphose into a mediocre film actor and say "Sale ko jaan se maar do" (Kill the bastard). That I did not notice the presence of any "goondas" in a "drunken state". And finally, that my name is spelt wrong.

On the morning of the 13th of December 2000, I learned that people from the Narmada Valley had gathered outside the gates of the Supreme Court. When I arrived at the Supreme Court at about 11.30 am, gate No. C was already closed. Four to five hundred people were standing outside. Most of them were adivasi people who, as a consequence of the recent Supreme Court judgement that allowed the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam to proceed, will lose their lands and homes this monsoon to the rising waters of the reservoir. They have not been rehabilitated. In a few months they will be destitute and have nowhere to go. These people had travelled all the way from the Narmada Valley to personally convey their despair and anguish to the court. To tell the court that in contravention of its order, no land has been offered to them for rehabilitation and that the reality of the situation in the Narmada Valley is very different from the one portrayed in the Supreme Court Judgement. They asked the Registrar of the Court for a meeting with the Chief Justice.

A number of representatives of peoples' movements in Delhi, and other supporters of the Andolan like myself, were also there to express their solidarity. I would like to stress that I did not see Prashant Bhushan, the main accused in the petition, at the dharna. Medha Patkar, who was there, asked me to speak to the people for five minutes.

My exact words were: "Mujhe paanch minute bhi nahi chahiye aapke saamne apni baat rakhne ke liye. Mein aapke saath hoon." (I do not even need five minutes to tell you why I'm here. I'm here because I support you.) This is easy to verify as there were several film and television crews shooting the event. The villagers had cloth labels hung around their necks that said "Project Affected at 90 metres" (the current height of the dam). As time went by and it became clear that the request for a meeting with the Chief Justice was not going to be granted, people grew disheartened. Several people (who I don't know or recognise) made speeches critical of the Court, its inaccessibility to common people, and its process. Others spoke about corruption in the judiciary, about the judges and how far removed they are from ground realities. I admit that I made absolutely no attempt to intervene. I am not a policeman or a public official. As a writer I am deeply interested in peoples' perceptions of the functioning of one of the most important institutions in this country.

However, I would like to clarify that I have never, either in my writing, or in any public forum cast aspersions on the character or integrity of the judges. I believe that the reflexive instinct of the powerful to protect the powerful is sufficient explanation for the kind of iniquitous judgement as in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project. I did not raise slogans against the court. I did not, as the petition claims, say "Supreme Court bika hua hai" (The Supreme Court has sold out). I certainly did not "command the crowd that Supreme Court of India is the thief and all these are this touts." (Perhaps the petitioners meant 'crowd'?)

I went to the dharna because I have been deeply distressed and angered by the Supreme Court's majority—and therefore operative—verdict on the Sardar Sarovar Project. The verdict allowed the project to proceed even though the court was well aware that the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal had been consistently violated for thirteen years. That not a single village had been resettled according to the directives of the tribunal, and that the Madhya Pradesh Government (which is

responsible for 80 per cent of the oustees) had given a written affidavit in court stating that it has no land to resettle them. In effect, the Supreme Court ordered the violation of the fundamental rights to life and livelihood of hundreds of thousands of Indian citizens, most of them Dalit and Adivasi.

As a consequence of the Supreme Court judgement, it is these unfortunate citizens who stand to lose their homes, their livelihoods, their gods and their histories. When they came calling on the Supreme Court on the morning of the 13th of December 2000, they were asking the Court to restore their dignity. To accuse them of lowering the dignity of the Court suggests that the dignity of the court and the dignity of Indian citizens are incompatible, oppositional, adversarial things. That the dignity of one can only exist at the cost of the other. If this is so, it is a sad and shameful proposition. In his Republic Day speech, President K.R. Narayanan called upon the nation, and specifically the judiciary, to take special care of these fragile communities. He said, "The developmental path we have adopted is hurting them, the marginalised, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and threatening their very existence."

I believe that the people of the Narmada Valley have the constitutional right to protest peacefully against what they consider an unjust and unfair judgement. As for myself, I have every right to participate in any peaceful protest meeting that I choose to. Even outside the gates of the Supreme Court. As a writer I am fully entitled to put forward my views, my reasons and arguments for why I believe that the judgement in the Sardar Sarovar case is flawed and unjust and violates the human rights of Indian citizens. I have the right to use all my skills and abilities such as they are, and all the facts and figures at my disposal, to persuade people to my point of view.

The petition is a pathetic attempt to target what the petitioners perceive to be the three main fronts of the resistance movement in the Narmada Valley. The activist Medha Patkar, leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and representative of the people in the valley; the lawyer, Prashant Bhushan, legal counsel for the Narmada Bachao Andolan; and the writer (me), who is seen as one of those who carries the voice of the Andolan to the world outside. It is significant that this is the third time that I, as a writer, have had to face legal harassment connected with my writing.

In July 1999, the three-judge bench in the Supreme Court hearing the public interest petition on the Sardar Sarovar Project took offence at my essay *The Greater Common Good* published in *Outlook* and *Frontline* magazines. While the waters rose in the Narmada, while villagers stood in their homes in chest-deep water for days on end, protesting the Court's interim order, the Supreme Court held three hearings in which the main topic they discussed was whether or not the dignity of the Court had been violated by my essay. On the 15th of October 1999, without giving me an opportunity to be heard, the Court passed an insulting order. Here is an extract:

"...Judicial process and institution cannot be permitted to be scandalised or subjected to contumacious violation in such a blatant manner in which it has been done by her...vicious stultification and vulgar debunking cannot be permitted to pollute the stream of justice...we are unhappy at the way in which the leaders of nba and Ms Arundhati Roy have attempted to undermine the dignity of the Court. We expected better behaviour from them..."

The order contained a veiled warning to me not to continue with my "objectionable writings".

In 1997 a criminal case for Corrupting Public Morality was filed against me in a district magistrate's court in Kerala for my book *The God of Small Things*. It has been pending for the last four years. I have had to hire criminal lawyers, draft affidavits and travel all the way to Kerala to appear in court.

And now I have to defend myself on this third, ludicrous charge.

As a writer I wish to state as emphatically as I can that this is a dangerous trend. If the Court uses the Contempt of Court law, and allows citizens to abuse its process to intimidate and harass writers, it will have the chilling effect of interfering with a writer's imagination and the creative act itself. This fear of harassment will create a situation in which even before a writer puts pen to paper, she will have to anticipate what the Court might think of her work. It will induce a sort of enforced, fearful self-censorship. It would be bad for law, worse for literature and sad for the world of art and beauty.

I have written and published several essays and articles on the Narmada issue and the Supreme Court judgement. None of them was intended to show contempt to the Court. However, I have every right to disagree with the Court's views on the subject and to express my disagreement in any publication or forum that I choose to. Regardless of everything the operative Supreme Court judgement on the Sardar Sarovar says, I continue to be opposed to Big Dams. I continue to believe that they are economically unviable, ecologically destructive and deeply undemocratic. I continue to believe that the judgement disregarded the evidence placed before the Court. I continue to write what I believe. Not to do so would undermine the dignity of writers, their art, their very purpose. I need hardly add that I also believe that those who hold the opposite point of view to mine, those who wish to disagree with my views, criticise them or denounce them, have the same rights to free speech and expression as I do.

I left the dharna at about 6 pm. Until then, contrary to the lurid scenario described in the petitioners' FIR, I can state on oath that no blood was spilled, no mob was drunk, no hair was pulled, no murder attempted. A little khichdi was cooked and consumed. No litter was left. There were over a hundred police constables and some senior police officers present. Though I would very much like to, I cannot say in good conscience that I have never set eyes on the petitioners because I don't know who they are or what they look like. They could have been any one of the hundreds of people who were milling around on that day.

But whoever they are, and whatever their motives, for the petitioners to attempt to misuse the Contempt of Court Act and the good offices of the Supreme Court to stifle criticism and stamp out dissent strikes at the very roots of the notion of democracy.

In recent months this Court has issued judgements on several major public issues. For instance, the closure of polluting industries in Delhi, the conversion of public transport buses from diesel to cng, and the judgement permitting the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to proceed. All of these have had far-reaching and often unanticipated impacts. They have materially affected, for better or for worse, the lives and livelihoods of millions of Indian citizens. Whatever the justice or injustice of these judgements, whatever their finer legal points, for the Court to become intolerant of criticism or expressions of dissent would mark the beginning of the end of democracy.

An 'activist' judiciary, that intervenes in public matters to provide a corrective to a corrupt, dysfunctional executive, surely has to be more, not less accountable. To a society that is already convulsed by political bankruptcy, economic distress and religious and cultural intolerance, any form of judicial intolerance will come as a crippling blow. If the judiciary removes itself from public scrutiny and accountability, and severs its links with the society that it was set up to serve in the first place, it would mean that yet another pillar of Indian democracy will crumble. A judicial dictatorship is as fearsome a prospect as a military dictatorship or any other form of totalitarian rule.

The Tehelka tapes broadcast recently on a national television network show the repulsive sight of Presidents of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Samata Party (both part of the ruling coalition) accepting bribes from spurious arms dealers. Though this ought to have been considered prima facie evidence of corruption, the Delhi High Court declined to entertain a petition seeking an inquiry into the defence deals that were referred to in the tapes. The bench took strong exception to the petitioner approaching the court without substantial evidence and even warned the petitioner's counsel that if he failed to substantiate its allegations, the court would impose costs on the petitioner.

On the grounds that judges of the Supreme Court were too busy, the Chief Justice of India refused to allow a sitting judge to head the judicial inquiry into the Tehelka scandal, even though it involves matters of national security and corruption in the highest places.

Yet, when it comes to an absurd, despicable, entirely unsubstantiated petition in which all the three respondents happen to be people who have publicly—though in markedly different ways—questioned the policies of the government and severely criticised a recent judgement of the Supreme Court, the Court displays a disturbing willingness to issue notice.

It indicates a disquieting inclination on the part of the Court to silence criticism and muzzle dissent, to harass and intimidate those who disagree with it. By entertaining a petition based on an FIR that even a local police station does not see fit to act upon, the Supreme Court is doing its own reputation and credibility considerable harm.

In conclusion, I wish to reaffirm that as a writer I have the right to state my opinions and beliefs. As a free citizen of India I have the right to be part of any peaceful dharna, demonstration or protest march. I have the right to criticise any judgement of any court that I believe to be unjust. I have the right to make common cause with those I agree with. I hope that each time I exercise these rights I will not be dragged to court on false charges and forced to explain my actions.

The petitioners have committed civil and criminal defamation. They ought to be investigated and prosecuted for perjury. They ought to be made to pay damages for the time they have wasted of this Apex Court by filing these false charges. Above all they ought to be made to apologise to all those citizens who are patiently awaiting the attention of the Supreme Court in more important matters.

Deponent

Verification:

I, the deponent above named do hereby verify that the contents of the above affidavit are true to my knowledge and nothing material has been concealed thereof. Verified at New Delhi on this the 16th day of April 2001.

Deponent

## The Algebra Of Infinite Justice

**So here we have it. The equivocating distinction between civilisation and savagery, between the 'massacre of innocent people' or, if you like, 'a clash of civilisations' and 'collateral damage'. The sophistry and fastidious algebra of Infinite Justice...  
Free Speech**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

In the aftermath of the unconscionable September 11 suicide attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, an American newscaster said: "Good and Evil rarely manifest themselves as clearly as they did last Tuesday. People who we don't know, massacred people who we do. And they did so with contemptuous glee." Then he broke down and wept.

Here's the rub: America is at war against people it doesn't know (because they don't appear much on TV). Before it has properly identified or even begun to comprehend the nature of its enemy, the US government has, in a rush of publicity and embarrassing rhetoric, cobbled together an "International Coalition Against Terror", mobilised its army, its airforce, its navy and its media, and committed them to battle.

The trouble is that once America goes off to war, it can't very well return without having fought one. If it doesn't find its enemy, for the sake of the enraged folks back home, it will have to manufacture one. Once war begins, it will develop a momentum, a logic and a justification of its own, and we'll lose sight of why it's being fought in the first place.

What we're witnessing here is the spectacle of the world's most powerful country, reaching reflexively, angrily, for an old instinct to fight a new kind of war. Suddenly, when it comes to defending itself, America's streamlined warships, its Cruise missiles and F-16 jets look like obsolete, lumbering things. As deterrence, its arsenal of nuclear bombs is no longer worth its weight in scrap. Box-cutters, penknives, and cold anger are the weapons with which the wars of the new century will be waged. Anger is the lock pick. It slips through customs unnoticed. Doesn't show up in baggage checks.

Who is America fighting? On September 20, the FBI said that it had doubts about the identities of some of the hijackers. On the same day, President George W. Bush said: "We know exactly who these people are and which governments are supporting them." It sounds as though the President knows something that the FBI and the American public don't.

In his September 20 address to the US Congress, President Bush called the enemies of America "Enemies of Freedom". "Americans are asking why do they hate us?" he said. "They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." People are being asked to make two leaps of faith here. First, to assume that The Enemy is who the US government says it is, even though it has no substantial evidence to support that claim. And second, to assume that The Enemy's motives are what the US government says they are, and there's nothing to support that either.

For strategic, military and economic reasons, it is vital for the US government to persuade the American public that America's commitment to freedom and democracy and the American Way of Life is under attack. In the current atmosphere of grief, outrage and anger, it's an easy notion to peddle. However, if that were true, it's reasonable to wonder why the symbols of America's economic and military dominance—the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—were chosen as the targets of the attacks. Why not the Statue of Liberty? Could it be that the stygian anger that led to the attacks has its taproot not in American freedom and democracy, but in the US government's record of commitment and support to exactly the opposite things—to military and economic terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry and unimaginable genocide (outside America)?

It must be hard for ordinary Americans so recently bereaved to look up at the world with their eyes full of tears and encounter what might appear to them to be indifference. It isn't indifference. It's just augury. An absence of surprise. The tired wisdom of knowing that what goes around, eventually comes around. American people ought to know that it is not them, but their government's policies that are so hated. They can't possibly doubt that they themselves, their extraordinary musicians, their



writers, their actors, their spectacular sportsmen and their cinema, are universally welcomed. All of us have been moved by the courage and grace shown by firefighters, rescue workers and ordinary office-goers in the days and weeks that followed the attacks.

America's grief at what happened has been immense and immensely public. It would be grotesque to expect it to calibrate or modulate its anguish. However, it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try and understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own. Because then it falls to the rest of us to ask the hard questions and say the harsh things. And for our pains, for our bad timing, we will be disliked, ignored and perhaps eventually silenced.

The world will probably never know what motivated those particular hijackers who flew planes into those particular American buildings. They were not glory boys. They left no suicide notes, no political messages, no organisation has claimed credit for the attacks. All we know is that their belief in what they were doing outstripped the natural human instinct for survival or any desire to be remembered. It's almost as though they could not scale down the enormity of their rage to anything smaller than their deeds. And what they did has blown a hole in the world as we know it. In the absence of information, politicians, political commentators, writers (like myself) will invest the act with their own politics, with their own interpretations. This speculation, this analysis of the political climate in which the attacks took place, can only be a good thing.

But war is looming large. Whatever remains to be said, must be said quickly.

Before America places itself at the helm of the "international coalition against terror", before it invites (and coerces) countries to actively participate in its almost godlike mission—Operation Infinite Justice—it would help if some small clarifications are made. For example, Infinite Justice for whom? Is this America's War against Terror in America or against Terror in general? What exactly is being avenged here? Is it the tragic loss of almost 7,000 lives, the gutting of 5 million square feet of office space in Manhattan, the destruction of a section of the Pentagon, the loss of several hundreds of thousands of jobs, the bankruptcy of some airline companies and the dip in the New York Stock Exchange? Or is it more than that?

In 1996, Madeleine Albright, then US Secretary of State, was asked on national television what she felt about the fact that 5,00,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of US economic sanctions. She replied that it was "a very hard choice", but that all things considered, "we think the price is worth it." Madeleine Albright never lost her job for saying this. She continued to travel the world representing the views and aspirations of the US government. More pertinently, the sanctions against Iraq remain in place. Children continue to die.

So here we have it. The equivocating distinction between civilisation and savagery, between the 'massacre of innocent people' or, if you like, 'a clash of civilisations' and 'collateral damage'. The sophistry and fastidious algebra of Infinite Justice. How many dead Iraqis will it take to make the world a better place? How many dead Afghans for every dead American? How many dead women and children for every dead man? How many dead mujahideen for each dead investment banker?

As we watch mesmerised, Operation Infinite Justice unfolds on TV monitors across the world. A coalition of the world's superpowers is closing in on Afghanistan, one of the poorest, most ravaged, war-torn countries in the world, whose ruling Taliban government is sheltering Osama bin Laden, the man being held responsible for the September 11 attacks.

The only thing in Afghanistan that could possibly count as collateral value is its citizenry. (Among them, half a million maimed orphans. There are accounts of hobbling stampedes that occur when artificial limbs are airdropped into remote, inaccessible villages.) Afghanistan's economy is in a shambles. In fact, the problem for an invading army is that Afghanistan has no conventional coordinates or signposts to plot on a military map—no big cities, no highways, no industrial complexes, no water treatment plants. Farms have been turned into mass graves. The countryside is littered with landmines—10 million is the most recent estimate. The American army would first have to clear the mines and build roads in order to take its soldiers in.

Fearing an attack from America, one million citizens have fled from their homes and arrived at the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. As supplies run out—food and aid agencies have been asked to leave—the BBC reports that one of the worst humanitarian disasters of recent times has

begun to unfold. Witness the Infinite Justice of the new century. Civilians starving to death, while they're waiting to be killed.

By contributing to the killing of Afghan civilians, the US government will only end up helping the Taliban cause.

In America there has been rough talk of "bombing Afghanistan back to the stone age". Someone please break the news that Afghanistan is already there. And if it's any consolation, America played no small part in helping it on its way. The American people may be a little fuzzy about where exactly Afghanistan is (we hear reports that there's a run on maps of Afghanistan), but the US government and Afghanistan are old friends. In 1979, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) launched the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA. Their purpose was to harness the energy of Afghan resistance to the Soviets and expand it into a holy war, an Islamic jihad, which would turn Muslim countries within the Soviet Union against the Communist regime and eventually destabilise it. When it began, it was meant to be the Soviet Union's Vietnam. It turned out to be much more than that. Over the years, the CIA funded and recruited almost 1,00,000 radical mujahideen from 40 Islamic countries as soldiers for America's proxy war. The rank and file of the mujahideen were unaware that their jihad was actually being fought on behalf of Uncle Sam. (The irony is that America was equally unaware that it was financing a future war against itself).

By 1989, after being bloodied by 10 years of relentless conflict, the Russians withdrew, leaving behind a civilisation reduced to rubble. Civil war in Afghanistan raged on. The jihad spread to Chechnya, Kosovo and eventually to Kashmir. The CIA continued to pour in money and military equipment, but the overheads had become immense, and more money was needed. The mujahideen ordered farmers to plant opium as 'revolutionary tax'. The ISI set up hundreds of heroin laboratories across Afghanistan. Within two years of the CIA's arrival, the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland had become the biggest producer of heroin in the world, and the single biggest source on American streets. The annual profits, said to be between 100 and 200 billion dollars, were ploughed back into training and arming militants.

In 1995, the Taliban—then a marginal sect of dangerous, hardline fundamentalists—fought its way to power in Afghanistan. It was funded by the ISI, that old cohort of the CIA, and supported by many political parties in Pakistan. The Taliban unleashed a regime of terror. Its first victims were its own people, particularly women. It closed down girls' schools, dismissed women from government jobs, enforced Sharia laws in which women deemed to be 'immoral' are stoned to death, and widows guilty of being adulterous are buried alive. Given the Taliban government's human rights track record, it seems unlikely that it will in any way be intimidated or swerved from its purpose by the prospect of war, or the threat to the lives of its civilians.

After all that has happened, can there be anything more ironic than Russia and America joining hands to re-destroy Afghanistan? The question is, can you destroy destruction? Dropping more bombs on Afghanistan will only shuffle the rubble, scramble some old graves and disturb the dead.

The desolate landscape of Afghanistan was the burial ground of Soviet Communism and the springboard of a unipolar world dominated by America. It made the space for neo-capitalism and corporate globalisation, again dominated by America. And now Afghanistan is poised to be the graveyard for the unlikely soldiers who fought and won this war for America.

And what of America's trusted ally? Pakistan too has suffered enormously. The US government has not been shy of supporting military dictators who have blocked the idea of democracy from taking root in the country. Before the CIA arrived, there was a small rural market for opium in Pakistan. Between 1979 and 1985, the number of heroin addicts grew from zero to one and a half million. There are three million Afghan refugees living in tented camps along the border. Pakistan's economy is crumbling. Sectarian violence, globalisation's Structural Adjustment programmes and drug lords are tearing the country to pieces. Set up to fight the Soviets, the terrorist training centres and madrassas, sown like dragon's teeth across the country, produced fundamentalists with tremendous popular appeal within Pakistan itself. The Taliban, who the Pakistan government has supported, funded and propped up for years, has material and strategic alliances with Pakistan's own political parties. Now the US government is asking (asking?) Pakistan to garrot the pet it has hand-reared in its backyard for so many years. President Musharraf, having pledged his support to the US, could well find he has something resembling civil war on his hands.

India, thanks in part to its geography, and in part to the vision of its former leaders, has so far been fortunate enough to be left out of this Great Game. Had it been drawn in, it's more than likely that our democracy, such as it is, would not have survived. Today, as some of us watch in horror, the Indian government is furiously gyrating its hips, begging the US to set up its base in India rather than Pakistan. Having had this ringside view of Pakistan's sordid fate, it isn't just odd, it's unthinkable that India should want to do this. Any Third World country with a fragile economy and a complex social base should know by now that to invite a superpower like America in (whether it says it's staying or just passing through) would be like inviting a brick to drop through your windscreen.

In the media blitz that followed the September 11 events, no mainstream TV station thought it fit to tell the story of America's involvement with Afghanistan. So, to those unfamiliar with the story, the coverage of the attacks could have been moving, disturbing and perhaps to cynics, self-indulgent. However, to those of us who are familiar with Afghanistan's recent history, American television coverage and the rhetoric of the "International Coalition Against Terror" is just plain insulting. America's 'free press' like its 'free market' has a lot to account for.

Operation Infinite Justice is ostensibly being fought to uphold the American Way of Life. It'll probably end up undermining it completely. It will spawn more anger and more terror across the world. For ordinary people in America, it will mean lives lived in a climate of sickening uncertainty: will my child be safe in school? Will there be nerve gas in the subway? A bomb in the cinema hall? Will my love come home tonight? Already CNN is warning people against the possibility of biological warfare—small pox, bubonic plague, anthrax— being waged by innocuous crop duster aircraft. Being picked off a few at a time may end up being worse than being annihilated all at once by a nuclear bomb.

The US government, and no doubt governments all over the world, will use the climate of war as an excuse to curtail civil liberties, deny free speech, lay off workers, harass ethnic and religious minorities, cut back on public spending and divert huge amounts of money to the defence industry.

To what purpose? President George Bush can no more "rid the world of evil-doers" than he can stock it with saints. It's absurd for the US government to even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease. Terrorism has no country. It's transnational, as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike. At the first sign of trouble, terrorists can pull up stakes and move their 'factories' from country to country in search of a better deal. Just like the multinationals.

Terrorism as a phenomenon may never go away. But if it is to be contained, the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings, who, even if they are not on TV, have loves and griefs and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven's sake, rights. Instead, when Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary, was asked what he would call a victory in America's New War, he said that if he could convince the world that Americans must be allowed to continue with their way of life, he would consider it a victory.

The September 11 attacks were a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong. The message may have been written by Osama bin Laden (who knows?) and delivered by his couriers, but it could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America's old wars.

The millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the 17,500 killed when Israel—backed by the US— invaded Lebanon in 1982, the 2,00,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm, the thousands of Palestinians who have died fighting Israel's occupation of the West Bank. And the millions who died, in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican republic, Panama, at the hands of all the terrorists, dictators and genocidists who the American government supported, trained, bankrolled and supplied with arms. And this is far from being a comprehensive list. For a country involved in so much warfare and conflict, the American people have been extremely fortunate. The strikes on September 11 were only the second on American soil in over a century. The first was Pearl Harbour. The reprisal for this took a long route, but ended with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This time the world waits with bated breath for the horrors to come.

Someone recently said that if Osama bin Laden didn't exist, America would have had to invent him. But, in a way, America did invent him. He was among the jihadis who moved to Afghanistan in 1979 when the CIA commenced operations. Osama bin Laden has the distinction of being created by the CIA and wanted by the FBI. In the course of a fortnight, he has been promoted from Suspect, to Prime

Suspect, and then, despite the lack of any real evidence, straight up the charts to being "wanted dead or alive".

From all accounts, it will be impossible to produce evidence (of the sort that would stand scrutiny in a court of law) to link Osama bin Laden to the September 11 attacks. So far, it appears that the most incriminating piece of evidence against him is the fact that he has not condemned them.

From what is known about the location and the living conditions from which Osama bin Laden operates, it's entirely possible that he did not personally plan and carry out the attacks—that he is the inspirational figure, 'the CEO of the Holding Company'. The Taliban's response to US demands for the extradition of Osama bin Laden has been uncharacteristically reasonable: Produce the evidence, we'll hand him over. President Bush's response is that the demand is "non-negotiable".

(While talks are on for the extradition of CEOs—can India put in a side-request for the extradition of Warren Anderson of the USA? He was Chairman of Union Carbide, responsible for the Bhopal gas leak that killed 16,000 people in 1984. We have collated the necessary evidence. It's all in the files. Could we have him, please?)

But who is Osama bin Laden really?

Let me rephrase that. What is Osama bin Laden?

He's America's family secret. He is the American President's dark doppelganger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilised. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gunboat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of "full spectrum dominance", its chilling disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agenda that has munched through the economies of poor countries like a cloud of locusts. Its marauding multinationals who are taking over the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the water we drink, the thoughts we think.

Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and gradually becoming interchangeable. Their guns, bombs, money and drugs have been going around in the loop for a while. (The Stinger missiles that will greet US helicopters were supplied by the CIA. The heroin used by America's drug-addicts comes from Afghanistan. The Bush administration recently gave Afghanistan a \$43 million subsidy for a "war on drugs"...) Now they've even begun to borrow each other's rhetoric. Each refers to the other as 'the head of the snake'. Both invoke God and use the loose millenarian currency of Good and Evil as their terms of reference. Both are engaged in unequivocal political crimes. Both are dangerously armed—one with the nuclear arsenal of the obscenely powerful, the other with the incandescent, destructive power of the utterly hopeless. The fireball and the ice pick. The bludgeon and the axe. The important thing to keep in mind is that neither is an acceptable alternative to the other.

President Bush's ultimatum to the people of the world—"If you're not with us, you're against us"—is a piece of presumptuous arrogance.

It's not a choice that people want to, need to, or should have to make.

## War Is Peace

**The world doesn't have to choose between the Taliban and the US government. All the beauty of the world—literature, music, art—lies between these two fundamentalist poles.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

As darkness deepened over Afghanistan on Sunday, October 7, 2001, the US government, backed by the International Coalition Against Terror (the new, amenable surrogate for the United Nations), launched air strikes against Afghanistan. TV channels lingered on computer-animated images of Cruise missiles, stealth bombers, Tomahawks, 'bunker-busting' missiles and Mark 82 high-drag bombs. All over the world, little boys watched goggle-eyed and stopped clamouring for new video games.

The UN, reduced now to an ineffective abbreviation, wasn't even asked to mandate the air strikes. (As Madeleine Albright once said, "The US acts multilaterally when it can, and unilaterally when it must.") The 'evidence' against the terrorists was shared amongst friends in the 'Coalition'. After conferring, they announced that it didn't matter whether or not the 'evidence' would stand up in a court of law. Thus, in an instant, were centuries of jurisprudence carelessly trashed.

Nothing can excuse or justify an act of terrorism, whether it is committed by religious fundamentalists, private militia, people's resistance movements—or whether it's dressed up as a war of retribution by a recognised government. The bombing of Afghanistan is not revenge for New York and Washington. It is yet another act of terror against the people of the world. Each innocent person that is killed must be added to, not set off against, the grisly toll of civilians who died in New York and Washington.

People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them. People get killed. Governments moult and regroup, hydra-headed. They first use flags to shrink-wrap peoples' minds and suffocate real thought, and then as ceremonial shrouds to cloak the mangled corpses of the willing dead. On both sides, in Afghanistan as well as America, civilians are now hostage to the actions of their own governments. Unknowingly, ordinary people in both countries share a common bond—they have to live with the phenomenon of blind, unpredictable terror. Each batch of bombs that is dropped on Afghanistan is matched by a corresponding escalation of mass hysteria in America about anthrax, more hijackings and other terrorist acts.

There is no easy way out of the spiralling morass of terror and brutality that confronts the world today. It is time now for the human race to hold still, to delve into its wells of collective wisdom, both ancient and modern. What happened on September 11 changed the world forever. Freedom, progress, wealth, technology, war—these words have taken on new meaning. Governments have to acknowledge this transformation, and approach their new tasks with a modicum of honesty and humility. Unfortunately, up to now, there has been no sign of any introspection from the leaders of the International Coalition. Or the Taliban.

When he announced the air strikes, President George Bush said, "We're a peaceful nation." America's favourite ambassador, Tony Blair, (who also holds the portfolio of Prime Minister of the UK), echoed him: "We're a peaceful people."

So now we know. Pigs are horses. Girls are boys. War is Peace.

Speaking at the FBI headquarters a few days later, President Bush said: "This is our calling. This is the calling of the United States of America. The most free nation in the world. A nation built on fundamental values that reject hate, reject violence, rejects murderers and rejects evil. We will not tire."

Here is a list of the countries that America has been at war with—and bombed—since World War II: China (1945-46, 1950-53); Korea (1950-53); Guatemala (1954, 1967-69); Indonesia (1958); Cuba (1959-60); the Belgian Congo (1964); Peru (1965); Laos (1964-73); Vietnam (1961-73); Cambodia (1969-70); Grenada (1983); Libya (1986); El Salvador (1980s); Nicaragua (1980s); Panama (1989), Iraq (1991-99), Bosnia (1995), Sudan (1998); Yugoslavia (1999). And now Afghanistan.

Certainly it does not tire—this, the Most Free nation in the world. What freedoms does it uphold? Within its

borders, the freedoms of speech, religion, thought; of artistic expression, food habits, sexual preferences (well, to some extent) and many other exemplary, wonderful things. Outside its borders, the freedom to dominate, humiliate and subjugate—usually in the service of America's real religion, the 'free market'. So when the US government christens a war 'Operation Infinite Justice', or 'Operation Enduring Freedom', we in the Third World feel more than a tremor of fear. Because we know that Infinite Justice for some means Infinite Injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for others.

The International Coalition Against Terror is largely a cabal of the richest countries in the world. Between them, they manufacture and sell almost all of the world's weapons, they possess the largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction—chemical, biological and nuclear. They have fought the most wars, account for most of the genocide, subjection, ethnic cleansing and human rights violations in modern history, and have sponsored, armed and financed untold numbers of dictators and despots. Between them, they have worshipped, almost deified, the cult of violence and war. For all its appalling sins, the Taliban just isn't in the same league.

The Taliban was compounded in the crumbling crucible of rubble, heroin and landmines in the backwash of the Cold War. Its oldest leaders are in their early 40s. Many of them are disfigured and handicapped, missing an eye, an arm or a leg. They grew up in a society scarred and devastated by war. Between the Soviet Union and America, over 20 years, about \$45 billion worth of arms and ammunition was poured into Afghanistan. The latest weaponry was the only shard of modernity to intrude upon a thoroughly medieval society. Young boys—many of them orphans—who grew up in those times, had guns for toys, never knew the security and comfort of family life, never experienced the company of women. Now, as adults and rulers, the Taliban beat, stone, rape and brutalise women; they don't seem to know what else to do with them. Years of war have stripped them of gentleness, inured them to kindness and human compassion. They dance to the percussive rhythms of bombs raining down around them. Now they've turned their monstrosity on their own people.

With all due respect to President Bush, the people of the world do not have to choose between the Taliban and the US government. All the beauty of human civilisation—our art, our music, our literature—lies beyond these two fundamentalist, ideological poles. There is as little chance that the people of the world can all become middle-class consumers as there is that they'll all embrace any one particular religion. The issue is not about Good vs Evil or Islam vs Christianity as much as it is about space. About how to accommodate diversity, how to contain the impulse towards hegemony—every kind of hegemony, economic, military, linguistic, religious and cultural. Any ecologist will tell you how dangerous and fragile a monoculture is. A hegemonic world is like having a government without a healthy opposition. It becomes a kind of dictatorship. It's like putting a plastic bag over the world, and preventing it from breathing. Eventually, it will be torn open.

One and a half million Afghan people lost their lives in the 20 years of conflict that preceded this new war. Afghanistan was reduced to rubble, and now, the rubble is being pounded into finer dust. By the second day of the air strikes, US pilots were returning to their bases without dropping their assigned payload of bombs. As one pilot put it, Afghanistan is "not a target-rich environment". At a press briefing at the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld, US defence secretary, was asked if America had run out of targets.

"First we're going to re-hit targets," he said, "and second, we're not running out of targets, Afghanistan is..." This was greeted with gales of laughter in the Briefing Room.

By the third day of the strikes, the US defence department boasted that it had "achieved air supremacy over Afghanistan". (Did they mean that they had destroyed both, or maybe all 16, of Afghanistan's planes?)

On the ground in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance—the Taliban's old enemy, and therefore the International Coalition's newest friend—is making headway in its push to capture Kabul. (For the archives, let it be said that the Northern Alliance's track record is not very different from the Taliban's. But for now, because it's inconvenient, that little detail is being glossed over.) The visible, moderate,

"acceptable" leader of the Alliance, Ahmed Shah Masood, was killed in a suicide-bomb attack early in September. The rest of the Northern Alliance is a brittle confederation of brutal warlords, ex-communists and unbending clerics. It is a disparate group divided along ethnic lines, some of whom have tasted power in Afghanistan in the past.

Until the US air strikes, the Northern Alliance controlled about 5 per cent of the geographical area of Afghanistan. Now, with the Coalition's help and 'air cover', it is poised to topple the Taliban. Meanwhile, Taliban soldiers, sensing imminent defeat, have begun to defect to the Alliance. So the fighting forces are busy switching sides and changing uniforms. But in an enterprise as cynical as this one, it seems to matter hardly at all. Love is hate, north is south, peace is war.

Among the global powers, there is talk of 'putting in a representative government'. Or, on the other hand, of 'restoring' the Kingdom to Afghanistan's 89-year-old former king, Zahir Shah, who has lived in exile in Rome since 1973. That's the way the game goes—support Saddam Hussein, then 'take him out'; finance the mujahideen, then bomb them to smithereens; put in Zahir Shah and see if he's going to be a good boy. (Is it possible to 'put in' a representative government? Can you place an order for Democracy—with extra cheese and jalapeno peppers?)

Reports have begun to trickle in about civilian casualties, about cities emptying out as Afghan civilians flock to the borders which have been closed. Main arterial roads have been blown up or sealed off. Those who have experience of working in Afghanistan say that by early November, food convoys will not be able to reach the millions of Afghans (7.5 million according to the UN) who run the very real risk of starving to death during the course of this winter. They say that in the days that are left before winter sets in, there can either be a war, or an attempt to reach food to the hungry. Not both.

As a gesture of humanitarian support, the US government air-dropped 37,000 packets of emergency rations into Afghanistan. It says it plans to drop a total of 5,00,000 packets. That will still only add up to a single meal for half-a-million people out of the several million in dire need of food. Aid workers have condemned it as a cynical, dangerous, public-relations exercise. They say that air-dropping food packets is worse than futile. First, because the food will never get to those who really need it. More dangerously, those who run out to retrieve the packets risk being blown up by landmines. A tragic alms race.

Nevertheless, the food packets had a photo-op all to themselves. Their contents were listed in major newspapers. They were vegetarian, we're told, as per Muslim Dietary Law(!) Each yellow packet, decorated with the American flag, contained: rice, peanut butter, bean salad, strawberry jam, crackers, raisins, flat bread, an apple fruit bar, seasoning, matches, a set of plastic cutlery, a serviette and illustrated user instructions.

After three years of unremitting drought, an air-dropped airline meal in Jalalabad! The level of cultural ineptitude, the failure to understand what months of relentless hunger and grinding poverty really mean, the US government's attempt to use even this abject misery to boost its self-image, beggars description.

Reverse the scenario for a moment. Imagine if the Taliban government was to bomb New York City, saying all the while that its real target was the US government and its policies. And suppose, during breaks between the bombing, the Taliban dropped a few thousand packets containing nan and kababs impaled on an Afghan flag. Would the good people of New York ever find it in themselves to forgive the Afghan government? Even if they were hungry, even if they needed the food, even if they ate it, how would they ever forget the insult, the condescension? Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of New York City, returned a gift of \$10 million from a Saudi prince because it came with a few words of friendly advice about American policy in the Middle East. Is pride a luxury only the rich are entitled to?

Far from stamping it out, igniting this kind of rage is what creates terrorism. Hate and retribution don't go back into the box once you've let them out. For every 'terrorist' or his 'supporter' that is killed, hundreds of innocent people are being killed too. And for every hundred innocent people killed, there is a good chance that several future terrorists will be created.

Where will it all lead?

Setting aside the rhetoric for a moment, consider the fact that the world has not yet found an acceptable definition of what 'terrorism' is. One country's terrorist is too often another's freedom

fighter. At the heart of the matter lies the world's deep-seated ambivalence towards violence. Once violence is accepted as a legitimate political instrument, then the morality and political acceptability of terrorists (insurgents or freedom fighters) becomes contentious, bumpy terrain. The US government itself has funded, armed and sheltered plenty of rebels and insurgents around the world. The CIA and Pakistan's ISI trained and armed the mujahideen who, in the '80s, were seen as terrorists by the government in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. While President Reagan posed with them for a group portrait and called them the moral equivalents of America's founding fathers. Today, Pakistan—America's ally in this new war—sponsors insurgents who cross the border into Kashmir in India. Pakistan lauds them as 'freedom fighters', India calls them 'terrorists'. India, for its part, denounces countries who sponsor and abet terrorism, but the Indian army has, in the past, trained separatist Tamil rebels asking for a homeland in Sri Lanka—the LTTE, responsible for countless acts of bloody terrorism. (Just as the CIA abandoned the mujahideen after they had served its purpose, India abruptly turned its back on the LTTE for a host of political reasons. It was an enraged LTTE suicide-bomber who assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.)

It is important for governments and politicians to understand that manipulating these huge, raging human feelings for their own narrow purposes may yield instant results, but eventually and inexorably, they have disastrous consequences. Igniting and exploiting religious sentiments for reasons of political expediency is the most dangerous legacy that governments or politicians can bequeath to any people—including their own. People who live in societies ravaged by religious or communal bigotry know that every religious text— from the Bible to the Bhagwad Gita—can be mined and misinterpreted to justify anything, from nuclear war to genocide to corporate globalisation.

This is not to suggest that the terrorists who perpetrated the outrage on September 11 should not be hunted down and brought to book. They must be. But is war the best way to track them down? Will burning the haystack find you the needle? Or will it escalate the anger and make the world a living hell for all of us?

At the end of the day, how many people can you spy on, how many bank accounts can you freeze, how many conversations can you eavesdrop on, how many e-mails can you intercept, how many letters can you open, how many phones can you tap? Even before September 11, the CIA had accumulated more information than is humanly possible to process. (Sometimes, too much data can actually hinder intelligence—small wonder the US spy satellites completely missed the preparation that preceded India's nuclear tests in 1998.)

The sheer scale of the surveillance will become a logistical, ethical and civil rights nightmare. It will drive everybody clean crazy. And freedom—that precious, precious thing—will be the first casualty. It's already hurt and haemorrhaging dangerously.

Governments across the world are cynically using the prevailing paranoia to promote their own interests. All kinds of unpredictable political forces are being unleashed. In India, for instance, members of the All India People's Resistance Forum, who were distributing anti-war and anti-US pamphlets in Delhi, have been jailed. Even the printer of the leaflets was arrested. The right-wing government (while it shelters Hindu extremists groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal) has banned the Students' Islamic Movement of India and is trying to revive an anti-terrorist act which had been withdrawn after the Human Rights Commission reported that it had been more abused than used. Millions of Indian citizens are Muslim. Can anything be gained by alienating them?

Every day that the war goes on, raging emotions are being let loose into the world. The international press has little or no independent access to the war zone. In any case, mainstream media, particularly in the US, has more or less rolled over, allowing itself to be tickled on the stomach with press hand-outs from militarymen and government officials. Afghan radio stations have been destroyed by the bombing. The Taliban has always been deeply suspicious of the Press. In the propaganda war, there is no accurate estimate of how many people have been killed, or how much destruction has taken place. In the absence of reliable information, wild rumours spread.

Put your ear to the ground in this part of the world, and you can hear the thrumming, the deadly drumbeat of burgeoning anger. Please. Please, stop the war now. Enough people have died. The smart missiles are just not smart enough. They're blowing up whole warehouses of suppressed fury.

President George Bush recently boasted: "When I take action, I'm not going to fire a \$2 million missile at a \$10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt. It's going to be decisive." President Bush should know



that there are no targets in Afghanistan that will give his missiles their money's worth. Perhaps, if only to balance his books, he should develop some cheaper missiles to use on cheaper targets and cheaper lives in the poor countries of the world. But then, that may not make good business sense to the Coalition's weapons manufacturers. It wouldn't make any sense at all, for example, to the Carlyle Group—described by the Industry Standard as 'the world's largest private equity firm', with \$12 billion under management. Carlyle invests in the defence sector and makes its money from military conflicts and weapons spending.

Carlyle is run by men with impeccable credentials. Former US defence secretary Frank Carlucci is Carlyle's chairman and managing director (he was a college roommate of Donald Rumsfeld's). Carlyle's other partners include former US secretary of state James A. Baker III, George Soros, Fred Malek (George Bush Sr's campaign manager). An American paper—the Baltimore Chronicle and Sentinel—says that former President George Bush Sr is reported to be seeking investments for the Carlyle Group from Asian markets. He is reportedly paid not inconsiderable sums of money to make 'presentations' to potential government- clients.

Ho Hum. As the tired saying goes, it's all in the family.

Then there's that other branch of traditional family business—oil. Remember, President George Bush (Jr) and Vice-President Dick Cheney both made their fortunes working in the US oil industry.

Turkmenistan, which borders the northwest of Afghanistan, holds the world's third largest gas reserves and an estimated six billion barrels of oil reserves. Enough, experts say, to meet American energy needs for the next 30 years (or a developing country's energy requirements for a couple of centuries.) America has always viewed oil as a security consideration, and protected it by any means it deems necessary. Few of us doubt that its military presence in the Gulf has little to do with its concern for human rights and almost entirely to do with its strategic interest in oil.

Oil and gas from the Caspian region currently moves northward to European markets. Geographically and politically, Iran and Russia are major impediments to American interests. In 1998, Dick Cheney—then CEO of Halliburton, a major player in the oil industry—said: "I can't think of a time when we've had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian. It's almost as if the opportunities have arisen overnight." True enough.

For some years now, an American oil giant called Unocal has been negotiating with the Taliban for permission to construct an oil pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and out to the Arabian Sea. From here, Unocal hopes to access the lucrative 'emerging markets' in South and Southeast Asia. In December 1997, a delegation of Taliban mullahs travelled to America and even met US State Department officials and Unocal executives in Houston. At that time the Taliban's taste for public executions and its treatment of Afghan women were not made out to be the crimes against humanity that they are now. Over the next six months, pressure from hundreds of outraged American feminist groups was brought to bear on the Clinton administration. Fortunately, they managed to scuttle the deal. And now comes the US oil industry's big chance.

In America, the arms industry, the oil industry, the major media networks, and, indeed, US foreign policy, are all controlled by the same business combines. Therefore, it would be foolish to expect this talk of guns and oil and defence deals to get any real play in the media. In any case, to a distraught, confused people whose pride has just been wounded, whose loved ones have been tragically killed, whose anger is fresh and sharp, the inanities about the 'Clash of Civilisations' and the 'Good vs Evil' discourse home in unerringly. They are cynically doled out by government spokesmen like a daily dose of vitamins or anti-depressants. Regular medication ensures that mainland America continues to remain the enigma it has always been—a curiously insular people, administered by a pathologically meddling, promiscuous government.

And what of the rest of us, the numb recipients of this onslaught of what we know to be preposterous propaganda? The daily consumers of the lies and brutality smeared in peanut butter and strawberry jam being air-dropped into our minds just like those yellow food packets. Shall we look away and eat because we're hungry, or shall we stare unblinking at the grim theatre unfolding in Afghanistan until we retch collectively and say, in one voice, that we have had enough?

As the first year of the new millennium rushes to a close, one wonders—have we forfeited our right to dream? Will we ever be able to re-imagine beauty? Will it be possible ever again to watch the slow, amazed blink of a new-born gecko in the sun, or whisper back to the marmot who has just whispered in your ear— without thinking of the World Trade Center and Afghanistan?

## Shall We Leave It to the Experts?

**"I am, apparently, a writer-activist. (Like a sofa-bed.) Why does that make me flinch?" asks Arundhati Roy. Because it suggests writers are too effete to come up with the clarity for debate. "Go and play with your toys, leave the real world to us," goes the taunt. Free Speech: Your Take**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow we manage to progress and regress simultaneously. As a nation we age by pushing outwards from the middle—adding a few centuries on to either end of our extraordinary CV. We greatness like the maturing head of a hammer-headed shark with eyes looking in diametrically opposite directions. On the one hand, we hear that European countries are considering changing their immigration laws in order to import Indian software engineers. On the other, that a Naga sadhu at the Kumbh Mela towed the district collector's car with his penis while the officer sat in it solemnly with his wife and children.

As Indian citizens, we subsist on a regular diet of caste massacres and nuclear tests, mosque breaking and fashion shows, church burning and expanding cellphone networks, bonded labour and the digital revolution, female infanticide and the Nasdaq crash, husbands who continue to burn their wives for dowry, and our delectable stockpile of Miss Worlds. I don't mean to put a simplistic value judgement on this peculiar form of 'progress' by suggesting that Modern is Good and Traditional is Bad—or vice versa. What's hard to reconcile oneself to, both personally and politically, is the schizophrenic nature of it. That applies not just to the ancient/modern conundrum, but to the utter illogic of what appears to be the current national enterprise. In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road-gangs of emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles.

It's as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded on to two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears. A cursory survey that tallies the caste, class and religion of who gets to be in which convoy would make a good Lazy Person's Concise Guide to the History of India. For some of us, life in India is like being suspended between two of the trucks, one in each convoy, and being neatly dismembered as they move apart, not bodily, but emotionally and intellectually.

Of course, India is a micro-cosm of the world. Of course, versions of what happens here happen everywhere. Of course, if you're willing to look, the parallels are easy to find. The difference in India is only in the scale, the magnitude, and the sheer proximity of the disparity. In India, your face is slammed right up against it. To address it, to deal with it, to not deal with it, to try and understand it, to insist on not understanding it, to simply survive it—on a daily, hourly basis—is a fine art. Either an art or a form of insular, inward-looking insanity. Or both.

To be a writer—a supposedly 'famous' writer—in a country where millions of people are illiterate is a dubious honour. To be a writer in a country that gave the world Mahatma Gandhi, that invented the concept of non-violent resistance, and then, half-a-century later, followed that up with nuclear tests is a ferocious burden. (Though no more ferocious a burden, it has to be said, than being a writer in the United States, a country that has amassed enough nuclear weapons to destroy the earth several times over.) To be a writer in a country where something akin to an undeclared civil war is being waged on its citizens in the name of 'development' is an onerous responsibility. When it comes to writers and writing, I use words like 'onerous' and 'responsibility' with a heavy heart and not a small degree of sadness.

What is the role of writers and artists in society? Do they have a definable role? Can it be fixed, described, characterised in any definite way? Should it be?

Personally, I can think of few things more terrifying than if writers and artists were charged with an immutable charter of duties and responsibilities that they had to live and work by. Imagine, if there was this little black book—a sort of Approved Guide to Good Writing—that said: 'All writers shall be

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politically conscious and sexually moral', or, 'All writers should believe in god, globalisation, and the joys of family life...'

Rule One for a writer, as far as I'm concerned, is that There Are No Rules. And Rule Two (since Rule One was made to be broken) is that There Are No Excuses for Bad Art. Painters, writers, singers, actors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians—they are meant to fly, to push at the frontiers, to worry the edges of the human imagination, to conjure beauty from the most unexpected things, to find magic in places where others never thought to look. If you limit the trajectory of their flight, if you weight their wings with society's existing notions of morality and responsibility, if you truss them up with preconceived values, you subvert their endeavour.

A good or great writer may refuse to accept any responsibility or morality that society wishes to impose on her. Yet, the best and greatest of them know that if they abuse this hard-won freedom, it can only lead to bad art. There is an intricate web of morality, rigour and responsibility that art, that writing itself, imposes on a writer. It is singular, individual, but nevertheless it's there. At its best, it's an exquisite bond between the artist and the medium. At its acceptable end, a sort of sensible cooperation. At its worst, it's a relationship of disrespect and exploitation.

The absence of external rules complicates things. There's a very thin line that separates the strong, true, bright bird of the imagination from the synthetic, noisy bauble. Where is that line? How do you recognise it? How do you know you've crossed it? At the risk of sounding esoteric and arcane, I'm tempted to say that you just know. The fact is that nobody—no reader, no reviewer, agent, publisher, colleague, friend or enemy—can tell for sure. A writer just has to ask herself that question and answer it as honestly as possible. The thing about this 'line' is that once you learn to recognise it, once you see it, it's impossible to ignore. You have no choice but to live with it, to follow it through. You have to bear with all its complexities, contradictions and demands. And that's not always easy. It doesn't always lead to compliments and standing ovations. It can lead you to the strangest, wildest places. In the midst of war, for instance, you could find yourself fascinated by the mating rituals of a purple sunbird, or the secret life of captive goldfish, or an old aunt's descent into madness. And nobody can say that there isn't truth and art and beauty in that. Or, on the contrary, in the midst of putative peace, you could, like me, be unfortunate enough to stumble on a silent war. The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable.

Today, perhaps more so than in any other era in history, the writer's right to free speech is guarded and defended by the civil societies and state establishments of the most powerful countries in the world. Any overt attempt to silence or muffle a voice is met with furious opposition. The writer is embraced and protected. This is a wonderful thing. The writer, the actor, the musician, the filmmaker—they have become radiant jewels in the crown of modern civilisation. The artist, I imagine, is finally as free as he or she will ever be. Never before have so many writers had their books published. (And now, of course, we have the Internet.) Never before have we been more commercially viable. We live and prosper in the heart of the marketplace. True, for every so-called success there are hundreds who 'fail'. True, there are a myriad art forms, both folk and classical, myriad languages, myriad cultural and artistic traditions that are being crushed and cast aside in the stampede to the big bumper sale in Wonderland. Still, there have never been more writers, singers, actors, painters who have become influential, wealthy superstars. And they, the successful ones, spawn a million imitators, they become the torch-bearers, their work becomes the benchmark for what art is, or ought to be.

Nowadays in India, the scene is almost farcical. Following the recent commercial success of some Indian authors, western publishers are desperately prospecting for the next big Indo-Anglian work of fiction. They're doing everything short of interviewing English-speaking Indians for the post of 'writer'. Ambitious middle-class parents who, a few years ago, would only settle for a future in engineering, medicine or management for their children, now hopefully send them to creative-writing schools. People like myself are constantly petitioned by computer companies, watch manufacturers, even media magnates, to endorse their products. A boutique owner in Bombay once asked me if he could 'display' my book (as though it was an accessory, a bracelet or a pair of earrings) while he filmed me shopping for clothes! Jhumpa Lahiri, the American writer of Indian origin who won the Pulitzer Prize, came to India recently to have a traditional Bengali wedding. The wedding was reported on the front page of national newspapers.

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Now where does all this lead us? Is it just harmless nonsense, best ignored? How does all this ardent wooing affect our art? What kind of lenses does it put in our spectacles? How far does it remove us from the world around us?

There is very real danger that this neoteric seduction can shut us up far more effectively than violence and repression ever could. We have free speech. Maybe. But do we have Really Free Speech? If what we have to say doesn't 'sell', will we still say it? Can we? Or is everybody looking for Things That Sell to say? Could writers end up playing the role of palace entertainers? Or the subtle twenty-first-century version of court eunuchs attending to the pleasures of our incumbent CEOs? You know—naughty, but nice. Risque perhaps, but not risky.

It has been some years now since my first, and so far only, novel, *The God of Small Things*, was published. In the early days, I used to be described—introduced—as the author of an almost freakishly 'successful' (if I may use so vulgar a term) first book. Nowadays I'm introduced as something of a freak myself. I am, apparently, what is known in twenty-first century vernacular as a 'writer-activist'. (Like a sofa-bed.)

Why am I called a 'writer-activist' and why—even when it's used approvingly, admiringly—does that term make me flinch? I'm called a writer-activist because after writing *The God of Small Things* I wrote three political essays: *The End of Imagination* about India's nuclear tests, *The Greater Common Good* about big dams and the 'development' debate, and *Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin* about the privatisation and corporatisation of essential infrastructure like water and electricity. Apart from the building of the temple in Ayodhya, these also currently happen to be the major preoccupations of the Indian government.

Now, I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays. True, the essays are works of non-fiction, but since when did writers forgo the right to write non-fiction?

My thesis is that I've been saddled with this double-barrelled appellation, this awful professional label, not because my work is political, but because in my essays, I take sides. I take a position. I have a point of view. What's worse, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position and what's even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position. For a writer of the 21st century, that's considered a pretty uncool, unsophisticated thing to do. It skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues—a breed of people that the world has learned (quite rightly) to mistrust. I'm aware of this. I'm all for being circumspect. I'm all for discretion, prudence, tentativeness, subtlety, ambiguity, complexity... I love the unanswered question, the unresolved story, the unclimbed mountain, the tender shard of an incomplete dream. Most of the time.

But is it mandatory for a writer to be ambiguous about everything? Isn't it true that there have been fearful episodes in human history when prudence and discretion would have just been euphemisms for pusillanimity? When caution was actually cowardice? When sophistication was disguised decadence? When circumspection was really a kind of espousal?

Isn't it true, or at least theoretically possible, that there are times in the life of a people or a nation when the political climate demands that we—even the most sophisticated of us—overtly take sides? I believe that such times are upon us. And I believe that in the coming years, intellectuals and artists will be called upon to take sides, and this time, unlike the struggle for Independence, we won't have the luxury of fighting a 'colonising enemy'. We'll be fighting ourselves.

We will be forced to ask ourselves some very uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our 'democratic institutions', the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community.

Fifty years after Independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the 'cultural insult'. As citizens, we're still caught up in the business of 'disproving' the white world's definition of us. Intellectually and emotionally, we have just begun to grapple with communal and caste politics that threaten to tear our society apart. But in the meanwhile something new looms on our horizon.

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It's not war, it's not genocide, it's not ethnic cleansing, it's not a famine or an epidemic. On the face of it, it's just ordinary, day-to-day business. It lacks the drama, the large format, epic magnificence of war or genocide. It's dull in comparison. It makes bad TV. It has to do with boring things like water supply, electricity, irrigation. But it also has to do with a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has few parallels in history. You may have guessed by now that I'm talking about the modern version of corporate globalisation.

What is globalisation? Who is it for? What is it going to do to a country like India in which social inequality has been institutionalised in the caste system for centuries? A country in which hundreds of millions of people live in rural areas. In which 80 per cent of the landholdings are small farms. In which almost half the population cannot read or write.

Is the corporatisation and globalisation of agriculture, water supply, electricity and essential commodities going to pull India out of the stagnant morass of poverty, illiteracy and religious bigotry? Is the dismantling and auctioning off of elaborate public sector infrastructure, developed with public money over the last 50 years, really the way forward? Is corporate globalisation going to close the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged, between the upper castes and the lower castes, between the educated and the illiterate? Or is it going to give those who already have a centuries-old head start a friendly helping hand?

Is corporate globalisation about 'the eradication of world poverty' or is it a mutant variety of colonialism, remote controlled and digitally operated? These are huge, contentious questions. The answers vary depending on whether they come from the villages and fields of rural India, from the slums and shantytowns of urban India, from the living rooms of the burgeoning middle class or from the boardrooms of big business houses.

Today, India produces more milk, more sugar, more foodgrain than ever before. Government warehouses are overflowing with 42 million tonnes of foodgrain. That's almost a quarter of the total annual foodgrain produce. Farmers with too much grain on their hands were driven to despair. In regions that wielded enough political clout, the government went on a buying spree, purchasing more grain than it could possibly store or use. And yet, under the terms of its agreement with the World Trade Organisation, the Indian government had to lift import restrictions on 1,400 commodities, including milk, grain, sugar, cotton, tea, coffee, rubber and palm oil. This, despite the fact that there was a glut of these products in the market. While grain rots in government warehouses, hundreds of millions of Indian citizens live below the poverty line and do not have the means to eat a square meal a day. Starvation deaths (dressed up as measles and food-poisoning) are being reported from several parts of the country.

From 1 April, 2001—April Fools Day—once again according to the terms of its agreement with the WTO, the Indian government is contracted to drop its quantitative import restrictions. The Indian market is already flooded with cheaper imports. Though India is technically free to export its agricultural produce, in practice most of it cannot be exported because it doesn't meet the first world's 'environmental standards'. (Western consumers don't eat bruised mangoes, or bananas with mosquito bites, or rice with a few weevils in it. In India we don't mind the odd mosquito-bite or the occasional weevil.)

Developed countries like the US, whose hugely subsidised farm industry engages only 2 to 3 per cent of its total population, are using the WTO to pressurise countries like India to drop agricultural subsidies in order to make the market 'competitive'. Huge, mechanised corporate enterprises working thousands of acres of farmland want to compete with impoverished subsistence farmers who own only a couple of acres.

In effect, India's rural economy is being garrotted. Farmers who produce too much are in distress, farmers who produce too little are in distress and landless agricultural labour is out of work as big estates and farms lay off their workers. They're all flocking to the cities in search of employment.

'Trade not Aid' is the rallying cry of the headmen of the new Global Village, headquartered in the shining offices of the WTO. Our British colonisers stepped on to our shores a few centuries ago disguised as traders. We all remember the East India Company. This time around, the coloniser doesn't even need a token white presence in the colonies. The CEOs and their men don't need to go to the trouble of tramping through the tropics risking malaria, diarrhoea, sunstroke and an early death. They don't have to maintain an army or a police force, or worry about insurrections and mutinies. They

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can have their colonies and an easy conscience. 'Creating a good investment climate' is the new euphemism for third world repression. Besides, the responsibility for implementation rests with the local administration.

In India, in order to clear the way for 'development projects', the government is in the process of amending the present Land Acquisition Act (which, ironically, was drafted by the British in the nineteenth century) and making it more draconian than it already is. State governments are preparing to ratify 'anti-terrorist' laws so that those who oppose development projects will be counted as terrorists. They can be held without trial for three years. They can have their lands and cattle seized.

Recently, corporate globalisation has come in for some criticism. What happened in Seattle and Prague will go down in history. Each time the WTO or the World Economic Forum wants to have a meeting, they have to barricade themselves with thousands of heavily armed police. Still, all its admirers, from Bill Clinton, Kofi Annan and A.B. Vajpayee to the cheering brokers in the stalls, continue to say the same lofty things. If we have the right institutions of governance in place—effective courts, good laws, honest politicians, participatory democracy, a transparent administration that respects human rights and gives people a say in decisions that affect their lives—then the globalisation project will work for the poor, as well. They call this 'globalisation with a human face'.

The point is, if all this was in place, almost anything would succeed: socialism, capitalism, you name it. Everything works in Paradise, a communist State as well as a military dictatorship! But in an imperfect world, is it corporate globalisation that's going to bring us all this bounty? Is that what's happening in India now that it's on the fast track to the free market? Does any one thing on that lofty list apply to life in India today? Are state institutions transparent? Have people had a say? Have they even been informed—let alone consulted—about decisions that vitally affect their lives? And are Mr Clinton (or now Mr Bush) and Mr Vajpayee doing everything in their power to see that the 'right institutions of governance' are in place? Or are they involved in exactly the opposite enterprise? Do they mean something else altogether when they talk of the 'right institutions of governance'?

In November 2000, the World Commission on Dams report was released by Nelson Mandela. It is the first time ever that any serious attempt has been made to study the performance of big dams. For those of us who are opposed to big dams, the WCD report is a contested document with many unacceptable, wishy-washy clauses. However, at least it attempted to address the serious social and ecological issues that have been raised and debated over the years. At least, it attempted to set out guidelines for those governments and agencies engaged in building dams. At least, it attempted to estimate how many people have been displaced by big dams.

India is the only country in the world that refused permission to the World Commission on Dams to hold a public hearing. The government of Gujarat, the state in which the Sardar Sarovar dam is being built, threatened members of the Commission with arrest.

In February 2001, the Indian government formally rejected the World Commission on Dams report. Does this sound like a transparent, accountable, participatory democracy?

Recently, the Supreme Court ordered the closure of 77,000 'polluting and non-conforming' industrial units in Delhi. The order will put 500,000 people out of work. What are these 'industrial units'? Who are these people? They're the millions who have migrated from their villages, some voluntarily, others involuntarily, in search of work. They're the people who aren't supposed to exist, the 'non-citizens' who survive in the folds and wrinkles, the cracks and fissures of the 'official' city. They exist just outside the net of the 'official' urban infrastructure.

Close to 40 per cent of Delhi's population of 12 million—about 5 million people—live in slums and unauthorised colonies. Most of them are not serviced by municipal facilities—no electricity, no water, no sewage systems. About 50,000 people are homeless and sleep on the streets. These 'non-citizens' are employed in what economists rather stuffily call the 'informal sector', the fragile but vibrant parallel economy that both shocks and delights the imagination. They work as hawkers, rickshaw-pullers, garbage recyclers, car-battery rechargers, street tailors, transistor-knob makers, buttonhole stitchers, paper-bag makers, dyers, printers, barbers. These are the 'industrial units' that have been targeted by the Supreme Court. (Fortunately, I haven't had that knock on my door yet, though I'm as non-conforming a unit as the rest of them.)

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The trains that leave Delhi these days carry thousands of people who simply cannot survive in the city. They're returning to the villages they fled in the first place. Millions of others, because they're 'illegal', have become easy meat for the rapacious, bribe-seeking police and predatory government officials. They haven't yet been driven out of the city but now must live in perpetual fear and dread of that happening.

In India, the times are full of talk of the 'free market', reforms, deregulation and the dismantling of the 'licence-raj'—all in the name of encouraging entrepreneurship and discouraging corruption. Yet, when the state obliterates a flourishing market, when it breaks the backs of half-a-million imaginative, resourceful, small-scale entrepreneurs, and delivers millions of others as fodder to the doorstep of the corruption industry, few comment on the irony.

No doubt it's true that the informal sector is polluting and, according to a colonial understanding of urban land use, 'non-conforming'. But then we don't live in a clean, perfect world. What about the fact that 67 per cent of Delhi's pollution comes from motor vehicles? Is it conceivable that the Supreme Court will come up with an act that bans private cars, or limits the number of cars a household can own?

If pollution is indeed the main concern of our courts and government, why is it that they have shown no great enthusiasm for regulating big factories run by major industrialists that have polluted rivers, denuded forests, depleted and poisoned groundwater, and destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of people who depend on these resources for a living? The Grasim factory in Kerala, the Orient Paper Mill in Madhya Pradesh, the noxious 'sunrise belt' industries in Gujarat. The uranium mines in Jaduguda, the aluminum plants in Orissa. And hundreds of others.

This is our in-house version of first world bullying in the global warming debate, i.e., we pollute, you pay.

In circumstances like these, the term 'writer-activist' as a professional description of what I do makes me flinch doubly. First, because it is strategically positioned to diminish both writers and activists. It seeks to reduce the scope, the range, the sweep, of what a writer is and can be. It suggests, somehow, that writers by definition are too effete to come up with the clarity, the explicitness, the reasoning, the passion, the grit, the audacity and, if necessary, the vulgarity, to publicly take a political position. And conversely, it suggests that activists occupy the coarser, cruder end of the intellectual spectrum. That activists are by profession 'position-takers' and therefore lack complexity and intellectual sophistication, and are instead fuelled by a crude, simple-minded, one-sided understanding of things. But the more fundamental problem I have with the term is that this attempt to 'professionalise' protest has the effect of containing the problem and suggesting that it's up to the professionals—activists and writer-activists—to deal with it.

The fact is that what's happening today is not a 'problem', and the issues that some of us are raising are not 'causes'. They are huge political and social upheavals that are convulsing the world. One is not involved by virtue of being a writer or activist. One is involved because one is a human being. Writing about it just happens to be the most effective thing a writer can do. It is vital to de-professionalise the public debate on matters that vitally affect the lives of ordinary people. It's time to snatch our futures back from the 'experts'. Time to ask, in ordinary language, the public question and to demand in ordinary language, the public answer.

Frankly, however trenchantly, angrily, persuasively or poetically the case is made out, at the end of the day, a writer is a citizen, only one of many, who is demanding public information, asking for a public explanation.

Speaking for myself, I have no personal or ideological axe to grind. I have no professional stakes to protect. I'm prepared to be persuaded. I'm prepared to change my mind. But instead of an argument, or an explanation, or a disputing of facts, one gets insults, invective and the Experts' Anthem: You don't understand and it's too complicated to explain. The subtext, of course, is: don't worry your little head about it. Go and play with your toys. Leave the real world to us.

It's the old Brahminical instinct. Colonise knowledge, build four walls around it, and use it to your advantage. The Manusmriti, the Vedic Hindu code of conduct, says that if a Dalit overhears a shloka or any part of a sacred text, he must have molten lead poured into his ear. It isn't a coincidence that while India is poised to take her place at the forefront of the Information Revolution, millions of her

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citizens are illiterate. (It would be interesting, as an exercise, to find out how many 'experts'—scholars, professionals, consultants—in India are actually Brahmins or from the upper castes.)

If you're one of the lucky people with a berth booked on the small convoy, then Leaving it to the Experts is, or can be, a mutually beneficial proposition both for the expert and yourself. It's a convenient way of easing your conscience, shrugging off your own role in the circuitry. And it creates a huge professional market for all kinds of 'expertise'. There's a whole ugly universe waiting to be explored there. This is not at all to suggest that all consultants are racketeers or that expertise is unnecessary, but you've heard the saying— There's a lot of money in poverty. There are plenty of ethical questions to be asked of those who make a professional living off their expertise in poverty and despair.

For instance, at what point does a scholar stop being a scholar and become a parasite who feeds off despair and dispossession? Does the source of a scholar's funding compromise his or her scholarship? We know, after all, that World Bank studies are the most quoted studies in the world. Is the World Bank a dispassionate observer of the global situation? Are the studies it funds entirely devoid of self-interest?

Take, for example, the international dam industry. It's worth tens of billions of dollars a year. It's bursting with experts and consultants. Given the number of studies, reports, books, PhDs, grants, loans, consultancies, eas—its odd, wouldn't you say, that there is no really reliable estimate of how many people have been displaced by big dams in India? That there is no estimate for exactly what the contribution of big dams has been to overall food production? That there hasn't been an official audit, a comprehensive, honest, thoughtful, post-project evaluation of a single big dam to see whether or not it has achieved what it set out to achieve? Whether or not the costs were justified, or even what the costs actually were?

What are the experts up to?

On the whole, in India, the prognosis is—to put it mildly—Not Good. And yet, one cannot help but marvel at the fantastic range and depth and wisdom of the hundreds of people's resistance movements all over the country. They're being beaten down, but they simply refuse to lie down and die.

Their political ideologies and battle strategies span the range. We have the maverick Malayali professor who petitions the President every day against the communalisation of history texts; Sunderlal Bahuguna, who risks his life on indefinite hunger strikes protesting the Tehri dam; the Adivasis in Jaduguda protesting uranium mining on their lands; the Koel Karo Sangathan resisting a mega-dam project in Jharkhand; the awe-inspiring Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha; the relentlessly dogged Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan; the Beej Bachao Andolan in Tehri-Garhwal fighting to save the biodiversity of seeds; and of course, the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

India's redemption lies in the inherent anarchy and fractiousness of its people and its political formations. Even our heel-clicking, boot-stamping Hindu fascists are undisciplined to the point of being chaotic. They can't bring themselves to agree with each other for more than five minutes at a time. Corporatising India is like trying to impose an iron grid on a heaving ocean, forcing it to behave. My guess is that India will not behave. It cannot. It's too old and too clever to be made to jump through the hoops all over again. It's too diverse, too grand, too feral, and—eventually, I hope—too democratic to be lobotomised into believing in one single idea, which is, eventually, what corporate globalisation really is: Life is Profit.

What is happening to the world lies, at the moment, just outside the realm of common human understanding. It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers, the filmmakers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding. Who can translate cash-flow charts and scintillating boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives. Stories about what it's like to lose your home, your land, your job, your dignity, your past, and your future to an invisible force. To someone or something you can't see. You can't hate. You can't even imagine.

It's a new space that's been offered to us today. A new kind of challenge. It offers opportunities for a new kind of art. An art which can make the impalpable palpable, the intangible tangible, the invisible visible and the inevitable evitable. An art which can draw out the incorporeal adversary and make it real. Bring it to book.



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Cynics say that real life is a choice between the failed revolution and the shabby deal. I don't know...maybe they're right. But even they should know that there's no limit to just how shabby that shabby deal can be. What we need to search for and find, what we need to hone and perfect into a magnificent, shining thing, is a new kind of politics. Not the politics of governance, but the politics of resistance. The politics of opposition. The politics of forcing accountability. The politics of joining hands across the world and preventing certain destruction. In the present circumstances, I'd say that the only thing worth globalising is dissent. It's India's best export.

From *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, published by Penguin Books India.

## Contempt Of Court?

**Full text of the [second] affidavit filed by Arundhati Roy in the Supreme Court of India on October 15, 2001, arguing "there has been a misreading and complete misunderstanding of my [first] affidavit in general and of the ... three [impugned] paragraphs [therein] in particular".  
Free Speech: what do you think?**

**ARUNDHATI ROY**

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA ORIGINAL JURISDICTION

In the matter of

CONTEMPT PETITION (CRL) NO. 10 OF 2001

(Suo motu Contempt Proceedings under Rule 3(a) of the Rules to regulate proceedings for Contempt of the Supreme Court 1975 initiated on the basis of Affidavit dated 16.4.2001 filed on 17.4.2001 in Contempt Petition (Crl) No. 2/2001 titled J.R. Parashar and Others Versus Prasant Bhushan and Others.)

Affidavit in Response of the respondent/noticee

I, Arundhati Roy, daughter of Mary Roy, resident of 2A Kautilya Marg, New Delhi 110021, do hereby state and affirm as follows: That I have read and understood the contents of the Contempt Notice issued to me dated 5th September 2001 and my reply to it is as under:

1. The Contempt Notice alleges that three paragraphs in my Affidavit dated 16.4.2001 are grossly contemptuous, that they attribute improper motives to the Court and therefore amount to Criminal Contempt of the Court as defined under Section 2(c) of the Contempt of Court Act read with Article 129 of the Constitution of India. In this particular instance I understand "Criminal Contempt of the Court" to mean "the publication of any matter or the doing of any other act whatsoever which scandalizes or tends to scandalize or lowers or tends to lower the authority of, any court."

The allegedly offending paragraphs from my affidavit are reproduced below:

"On the grounds that judges of the Supreme Court were too busy, the Chief Justice of India refused to allow a sitting judge to head the judicial enquiry into the Tehelka scandal, even though it involves matters of national security and corruption in the highest places.

"Yet, when it comes to an absurd, despicable, entirely unsubstantiated petition in which all the three respondents happen to be people who have publicly - though in markedly different ways - questioned the policies of the government and severely criticized a recent judgement of the Supreme Court, the Court displays a disturbing willingness to issue notice.

"It indicates a disquieting inclination on the part of the court to silence criticism and muzzle dissent, to harass and intimidate those who disagree with it. By entertaining a petition based on an FIR that even a local police station does not see fit to act upon, the Supreme Court is doing its own reputation and credibility considerable harm."

2. I submit that there has been a misreading and complete misunderstanding of my affidavit in general and of the above three paragraphs in particular. I have not attributed any improper motive to any particular judge. I have not said anything that scandalizes or tends to scandalize or lowers or tends to lower the authority of the Court. I have not asserted as a fact that the Court wishes to muzzle dissent. I have said that by admitting a flawed petition against three people who had recently and publicly criticised the Supreme Court judgement in the Sardar Sarovar case, the Court creates this impression. Therefore, I said, by its own action, the Court is harming its credibility and reputation. In a democracy, it is a citizen's duty to point this out.

3. If Supreme Court judges are too busy to be spared to head a judicial enquiry into a matter concerning national security and corruption in the highest places, it is fair and valid to assume that they are busy with matters of equal, if not greater importance.

4. It is for this reason that I was distressed that an already overburdened Court had time to entertain an obviously false and flawed petition such as the one filed by J.R Parashar and others (Crl No. 2/2001 titled J.R. Parashar and Others Versus Prasant Bhushan and Others). In our affidavits in reply, Medha Patkar, Prashant Bhushan, as well as I myself pointed out the reasons why, in our opinion, the petition was false, contained multiple flaws, was a deliberate attempt to mislead the Court and did not have the approval of the Attorney General which is mandatory in a Contempt of Court case.

5. Subsequently the Court itself in its order dated August 28th 2001, while dismissing the petition, said that it violated "almost every one of the Rules framed by this Court" and was "shabbily drafted, procedurally grossly defective."

6. The order also says "Apart from the defective nature of the petition, the unexplained reluctance on the part of the four petitioners to affirm an affidavit verifying the facts contained in the petition, the failure to even attempt to obtain the consent of the Solicitor General and most importantly the refusal of the police station to record an FIR on the basis of the complaint lodged by the petitioner No.1 are telling circumstances against the case in the petition. Admittedly, the police personnel were present at the time of the incident. Their refusal to record the FIR on the petition's complaint is, therefore, significant."

7. Addressing the issue of why such a petition was admitted by the Court in the first place, the order says: "When a matter is listed before the Court, the Court assumes that the formalities in connection with the filing have been scrutinized by the Registry of this Court that the proper procedure has been followed as it is the duty of the Registry to scrutinise the petition to see whether it is in order before placing it before the Court for consideration. There is no occasion for this Court to assume the task of the Registry before considering the merits of each matter. Had our attention been drawn to the procedural defects, we would have had no hesitation in rejecting the application in limine on this ground alone." The Court appears to be as - if not more - outraged than the Respondents at the nature of the petition and the grossly defective procedure by which it came to be admitted to the highest court in the land.

8. As an ordinary citizen, I cannot and could not have been expected to make a distinction between the Registry and the Court. In my eyes, the Court is responsible for the functioning of its Registry. Together they decide the prioritization of judicial resources, together they decide which petitions are admitted and which are not. For a common citizen, the Registry of the Supreme Court is the threshold to Justice itself. If citizens cannot have faith in the proper functioning of the Registry, it is bound to undermine their faith in the Court itself. Given the circumstances, it seems perfectly justifiable for someone in my position to wonder why such an obviously defective petition had been admitted by the Court. It seemed perfectly appropriate to air my view that in this particular instance, the Court, by allowing certain citizens to grossly abuse its process in this way, creates the disturbing impression that there is an inclination on the part of the Court to silence criticism and muzzle dissent. This does not, and was not meant to impute motives to any particular judges. It does not, nor was it meant to undermine the dignity of the Court. I was simply stating the honest impression that had formed in my mind.

9. Issuing a Criminal Contempt Notice may be a routine, everyday matter for the Court. However, for an ordinary citizen who receives one, it involves considerable travail and humiliation. To begin with, one has to engage lawyers and spend a great deal of time briefing them, and drafting affidavits. Hiring lawyers also involves a major expense. For a working person, being asked to schedule one's entire life around enforced court appearances, as though one is a common criminal, is humiliating and damaging to one's professional life. It is therefore incumbent on the Court to see that a petition on the basis of which Notice is issued, passes at least a minimum credibility test.

10. Other than the facts pertaining to the petition (Crl No. 2/2001 titled J.R. Parashar and Others Versus Prasant Bhushan and Others), the manner in which it was admitted, and the travails that receiving a Contempt Notice from the Supreme Court of India entails, there were some other salient facts present in my mind when I filed my affidavit dated 16.4.2001 which will also explain the reasons for writing what I did.

## Arundhati Roy – Contempt of Court -

11. In May 1999, my essay titled "The Greater Common Good" was published in Outlook and Frontline magazines. On 15th October 1999, the Supreme Court made the following remarks against me: "Judicial process and institution cannot be permitted to be scandalized or subjected to contumacious violation in such a blatant manner in which it has been done by her.... Vicious stultification and vulgar debunking cannot be permitted to pollute the stream of justice.... We are unhappy at the way in which the leaders of the NBA and Ms Arundhati Roy have attempted to undermine the dignity of the court. We expected better behaviour from them."

The order also said "Whatever may be the motive of Ms Arundhati Roy, it is quite obvious that she decided to use her literary fame by misinforming the public and projecting in a totally incorrect manner how the proceeding relating to Resettlement and Rehabilitation had shaped in the Court...."

12. I was not a party to the case on the Sardar Sarovar Project. The order was passed without giving me an opportunity to be heard and was therefore in violation of the Principles of Natural Justice.

13. It is certainly true that I had (and continue to have) a different opinion from that contained in the majority - and therefore operative - Judgement on the Sardar Sarovar issue. But so do millions of people in the world, as did one of the Judges on that particular bench who wrote an admirable, dissenting judgement. "Vulgar debunking" and "vicious stultification" are strong words indeed to describe a difference of opinion.

14. The Greater Common Good has been published and reprinted in several countries and several languages across the world. Each fact and figure has been backed up with notes and references and maps. So far no one has pointed out a single factual error in the essay, nor have I been made aware of any instance of deliberate 'misinformation'. It was unjustified on the part of the court to suggest that I deliberately 'decided' to use my 'literary fame' to misinform the public. A baseless comment like this does not behove the august offices of the Apex Court.

15. This incident contributed in no small measure to the impression that I stated in my affidavit.

16. A person can perhaps be forced under duress to withdraw a statement, or apologize for stating an opinion. However, a person cannot be coerced into changing his or her mind. That can only happen through persuasion. The impression I had of the Court's actions in this case would have been corrected, and in fact, completely dispelled had the Court done all or any of the following things:

- a. Dismissed the petition at the initial stage, without issuing notice.
- b. Ordered an enquiry into the functioning of the Registry to establish how such a 'procedural lapse' could have taken place.
- c. Taken action against the Petitioners for filing a false case and deliberately attempting to mislead the Court.

17. Sadly, the events that occurred subsequent to the filing of my affidavit have done nothing to dispel an already unfortunate impression that has been created. The events are:

- a. At each hearing, the presence of a large police force ensured that no members of the public were allowed into what is supposed to be a public courtroom.
- b. At the hearing on 2nd August 2001, one of the petitioners, Shri R.K. Virmani, while attempting to avoid answering a question posed by one of the judges, stood up and shouted that he had lost faith in the sitting Bench and that he wanted the judges changed. This was a clear case of imputing improper motives and committing gross Contempt in the face of the Court. No action was taken against him.
- c. Instead, based on a misreading of my affidavit, a Notice for Criminal Contempt of Court was issued to me on 5th September 2001.
- d. A Press Report (Frontline September 28th 2001) by V.Venkatesan along with editorial inputs from Frontline's editor N.Ram, reveals that the Registry had indeed refused to list the petition before the Court in view of its multiple flaws. The article says that the Attorney General had been approached and that he had declined to deal with the matter. It goes on to say that the Petitioners then requested the Court to take suo motu action which the Court did not do. Finally, and inexplicably, without meeting

any of the formal requirements, without passing even a minimal test of credibility, the petition was admitted and notice was issued directing the Respondents to appear in person before the Court.

If these facts are correct, they raise further questions about how this petition came to be admitted to the Supreme Court.

18. I do not believe that the criticism of the Court or its process by an individual, whoever that individual might be, can possibly lower the dignity of an institution as powerful and venerable as the Supreme Court of India. If the criticism is random and unfounded, it will automatically rebound on the reputation and credibility of the individual who leveled it. If, on the other hand, the criticism is substantial or valid, the Court cannot hope to restore its dignity by punishing or silencing the critic. Indeed, doing so will have the opposite effect. The dignity, the authority and the reputation of the Court depend entirely on the conduct of its judges and the quality of their judgements. The standing of an institution whose reputation has been built up on the basis of actions and judgements over more than half a century cannot be undermined by criticism from an individual.

19. It has always been accepted that the judgements and actions of the courts can be subjected to the most severe and trenchant criticism. Any serious jurisprudential analysis of the evolution and development of law would necessarily involve an attempt to understand why the Court has acted in the manner that it has. Highly respected judges and serious academic scholars have always done this kind of analysis of the courts. Books like *The Politics of the Judiciary* by J.A.G. Griffith are learned attempts to understand how the political views of individual judges have altered the course of the interpretation of law. Studies like this would necessarily involve an attempt to understand and discuss the motivation of judges and how this has affected their judgements, and thus, the development of Law. If such discussion is prohibited on pain of contempt it will render the entire analysis of the judiciary completely sterile.

20. Certain interpretations of Section 2(c) of the Contempt of Court Act tend to be inconsistent with the Right to Free Speech. Keeping in mind the reasons mentioned in Para 8 above, in case of a conflict between the Law of Contempt and the Right to Free Speech, the fair and judicious thing for the Court to do would be to err on the side of protecting Free Speech.

With reference to the present case, it is submitted that this Court's allegation that three paragraphs in my affidavit dated 16.4.2001 amount to a criminal offense under Section 2 (c) of the Contempt of Court Act is an incorrect interpretation of the law. Other individuals have made similar if not more trenchant criticisms of the functioning of the Court and have not been found guilty of committing Contempt of Court: During a speech he gave at a meeting of the Bar Council in Hyderabad, Shri P. Shiv Shankar, then Minister of Law, Justice and Company Affairs said that because Judges had an "unconcealed sympathy for the 'haves'" they interpreted the expression "compensation" in the way they did. He went on to say "Anti-social elements i.e.: FERA violators, bride-burners and whole hordes of reactionaries have found their haven in the Supreme Court." A case for Contempt of Court was filed against him. In the order by Justices Sabyasachi Mukherjee and S. Ranganathan J.J, dated April 15th 1988, the Law Minister was absolved of the charge of Contempt of Court.

21. Whimsical interpretations of the same Law leave citizens at the mercy of individual judges. If the three paragraphs of my affidavit dated 16.4.2001 are deemed to be a criminal offense under section 2(c) of the Contempt of Court Act, it will have the chilling effect of gagging the Press and preventing it from reporting on and analysing matters that vitally concern the lives of millions of Indian citizens. This will be an unfortunate blow to one of the most responsible, most robust institutions of Indian democracy.

22. In a democracy, a Free Press is, or ought to be, as cherished an institution as a Fair Judiciary. A democracy must have an arena in which contending ideas and plural, competing and dissenting opinions can be freely voiced. The Free Press is the breathing machine - the lungs - of a democracy. There cannot be a democracy without a Free Press. There cannot be a truly Free Press if every single citizen's Right to Free Speech is not ardently protected, even when it relates to the actions of the Judiciary. The prospect of having to undergo a lengthy and exorbitant process of litigation, and the threat of an eventual prison sentence, will effectively restrain the Press from writing about or analysing the actions of the Judiciary. It will render the Judiciary accountable to no-one but itself. As I have said in my affidavit dated 16.4.2001, if the judiciary removes itself from public scrutiny and accountability, and severs its links with the society that it was set up to serve in the first place, it will mean that yet another pillar of Indian democracy will eventually crumble.

23. In conclusion, may I take the liberty of saying that the process of this trial and all that it entails, is as much, if not more of a punishment than the sentence itself. If the Court sentences a writer to a short spell in prison for the alleged 'crime' of stating a reasonable and honest impression, her mind can float through the bars to freedom. But yoke her to this 'cause' for long enough - these endless meetings with lawyers, this drafting and re-drafting of affidavits, enforced Court appearances that make her feel like a criminal, this fearful study of law books before writing a single line, the apprehension that each new piece of writing will invite more litigation - and perhaps a writer will gradually lose the ability, the spontaneity, and perhaps even the will to write at all.

In my case, I realise that this will come as a relief to many and few will mourn the loss. However, I will mourn the loss of my writing self.

DEPONENT

VERIFICATION: I the deponent above named do hereby verify that the contents of the above affidavit are true to my knowledge and nothing material has been concealed there from. Verified at New Delhi on this the 15th Day of October 2001.

## 'I Stand By What I Have Said'

**Text of the statement read out by Arundhati Roy at a press conference after her release from Tihar jail**

### **ARUNDHATI ROY**

I stand by what I have said in my Affidavit and I have served the sentence which the Supreme Court imposed on me. Anybody who thinks that the punishment for my supposed 'crime' was a symbolic one day in prison and a fine of two thousand rupees, is wrong. The punishment began over a year ago when notice was issued to me to appear personally in Court over a ludicrous charge which the Supreme Court itself held should never have been entertained. In India, everybody knows that as far as the legal system is concerned, the process is part of the punishment.

I spent a night in prison, trying to decide whether to pay the fine or serve out a 3-month sentence instead. Paying the fine does not in any way mean that I have apologized or accepted the judgement. I decided that paying the fine was the correct thing to do, because I have made the point I was trying to make. To take it further would be to make myself into a martyr for a cause that is not mine alone.

It is for India's free Press to fight to patrol the boundaries of its freedom which the law of Contempt, as it stands today, severely restricts and threatens. I hope that battle will be joined. If not - in the course of this last year, I would have fought only for my own dignity, for my own right as an Indian citizen to look the Supreme Court of India in the eye and say, "I insist on the right to comment on the Court and to disagree with it." That would be considerably less than what I hope this fight is all about. It's not perfect, but it'll have to do.

There are parts of the Judgement which would have been deeply reassuring if it weren't for the fact that citizens of India, on a daily basis, have just the opposite experience - "Rule of Law is the basic rule of governance of any civilised, democratic polity... Whoever the person may be, however high he or she is, no one is above the law notwithstanding however powerful and how rich he or she may be". If only! The Judgement goes on to say "after more than half a century of Independence, the Judiciary in the country is under constant threat and being endangered from within and without". If this is true, would the way to deal with it be to do some honest introspection or to silence its critics by exercising the power of Contempt?

Let me remind you of the paragraphs in my Affidavit which were held to constitute criminal contempt of court, that undermined the authority of the Judiciary and brought it into disrepute.

"On the grounds that judges of the Supreme Court were too busy, the Chief Justice of India refused to allow a sitting judge to head the judicial enquiry into the Tehelka scandal, even though it involves matters of national security and corruption in the highest places.

Yet, when it comes to an absurd, despicable, entirely unsubstantiated petition in which all the three respondents happen to be people who have publicly - though in markedly different ways - questioned the policies of the government and severely criticized a recent judgement of the Supreme Court, the Court displays a disturbing willingness to issue notice.

It indicates a disquieting inclination on the part of the court to silence criticism and muzzle dissent, to harass and intimidate those who disagree with it. By entertaining a petition based on an FIR that even a local police station does not see fit to act upon, the Supreme Court is doing its own reputation and credibility considerable harm."

On the 23rd of December 2001, the Chief Justice of India, in an Inaugural Address to a National Legal Workshop in Kerala, said that 20% of the Judges in this country across the board may be corrupt, and that they bring the entire Judiciary into disrepute. But of course this did not constitute Criminal Contempt.

Now let me read you what a former Law Minister said in a public speech some time ago: "The Supreme Court, composed of the elements of the elite class, had their unconcealed sympathy for the

## Arundhati Roy – I Stand By What I Have Said -

Haves i.e. the zamindars---anti-social elements i.e. FERA violators, bride-burners and a whole horde of reactionaries, have found their haven in the Supreme Court."

In this judgement, the Court says that the Law Minister's statement was permissible because "the criticism of the judicial system was made by a person who himself had been the judge of the High Court and was the Minister at the relevant time."

However, they go on to say that "all citizens cannot be permitted to comment upon the conduct of the Courts in the name of fair criticism, which if not checked, would destroy the institution itself".

In other words, it is not just WHAT you say, nor its correctness or justification, but WHO SAYS IT, which determines whether or not it constitutes criminal contempt. In other words, the assertion contained in the beginning of this judgement - namely: "whoever the person may be, however high he or she is, no one is above the law notwithstanding how powerful or how rich he or she might be" - is contradicted by the judgement itself. I wish to reiterate that I believe that the Supreme Court of India is an extremely important institution and has made some enlightened judgements.

For an individual to argue with the Court, does not in any way imply that he or she is undermining the whole institution. On the contrary, it means that he or she has a stake in this society and cares about the role and efficacy of that institution. Today, the Supreme Court makes decisions that affect - for better or for worse - the lives of millions of common citizens. To deny comment and criticism of this institution, on pain of criminal contempt, from all but an exclusive club of 'experts', would, I think, be destructive of the democratic principles on which our constitution is based.

The judiciary in India is possibly the most powerful institution in the country, and as the Chief Justice recently implied, the least accountable. In fact, the only accountability of this institution is that it can be subjected to comment and criticism by citizens in general. If even this right is denied, it would expose the country to the dangers of judicial tyranny.

I was also puzzled by the statement in the judgement that says:

"...showing the magnanimity of Law, by keeping in mind that the respondent is a woman, and hoping that better sense and wisdom shall dawn upon the respondent..."

Surely, women can do without this kind of inverse discrimination.

Lastly, I wish to point out that the Judgement says that I have drifted away "from the path on which she was traversing by contributing to the Art and Literature". I hope this does not mean that on top of everything else, from now on writers will have to look to the Supreme Court of India to define the correct path of Art and Literature.



## Democracy

**Who's she when she's at home?**

**ARUNDHATI ROY**

Also See: Fiddling With Facts As Gujarat Burns

Last night a friend from Baroda called. Weeping. It took her fifteen minutes to tell me what the matter was. It wasn't very complicated. Only that Sayeeda, a friend of hers, had been caught by a mob. Only that her stomach had been ripped open and stuffed with burning rags. Only that after she died, someone carved 'OM' on her forehead.

Precisely which Hindu scripture preaches this?

Our Prime Minister justified this as part of the retaliation by outraged Hindus against Muslim 'terrorists' who burned alive 58 Hindu passengers on the Sabarmati Express in Godhra. Each of those who died that hideous death was someone's brother, someone's mother, someone's child. Of course they were.

Which particular verse in the Quran required that they be roasted alive?

The more the two sides try and call attention to their religious differences by slaughtering each other, the less there is to distinguish them from one another. They worship at the same altar. They're both apostles of the same murderous god, whoever he is. In an atmosphere so vitiated, for anybody, and in particular the Prime Minister, to arbitrarily decree exactly where the cycle started is malevolent and irresponsible.

Right now we're sipping from a poisoned chalice—a flawed democracy laced with religious fascism. Pure arsenic.

What shall we do? What can we do?

We have a ruling party that's haemorrhaging. Its rhetoric against Terrorism, the passing of POTA, the sabre-rattling against Pakistan (with the underlying nuclear threat), the massing of almost a million soldiers on the border on hair-trigger alert, and most dangerous of all, the attempt to communalise and falsify school history text-books—none of this has prevented it from being humiliated in election after election. Even its old party trick—the revival of the Ram mandir plans in Ayodhya—didn't quite work out. Desperate now, it has turned for succour to the state of Gujarat.

Gujarat, the only major state in India to have a BJP government has, for some years, been the petri dish in which Hindu fascism has been fomenting an elaborate political experiment. Last month, the initial results were put on public display.

Within hours of the Godhra outrage, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal put into motion a meticulously planned pogrom against the Muslim community. Officially the number of dead is 800. Independent reports put the figure at well over 2,000. More than a hundred and fifty thousand people, driven from their homes, now live in refugee camps. Women were stripped, gang-raped, parents were bludgeoned to death in front of their children. Two hundred and forty dargahs and 180 masjids were destroyed—in Ahmedabad the tomb of Wali Gujarati, the founder of the modern Urdu poem, was demolished and paved over in the course of a night. The tomb of the musician Ustad Faiyaz Ali Khan was desecrated and wreathed in burning tyres. Arsonists burned and looted shops, homes, hotels, textiles mills, buses and private cars. Hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs.

[Please see Arundhati Roy's letter published in Outlook dated May 27, 2002: To the Jaffri Family, An Apology.] A mob surrounded the house of former Congress MP Iqbal Ehsan Jaffri. His phone calls to the Director-General of Police, the Police Commissioner, the Chief Secretary, the Additional Chief Secretary (Home) were ignored. The mobile police vans around his house did not intervene. The mob broke into the house. They stripped his daughters and burned them alive. Then they beheaded Ehsan Jaffri and dismembered him. Of course it's only a coincidence that Jaffri was a trenchant critic of

Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, during his campaign for the Rajkot Assembly by-election in February.

Across Gujarat, thousands of people made up the mobs. They were armed with petrol bombs, guns, knives, swords and tridents. Apart from the VHP and Bajrang Dal's usual lumpen constituency, Dalits and Adivasis took part in the orgy. Middle-class people participated in the looting. (On one memorable occasion a family arrived in a Mitsubishi Lancer.) The leaders of the mob had computer-generated cadastral lists marking out Muslim homes, shops, businesses and even partnerships. They had mobile phones to coordinate the action. They had trucks loaded with thousands of gas cylinders, hoarded weeks in advance, which they used to blow up Muslim commercial establishments. They had not just police protection and police connivance, but also covering fire.

While Gujarat burned, our Prime Minister was on MTV promoting his new poems. (Reports say cassettes have sold a hundred thousand copies.) It took him more than a month—and two vacations in the hills—to make it to Gujarat. When he did, shadowed by the chilling Mr Modi, he gave a speech at the Shah Alam refugee camp. His mouth moved, he tried to express concern, but no real sound emerged except the mocking of the wind whistling through a burned, bloodied, broken world. Next we knew, he was bobbing around in a golf-cart, striking business deals in Singapore.

The killers still stalk Gujarat's streets. The lynch mob continues to be the arbiter of the routine affairs of daily life: who can live where, who can say what, who can meet who, and where and when. Its mandate is expanding quickly. From religious affairs, it now extends to property disputes, family altercations, the planning and allocation of water resources... (which is why Medha Patkar of the NBA was assaulted). Muslim businesses have been shut down. Muslim people are not served in restaurants. Muslim children are not welcome in schools. Muslim students are too terrified to sit for their exams. Muslim parents live in dread that their infants might forget what they've been told and give themselves away by saying 'Ammi!' or 'Abba!' in public and invite sudden and violent death.

Notice has been given: this is just the beginning.

Is this the Hindu rashtra that we've all been asked to look forward to? Once the Muslims have been "shown their place", will milk and Coca-Cola flow across the land? Once the Ram mandir is built, will there be a shirt on every back and a roti in every belly? Will every tear be wiped from every eye? Can we expect an anniversary celebration next year? Or will there be someone else to hate by then? Alphabetically—Adivasis, Buddhists, Christians, Dalits, Parsis, Sikhs? Those who wear jeans, or speak English, or those who have thick lips, or curly hair? We won't have to wait long. It's started already. Will the established rituals continue? Will people be beheaded, dismembered and urinated upon? Will foetuses be ripped from their mothers' wombs and slaughtered? (What kind of depraved vision can even imagine India without the range and beauty and spectacular anarchy of all these cultures? India would become a tomb and smell like a crematorium.)

No matter who they were, or how they were killed, each person who died in Gujarat in the weeks gone by deserves to be mourned.

There have been hundreds of outraged letters to journals and newspapers asking why the "pseudosecularists" do not condemn the burning of the Sabarmati Express in Godhra with the same degree of outrage with which they condemn the killings in the rest of Gujarat. What they don't seem to understand is that there is a fundamental difference between a pogrom such as the one taking place in Gujarat now, and the burning of the Sabarmati Express in Godhra. We still don't know who exactly was responsible for the carnage in Godhra. The government says (without a shred of evidence) it was an ISI plot. Independent reports say the train was set on fire by an enraged mob. Either way, it was a criminal act. But every independent report says the pogrom against the Muslim community in Gujarat—billed by the government as spontaneous 'retaliation'—has at best been conducted under the benign gaze of the State and, at worst, with active State collusion. Either way the State is criminally culpable. And the State acts in the name of its citizens. So as a citizen, I am forced to acknowledge that I am somehow made complicit in the Gujarat pogrom. It is this that outrages me. And it is this that puts a completely different complexion on the two massacres.

After the Gujarat Massacres, at its convention in Bangalore, the RSS, the moral and cultural guild of the BJP, of which the Prime Minister, the Home Minister and Chief Minister Modi himself are all

members, called upon Muslims to earn the 'goodwill' of the majority community. At the meeting of the national executive of the BJP in Goa, Narendra Modi was greeted as a hero. His smirking offer to resign from the chief minister's post was unanimously turned down. In a recent public speech he compared the events of the last few weeks in Gujarat to Gandhi's Dandi March—both, according to him, significant moments in the Struggle for Freedom.

While the parallels between contemporary India and pre-war Germany are chilling, they're not surprising. (The founders of the RSS have, in their writings, been frank in their admiration for Hitler and his methods.) One difference is that here in India we don't have a Hitler. We have instead, a travelling extravaganza, a mobile symphonic orchestra. The hydra-headed, many-armed Sangh Parivar—with the BJP, the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, each playing a different instrument. Its utter genius lies in its apparent ability to be all things to all people at all times.

The Parivar has an appropriate head for every occasion. An old versifier with rhetoric for every season. A rabble-rousing hardliner for Home Affairs, a suave one for Foreign Affairs, a smooth, English-speaking lawyer to handle TV debates, a cold-blooded creature for a Chief Minister and the Bajrang Dal and the VHP, grassroots workers in charge of the physical labour that goes into the business of genocide. Finally, this many-headed extravaganza has a lizard's tail which drops off when it's in trouble, and grows back again: a specious socialist dressed up as Defence Minister, who it sends on its damage-limitation missions—wars, cyclones, genocides. They trust him to press the right buttons, hit the right note.

The Sangh Parivar speaks in as many tongues as a whole corsage of trishuls.

It can say several contradictory things simultaneously. While one of its heads (the VHP) exhorts millions of its cadres to prepare for the Final Solution, its titular head (the Prime Minister) assures the nation that all citizens, regardless of their religion, will be treated equally. It can ban books and films and burn paintings for 'insulting Indian culture'. Simultaneously, it can mortgage the equivalent of 60 per cent of the entire country's rural development budget as profit to Enron. It contains within itself the full spectrum of political opinion, so what would normally be a public fight between two adversarial political parties, is now just a Family Matter. However acrimonious the quarrel, it's always conducted in public, always resolved amicably, and the audience always goes away satisfied it's got value for money—anger, action, revenge, intrigue, remorse, poetry and plenty of gore. It's our own vernacular version of Full Spectrum Dominance.

But when the chips are down, really down, the squabbling heads quieten, and it becomes chillingly apparent that underneath all the clamour and the noise, a single heart beats. And an unforgiving mind with saffron-saturated tunnel vision works overtime.

There have been pogroms in India before, every kind of pogrom—directed at particular castes, tribes, religious faiths. In 1984, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party presided over the massacre of three thousand Sikhs in Delhi, every bit as macabre as the one in Gujarat. At the time, Rajiv Gandhi, never known for an elegant turn of phrase, said, "When a big tree falls, the ground shakes". In 1985 the Congress swept the polls. On a sympathy wave! Eighteen years have gone by. Nobody has been punished.

Take any politically volatile issue—the nuclear tests, the Babri Masjid, the Tehelka scam, the stirring of the communal cauldron for electoral advantage—and you'll see the Congress Party has been there before. In every case, the Congress sowed the seed and the BJP has swept in to reap the hideous harvest. So in the event that we're called upon to vote, is there a difference between the two? The answer is a faltering but distinct 'yes'. Here's why: It's true that the Congress Party has sinned, and grievously, and for decades together. But it has done by night what the BJP does by day. It has done covertly, stealthily, hypocritically, shamefacedly, what the BJP does with pride. And this is an important difference.

Whipping up communal hatred is part of the mandate of the Sangh Parivar. It has been planned for years. It has been injecting a slow-release poison directly into civil society's bloodstream. Hundreds of RSS shakhas and Saraswati shishu mandirs across the country have been indoctrinating thousands of children and young people, stunting their minds with religious hatred and falsified history. They're no different from, and no less dangerous than, the madrassas all over Pakistan and Afghanistan which spawned the Taliban. In states like Gujarat, the police, the administration, and the political cadres at every level have been systematically penetrated. It has huge popular appeal, which it would be foolish

to underestimate or misunderstand. The whole enterprise has a formidable religious, ideological, political, and administrative underpinning. This kind of power, this kind of reach, can only be achieved with State backing.

Madrassas, the Muslim equivalent of hothouses cultivating religious hatred, try and make up in frenzy and foreign funding, what they lack in State support. They provide the perfect foil for Hindu communalists to dance their dance of mass paranoia and hatred. (In fact they serve that purpose so perfectly, they might just as well be working as a team.)

Under this relentless pressure, what will most likely happen is that the majority of the Muslim community will resign itself to living in ghettos as second-class citizens, in constant fear, with no civil rights and no recourse to justice. What will daily life be like for them? Any little thing, an altercation in a cinema queue or a fracas at a traffic light, could turn lethal. So they will learn to keep very quiet, to accept their lot, to creep around the edges of the society in which they live. Their fear will transmit itself to other minorities. Many, particularly the young, will probably turn to militancy. They will do terrible things. Civil society will be called upon to condemn them. Then President Bush's canon will come back to us: "Either you're with us or with the terrorists."

Those words hang frozen in time like icicles. For years to come, butchers and genocidists will fit their grisly mouths around them ('lip-synch', filmmakers call it) in order to justify their butchery.

Mr Bal Thackeray of the Shiv Sena, who has lately been feeling a little upstaged by Mr Modi, has the lasting solution. He's called for civil war. Isn't that just perfect? Then Pakistan won't need to bomb us, we can bomb ourselves. Let's turn all of India into Kashmir. Or Bosnia. Or Palestine. Or Rwanda. Let's all suffer forever. Let's buy expensive guns and explosives to kill each other with. Let the British arms dealers and the American weapons manufacturers grow fat on our spilled blood. We could ask the Carlyle group—of which the Bush and Bin Laden families are both shareholders—for a bulk discount. Maybe if things go really well, we'll become like Afghanistan. (And look at the publicity they've gone and got themselves.) When all our farm lands are mined, our buildings destroyed, our infrastructure reduced to rubble, our children physically maimed and mentally wrecked, when we've nearly wiped ourselves out with self-manufactured hatred, maybe we can appeal to the Americans to help us out. Airdropped airline meals, anyone?

How close we have come to self-destruction. Another step and we'll be in free-fall. And yet the government presses on. At the Goa meeting of the BJP's national executive, the Prime Minister of Secular, Democratic India, Mr A.B. Vajpayee, made history. He became the first Indian Prime Minister to cross the threshold and publicly unveil an unconscionable bigotry against Muslims, which even George Bush, and Donald Rumsfeld would be embarrassed to own up to. "Wherever Muslims are," he said, "they do not want to live peacefully."

Shame on him. But if only it were just him: in the immediate aftermath of the Gujarat holocaust, confident of the success of its 'experiment', the BJP wants a snap poll. "The gentlest of people," my friend from Baroda said to me, "the gentlest of people, in the gentlest of voices, says 'Modi is our hero.'"

Some of us nurtured the naive hope that the magnitude of the horror of the last few weeks would make the Secular Parties, however self-serving, unite in sheer outrage. On its own, the BJP does not have the mandate of the people of India. It does not have the mandate to push through the Hindutva project. We hoped that the 27 allies that make up the BJP-led coalition at the Centre would withdraw their support. We thought, quite stupidly, that they would see that there could be no bigger test of their moral fibre, of their commitment to their avowed principles of secularism.

It's a sign of the times that not a single one of the BJP's allies has withdrawn support. In every shifty eye you see that faraway look of someone doing mental maths to calculate which constituencies and portfolios they'll retain and which ones they'll lose if they pull out. Except for Deepak Parekh of HDFC, not a single CEO of India's Corporate Community has condemned what happened. Farooq Abdullah, Chief Minister of Kashmir and the only prominent Muslim politician left in India, is currying favour with the government by supporting Modi because he's nursing the dim hope that he may become Vice-President of India very soon. And worst of all—Mayawati, leader of the BSP—the great hope of the lower castes, is on the verge of forging an alliance with the BJP in UP.

The Congress and the Left parties have launched a public agitation asking for Modi's resignation. Resignation? Have we lost all sense of proportion? Criminals are not meant to resign. They're meant to be charged, tried and convicted. As those who burned the train in Godhra should be. As the mobs, and those members of the police force and the administration who planned and participated in the pogrom in the rest of Gujarat should be. As those responsible for raising the pitch of the frenzy to boiling point must be. The Supreme Court has the option of acting against Modi and the Bajrang Dal and the VHP suo motu (when the Court itself files charges). There are hundreds of testimonies. There's masses of evidence.

But in India if you are a butcher or a genocidist who happens to be a politician, you have every reason to be optimistic. No one even expects politicians to be prosecuted. To demand that Modi and his henchmen be arraigned and put away, would make other politicians vulnerable to their own unsavoury pasts—so instead they disrupt Parliament, shout a lot, eventually those in power set up commissions of inquiry, ignore the findings and between themselves make sure the juggernaut chugs on.

Already the issue has begun to morph. Should elections be allowed or not? Should the Election Commission decide that? Or the Supreme Court? Either way, whether elections are held or deferred, by allowing Modi to walk free, by allowing him to continue with his career as a politician, the fundamental, governing principles of democracy are not just being subverted, but deliberately sabotaged. This kind of democracy is the problem, not the solution. Our society's greatest strength is being turned into her deadliest enemy. What's the point of us all going on about 'deepening democracy', when it's being bent and twisted into something unrecognisable?

What if the BJP does win the elections? (The buzz is that engineering a war against Pakistan is going to be the BJP's strategy to swing the vote.) After all, George Bush had an 80 per cent rating in his War Against Terror, and Ariel Sharon has a similar mandate for his bestial invasion of Palestine. Does that make everything all right? Why not dispense with the legal system, the Constitution, the press—the whole shebang—morality itself, why not chuck it and put everything up for a vote? Genocides can become the subject of opinion polls and massacres can have marketing campaigns.

Fascism's firm footprint has appeared in India. Let's mark the date: Spring, 2002. While we can thank the American President and the Coalition Against Terror for creating a congenial international atmosphere for its ghastly debut, we cannot credit them for the years it has been brewing in our public and private lives.

It breezed in in the wake of the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998. From then onwards, the massed energy of bloodthirsty patriotism became openly acceptable political currency. The 'weapons of peace' trapped India and Pakistan in a spiral of brinkmanship—threat and counter-threat, taunt and counter-taunt. And now, one war and hundreds of dead later, more than a million soldiers from both armies are massed at the border, eyeball to eyeball, locked in a pointless nuclear standoff. The escalating belligerence against Pakistan has ricocheted off the border and entered our own body politic, like a sharp blade slicing through the vestiges of communal harmony and tolerance between the Hindu and Muslim communities. In no time at all, the godsquadders from hell have colonised the public imagination. And we allowed them in. Each time the hostility between India and Pakistan is cranked up, within India there's a corresponding increase in the hostility towards the Muslims. With each battle cry against Pakistan, we inflict a wound on ourselves, on our way of life, on our spectacularly diverse and ancient civilisation, on everything that makes India different from Pakistan. Increasingly, Indian Nationalism has come to mean Hindu Nationalism, which defines itself not through a respect or regard for itself, but through a hatred of the Other. And the Other, for the moment, is not just Pakistan, it's Muslim. It's disturbing to see how neatly nationalism dovetails into fascism. While we must not allow the fascists to define what the nation is, or who it belongs to, it's worth keeping in mind that nationalism, in all its many avatars—socialist, capitalist and fascist—has been at the root of almost all the genocides of the twentieth century. On the issue of nationalism, it's wise to proceed with caution.

Can we not find it in ourselves to belong to an ancient civilisation instead of to just a recent nation? To love a land instead of just patrolling a territory? The Sangh Parivar understands nothing of what civilisation means. It seeks to limit, reduce, define, dismember and desecrate the memory of what we were, our understanding of what we are, and our dreams of who we want to be. What kind of India do they want? A limbless, headless, soulless torso, left bleeding under the butchers' cleaver with a flag driven deep into her mutilated heart? Can we let that happen? Have we let it happen?

The incipient, creeping fascism of the past few years has been groomed by many of our 'democratic' institutions. Everyone has flirted with it—Parliament, the press, the police, the administration, the public. Even 'secularists' have been guilty of helping to create the right climate. Each time you defend the right of an institution, any institution (including the Supreme Court), to exercise unfettered, unaccountable powers that must never be challenged, you move towards fascism. To be fair, perhaps not everyone recognised the early signs for what they were.

The national press has been startlingly courageous in its denunciation of the events of the last few weeks. Many of the BJP's fellow travellers who have journeyed with it to the brink are now looking down the abyss into the hell that was once Gujarat, and turning away in genuine dismay. But how hard and for how long will they fight? This is not going to be like a publicity campaign for an upcoming cricket season. And there will not always be spectacular carnage to report on. Fascism is also about the slow, steady infiltration of all the instruments of State power. It's about the slow erosion of civil liberties, about unspectacular day-to-day injustices. Fighting it means fighting to win back the minds and hearts of people. Fighting it does not mean asking for RSS shakhas and the madrassas to be banned, it means working towards the day when they're voluntarily abandoned as bad ideas. It means keeping an eagle eye on public institutions and demanding accountability. It means putting your ear to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless. It means giving a forum to the myriad voices from the hundreds of resistance movements across the country who are speaking about real things—about bonded labour, marital rape, sexual preferences, women's wages, uranium dumping, unsustainable mining, weavers' woes, farmers' worries. It means fighting displacement and dispossession and the relentless, everyday violence of abject poverty. Fighting it also means not allowing your newspaper columns and prime-time TV spots to be hijacked by their spurious passions and their staged theatrics, which are designed to divert attention from everything else.

While most people in India have been horrified by what happened in Gujarat, many thousands of the indoctrinated are preparing to journey deeper into the heart of the horror. Look around you and you'll see in little parks, in big maidans, in empty lots, in village commons, the RSS is marching, hoisting its saffron flag. Suddenly they're everywhere, grown men in khaki shorts marching, marching, marching. To where? For what? Their disregard for history shields them from the knowledge that fascism will thrive for a short while and then self-annihilate because of its inherent stupidity. But unfortunately, like the radioactive fallout of a nuclear strike, it has a half-life that will cripple generations to come.

These levels of rage and hatred cannot be contained, cannot be expected to subside, with public censure and denunciation. Hymns of brotherhood and love are great, but not enough.

Historically, fascist movements have been fuelled by feelings of national disillusionment. Fascism has come to India after the dreams that fuelled the Freedom Struggle have been frittered away like so much loose change.

Independence itself came to us as what Gandhi famously called a 'wooden loaf'—a notional freedom tainted by the blood of the thousands who died during Partition. For more than half a century now, the hatred and mutual distrust has been exacerbated, toyed with and never allowed to heal by politicians, led from the front by Mrs Indira Gandhi. Every political party has tilled the marrow of our secular parliamentary democracy, mining it for electoral advantage. Like termites excavating a mound, they've made tunnels and underground passages, undermining the meaning of 'secular', until it has just become an empty shell that's about to implode. Their tilling has weakened the foundations of the structure that connects the Constitution, Parliament and the courts of law—the configuration of checks and balances that forms the backbone of a parliamentary democracy. Under the circumstances, it's futile to go on blaming politicians and demanding from them a morality they're incapable of. There's something pitiable about a people that constantly bemoans its leaders. If they've let us down, it's only because we've allowed them to. It could be argued that civil society has failed its leaders as much as leaders have failed civil society. We have to accept that there is a dangerous, systemic flaw in our parliamentary democracy that politicians will exploit. And that's what results in the kind of conflagration that we have witnessed in Gujarat. There's fire in the ducts. We have to address this issue and come up with a systemic solution.

But politicians' exploitation of communal divides is by no means the only reason that fascism has arrived on our shores.

Over the past fifty years, ordinary citizens' modest hopes for lives of dignity, security and relief from abject poverty have been systematically snuffed out. Every 'democratic' institution in this country has

shown itself to be unaccountable, inaccessible to the ordinary citizen, and either unwilling, or incapable of acting, in the interests of genuine social justice. Every strategy for real social change—land reform, education, public health, the equitable distribution of natural resources, the implementation of positive discrimination—has been cleverly, cunningly and consistently scuttled and rendered ineffectual by those castes and that class of people who have a stranglehold on the political process. And now corporate globalisation is being relentlessly and arbitrarily imposed on an essentially feudal society, tearing through its complex, tiered, social fabric, ripping it apart culturally and economically.

There is very real grievance here. And the fascists didn't create it. But they have seized upon it, upturned it and forged from it a hideous, bogus sense of pride. They have mobilised human beings using the lowest common denominator—religion. People who have lost control over their lives, people who have been uprooted from their homes and communities who have lost their culture and their language, are being made to feel proud of something. Not something they have striven for and achieved, not something they can count as a personal accomplishment, but something they just happen to be. Or, more accurately, something they happen not to be. And the falseness, the emptiness of that pride, is fuelling a gladiatorial anger that is then directed towards a simulated target that has been wheeled into the amphitheatre.

How else can you explain the project of trying to disenfranchise, drive out or exterminate the second-poorest community in this country, using as your footsoldiers the very poorest (Dalits and Adivasis)? How else can you explain why Dalits in Gujarat, who have been despised, oppressed and treated worse than refuse by the upper castes for thousands of years, have joined hands with their oppressors to turn on those who are only marginally less unfortunate than they themselves? Are they just wage slaves, mercenaries for hire? Is it all right to patronise them and absolve them of responsibility for their own actions? Or am I being obtuse? Perhaps it's common practice for the unfortunate to vent their rage and hatred on the next most unfortunate, because their real adversaries are inaccessible, seemingly invincible and completely out of range? Because their own leaders have cut loose and are feasting at the high table, leaving them to wander rudderless in the wilderness, spouting nonsense about returning to the Hindu fold. (The first step, presumably, towards founding a Global Hindu Empire, as realistic a goal as Fascism's previously failed projects—the restoration of Roman Glory, the purification of the German race or the establishment of an Islamic Sultanate.)

One hundred and thirty million Muslims live in India. Hindu fascists regard them as legitimate prey. Do people like Modi and Bal Thackeray think that the world will stand by and watch while they're liquidated in a 'civil war'? Press reports say that the European Union and several other countries have condemned what happened in Gujarat and likened it to Nazi rule. The Indian government's portentous response is that foreigners should not use the Indian media to comment on what is an 'internal matter' (like the chilling goings-on in Kashmir?). What next? Censorship? Closing down the Internet? Blocking international calls? Killing the wrong 'terrorists' and fudging the dna samples? There is no terrorism like State terrorism.

But who will take them on? Their fascist cant can perhaps be dented by some blood and thunder from the Opposition. So far only Laloo Yadav of Bihar has shown himself to be truly passionate: "Kaun mai ka lal kehta hai ki yeh Hindu rashtra hai? Usko yahan bhej do, chhati phad doonga!" (Which mother's son says this is a Hindu Nation? Send him here, I'll tear his chest open.)

Unfortunately there's no quick fix. Fascism itself can only be turned away if all those who are outraged by it show a commitment to social justice that equals the intensity of their indignation.

Are we ready to get off our starting blocks? Are we ready, many millions of us, to rally not just on the streets, but at work and in schools and in our homes, in every decision we take, and every choice we make?

Or not just yet...

If not, then years from now, when the rest of the world has shunned us (as it should), like the ordinary citizens of Hitler's Germany, we too will learn to recognise revulsion in the gaze of our fellow human beings. We too will find ourselves unable to look our own children in the eye, for the shame of what we did and did not do. For the shame of what we allowed to happen.

This is us. In India. Heaven help us make it through the night.

## Fiddling With Facts As Gujarat Burns

**The Roys in the media are harming India with half-truths and worse, says Balbir K. Punj**

**BALBIR K. PUNJ**

[Please also see Arundhati Roy's letter published in Outlook dated May 27, 2002: To the Jaffri Family, An Apology.]

"Gujarat, the only major state in India to have a BJP government has, for some years, been the petri dish in which Hindu fascism has been fomenting an elaborate political experiment. Last month, the initial results were put on public display.

Within hours of the Godhra outrage, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal put into motion a meticulously planned pogrom against the Muslim community. Officially, the number of dead is 800. Independent reports put the figure at well over 2,000. More than a hundred and fifty thousand people, driven from their homes, now live in refugee camps. Women were stripped, gang-raped, parents were bludgeoned to death in front of their children. Two hundred and forty dargahs and 180 masjids were destroyed—in Ahmedabad the tomb of Wali Gujarati, the founder of the modern Urdu poem, was demolished and paved over in the course of a night. The tomb of the musician Ustad Faiyaz Ali Khan was desecrated and wreathed in burning tyres. Arsonists burned and looted shops, homes, hotels, textiles mills, buses and private cars. Hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs.

A mob surrounded the house of ex-Congress MP Iqbal Ehsan Jaffri. His phone calls to the director-general of police, the police commissioner, the chief secretary, the additional chief secretary (home) were ignored. The mobile police vans around his house did not intervene. The mob broke into the house. They stripped his daughters and burnt them alive. Then they beheaded Jaffri and dismembered him."

That was the Goddess of small things, Arundhati Roy, painting the big picture of Gujarat in Democracy: Who's she when she's at home? (Outlook, May 6, 2002). Roy sums here neatly almost all the charges against the Sangh parivar. When a reputed weekly like Outlook publishes a Booker Prize-winner, it is meant to be serious commentary. And concomitantly, Roy has put her brilliant linguistic skills to the service of "truth". Read her graphic details—"The mob broke into the house. They stripped his daughters and burnt them alive". Roy speaks with the confidence of an eyewitness. Alternatively, she must've access to an eyewitness. Anyway, it reads heart-rendingly honest.

Heart-rending, yes, but honest, no. Jaffri was killed in the riots but his daughters were neither "stripped" nor "burnt alive". T.A. Jafri, his son, in a front-page interview titled Nobody knew my father's house was the target (Asian Age, May 2, Delhi edition), says, "Among my brothers and sisters, I am the only one living in India. And I am the eldest in the family. My sister and brother live in the US. I am 40 years old and I have been born and brought up in Ahmedabad."

So, Roy is lying—for surely Jafri is not. But what about the hundreds of media lies that haven't been exhumed as yet? Her seven-page long (approx: 6,000 words) hate charter against India and the Sangh parivar is woven around just two specific cases of human tragedy, one of which—by now, we know for sure—is a piece of fiction.

The rest is hyperbole, punctuated with venom and vitriol to demonise the parivar. Precisely this type of demonisation had resulted in the macabre incident at Godhra. The vicious propaganda unleashed by the secularists for over a decade had made ordinary and gullible Muslims see the innocent Ram sevaks as demons who deserved to be burnt alive.

She terms Gujarat the "petri dish" of the Sangh parivar. The fact is that Godhra has been used as a crucible by the secular fundamentalists. No wonder, after the roasting of the Ram sevaks, they, while condemning the crime, blamed the victims. Many of them invented events such as a quarrel with hawkers, misbehaviour with women and shouting of provocative slogans to justify the horrendous crime.



And Roy continues the demonisation in this flim as well. Of all the politicians, she sees hope only in Laloo Yadav, the man responsible for dividing Bihar's polity on caste lines, vertically and horizontally. He lords— through his wife—over the province where 'the state has withered away' and has since been replaced by senas of various hues. Roy quotes Laloo, "Kaun mai ka lal kehta hai ki yeh Hindu rashtra hai? Usko yahan bhej do, chhati phaad doonga" (Which mother's son says this is a Hindu nation? Send him here, I'll tear his chest open). Her fascination for Laloo obviously stems from his call, pregnant with possibilities as it is of more Godhra-like situations. I discern a sickly ghoulish mindset in that.

Roy's flim-flam is replete with words like "fascism, planned pogrom, gang rape, genocide". About the '98 Pokhran nuclear tests, she says "bloodthirsty patriotism became openly acceptable political currency". Incidentally, her perception on these issues is fully shared by Musharraf, Pakistan's martial president, and partly also by certain sections in the West and the US. But was what happened in Gujarat a "pogrom" targeted at Muslims? Loss of 900-odd innocent lives (both Hindus and Muslims) is definitely not a "genocide" of any one community. Yet it is one more shameful event in the long and unfortunate chain of communal riots in India, since the 1893 Bombay and Azamgarh riots. Beginning from the 1714 Holi riots in the Mughal period, Ahmedabad itself has witnessed no less than 10 major recorded riots. The Sangh parivar was not there in 1714, nor was it a dominant force during the '69 and '85 riots. So what explains these riots when Gujarat was not a 'Sangh parivar petri dish'?

Out of those who perished in the communal frenzy, over one-third are Hindus. Following Godhra, massive spontaneous violence broke out in various parts of Gujarat against the Muslims. Since the rioters were mainly Hindus, they also accounted for about 75 per cent of those who fell to police bullets in the first three days. In fact, till April 18 Hindus accounted for more deaths in police firing than Muslims.

But for almost three weeks now, the violence has been led by Muslims against Hindus and, naturally, a bulk of the casualties are accounted for by them. The police have booked 34,000 rioters, majority of whom are Hindus. Both communities have suffered heavy loss of business and property in the arson and looting. While rioters are communal in picking their targets, looters are not—and they target at random. One lakh Muslims are struggling in relief camps, but so are 40,000 Hindus. This is a horrible riot, which is sad enough, but why call it a genocide? Whom does it help? Not the riot victims, only our enemies across the border.

The country hasn't suffered so much loss of face in the world as it has now, though it is like one of the scores of riots India has seen. Why? The obvious culprits are those who set ablaze a compartment full of innocent kar sevaks at Godhra and those who indulged in the senseless violence in the following weeks. But the real villains in tarring India's image are the Roys in the media and a section of public life, who mix half-truths with fiction to settle their ideological or political scores with the Sangh parivar.

Roy (a role model for several in the secular pack) opens her hate charter with the case of a woman named Sayeeda "whose stomach was ripped open and stuffed with burning rags". I heard similar horror stories in Parliament. The most frequently quoted were the cases of women raped (in some cases gang-raped), their stomachs ripped open, fetuses taken out and paraded on swords or trishuls. But no one was able to give me even one specific case with all the particulars. Roy gave one, but it proved to be a piece of fiction.

The secular pack is not only guilty of parading half-truths but also of condoning and inciting violence. The banner headline of the Hindustan Times (February 28) reporting on Godhra set a trend for secularists when it said 'Gujarat hit by Ayodhya backlash'. Scuttling beyond the 'first-information-report' with a cult of shady intellectualism, it thus immediately established a connection between the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the gruesome carnage.

Or how will you opine on the Siddharth Varadarajan report in the Times of India: 'BJP fiddles while Gujarat reels under killings' (March 1, 2002). It says: "dastardly attack on train passengers in Godhra... while official inquiry will establish the extent to which the attack on the Sabarmati Express was premeditated, there can be no doubt about the planned nature of violence directed against Gujarat's Muslims...".

The report, carried just two days after Godhra, mentions the murder of Ram sevaks only once in the 450- word plus report. What is important is that Varadarajan, sitting in Delhi, makes readers 'doubtless' about the planning in the backlash while defending Godhra, the indefensible.

Blatant myths and fiction have lacerated the facts on Gujarat. The ToI (March 3) reported Modi's much-publicised misquote of Newton's third law—"Every action has an equal and opposite reaction". In fact, the CM had never said such a thing and no other paper except for ToI had carried the misquote in its original reportage. But later on, numerous editorials were penned on the basis of this canard. All his denials were thrown in the dustbin.

We live in a time of televised war (Kargil), live terror attacks (WTC) and televised riots (Gujarat). Visuals have a hundred-fold greater leverage in shaping our responses. News channels are in a 24-hour rat race with each other, with a killer instinct to be the first with the news. In the process, at times they throw caution to the winds, particularly in a crisis situation. The channels added fuel to the fire during the riots by recklessly showing footage of gory scenes. Contrast it with coverage of the WTC attacks and the Afghanistan war by CNN and BBC. How many gruesome scenes did you see?

The Editor's Guild came down heavily on the Gujarati press and hailed the role of the English press in coverage of the riots. The former might have been guilty of exaggeration but I am sure it has not concocted stories the way the Roys did in the English media. Surprisingly, the Guild has nothing critical to say on the role of the electronic media and of the Roys, guilty of blackening India's name, generating more communal hate at a critical time and demonising a section of citizens through half-truths and complete lies. Some rioters may be guilty of rape and should be punished for their heinous crimes, but what about those who have raped the truth and the country in the last two months?

(The writer, a BJP MP, can be contacted at [ethtv2@id.eth.net](mailto:ethtv2@id.eth.net))

## **To the Jaffri Family, An Apology**

In a situation like the one that prevails in Gujarat, when the police are reluctant to register firs, when the administration is openly hostile to those trying to gather facts, and when the killings go on unabated—then panic, fear and rumour play a pivotal role. People who have disappeared are presumed dead, people who have been dismembered and burnt cannot be identified, and people who are distraught and traumatised are incoherent.

So even when those of us who write try and use the most reliable sources, mistakes can happen. But in an atmosphere so charged with violence, grief and mistrust, it's important to correct mistakes that are pointed out.

There is a factual error in my essay *Democracy: Where's she when she's at home?* (May 6). In describing the brutal killing of Ehsan Jaffri, I have said that his daughters had been killed along with their father. It has subsequently been pointed out to me that this is not correct. Eyewitness accounts say that Ehsan Jaffri was killed along with his three brothers and two nephews. His daughters were not among the 10 women who were raped and killed in Chamanpura that day.

I apologise to the Jaffri family for compounding their anguish. I'm truly sorry.

My information (mis-information, as it turned out) was cross-checked from two sources. *Time* magazine (March 11) in an article by Meenakshi Ganguly and Anthony Spaeth; and "Gujarat Carnage 2002: A Report to the Nation" by an independent fact-finding mission which included K.S. Subrahmanyam, former igp Tripura, and S.P. Shukla, former finance secretary. I spoke to Mr Subrahmanyam about the error. He said his information at that time came from a senior police official.

This and other genuine errors in recounting the details of the violence in Gujarat in no way alters the substance of what journalists, fact-finding missions, or writers like myself are saying.  
Arundhati Roy, New Delhi

## Under The Nuclear Shadow

**Why are you still here, they ask, why haven't you left the city? Isn't nuclear war a real possibility? It is, but where shall I go? ...**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

This week as diplomats' families and tourists quickly disappeared, journalists from Europe and America arrived in droves. Most of them stay at the Imperial Hotel in Delhi. Many of them call me. Why are you still here, they ask, why haven't you left the city? Isn't nuclear war a real possibility? It is, but where shall I go? If I go away and everything and every one, every friend, every tree, every home, every dog, squirrel and bird that I have known and loved is incinerated, how shall I live on? Who shall I love, and who will love me back? Which society will welcome me and allow me to be the hooligan I am, here, at home?

We've decided we're all staying. We've huddled together, we realize how much we love each other and we think what a shame it would be to die now. Life's normal, only because the macabre has become normal. While we wait for rain, for football, for justice, on TV the old generals and the eager boy anchors talk of first strike and second strike capability, as though they're discussing a family board game. My friends and I discuss Prophecy, the film of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the dead bodies choking the river, the living stripped of their skin and hair, we remember especially the man who just melted into the steps of the building and we imagine ourselves like that, as stains on staircases.

My husband's writing a book about trees. He has a section on how figs are pollinated, each fig by its own specialized fig wasp. There are nearly 1,000 different species of fig wasps. All the fig wasps will be nuked, and my husband and his book.

A dear friend, who is an activist in the anti-dam movement in the Narmanda Valley, is on indefinite hunger strike. Today is the twelfth day of her fast. She and the others fasting with her are weakening quickly. They are protesting because the government is bulldozing schools, felling forests, uprooting hand pumps, forcing people from their villages. What an act of faith and hope. But to a government comfortable with the notion of a wasted world, what's a wasted value?

Terrorists have the power to trigger a nuclear war. Non-violence is treated with contempt. Displacement, dispossession, starvation, poverty, disease, these are all just funny comic strip items now. Meanwhile, emissaries of the coalition against terror come and go preaching restraint. Tony Blair arrives to preach peace -- and on the side, to sell weapons to both India and Pakistan. The last question every visiting journalist always asks me: "Are you writing another book?"

That question mocks me. Another book? Right now when it looks as though all the music, the art, the architecture, the literature, the whole of human civilization means nothing to the monsters who run the world. What kind of book should I write? For now, just for now, for just a while pointlessness is my biggest enemy. That's what nuclear bombs do, whether they're used or not. They violate everything that is humane, they alter the meaning of life.

Why do we tolerate them? Why do we tolerate the men who use nuclear weapons to blackmail the entire human race?

## Ahimsa

**Right now the Narmada Bachao Andolan is not just fighting Big Dams. It's fighting for the survival of India's greatest gift to the world: non-violent resistance. You could call it the Ahimsa Bachao Andolan.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

While the rest of us are mesmerised by talk of war and terrorism and wars against terror, (can you go to war against a feeling?) in Madhya Pradesh a little life-raft has set sail into the wind. On a pavement in Bhopal, in an area called 'Tin Shed', a small group of people has embarked on a journey of faith and hope.

There's nothing new in what they're doing. What's new is the climate they're doing it in.

Today is the 23rd day of the indefinite hunger strike by four activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. They have fasted two days longer than Gandhi did on any of his fasts during the freedom struggle. Their demands are more modest than his ever were. They are protesting against the Madhya Pradesh government's forcible eviction of more than a thousand adivasi families to make way for the Maan Dam. All they're asking is that the government of MP implement its own policy of providing land for land to those being displaced by the Maan Dam. There's no controversy here. The dam has been built. The displaced people must be resettled before the reservoir fills up in the monsoon and submerges their villages.

The four activists on fast are: Vinod Patwa who was one of the 114,000 people displaced in 1990 by the Bargi Dam (which now, twelve years later, irrigates less land than it submerged). Mangat Verma who will be displaced by the Maheshwar Dam if it is ever completed. Chittarooma Palit, who's been with the NBA for almost 15 years. And 22-year-old Ram Kunwar, the youngest and frailest of the activists. Hers is the first village that will be submerged when the waters rise in the Maan reservoir. In the weeks since she began her fast, Ram Kunwar has lost 9 kilos - almost a fourth of her original body weight.

Unlike the other large dams like the Sardar Sarovar, Maheshwar and Indira Sagar, where the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of displaced people is simply not possible (except on paper, in court documents etc), in the case of Maan the total number of displaced people is about 6,000. People have even identified land that is available and could be bought and allotted to them by the government. And yet the government refuses.

Instead it's busy distributing paltry cash compensation which is illegal and violates its own policy. It says quite openly that if it were to give in to the demands of the Maan 'oustees' (ie: if it implemented its own policy) it would set a precedent for the hundreds of thousands of people (most of them Dalits and adivasis) who are slated to be submerged (without rehabilitation) by the 29 other big dams planned in the Narmada Valley. And the state government's commitment to these projects remains absolute, regardless of the social and environmental costs.

As Vinod, Mangat, Chittarooma and Ram Kunwar gradually weaken, as their systems close down and the risk of irreversible organ failure and sudden death sets in, no government official has bothered to even pay them a visit.

Let me tell you a secret - it's not all unwavering resolve and steely determination on the burning pavement under the pitiless sun at Tin Shed. The jokes about slimming and weight loss are becoming a little poignant now. There are tears of anger and frustration. There is trepidation and real fear. But underneath all that there's pure grit.

What will happen to them? Will they just go down in the ledgers as 'the price of progress'? That phrase cleverly posits the whole argument as one between those who are pro-development versus those who are anti-development - and suggests the inevitability of the choice you have to make: pro-development, what else? It slyly suggests that movements like the NBA are antiquated and absurdly anti-electricity or anti-irrigation. This of course is nonsense. The NBA believes that Big Dams are obsolete. It believes there are more democratic, more local, more economically viable and

environmentally sustainable ways of generating electricity and managing water systems. It is demanding more modernity, not less. It is demanding more democracy, not less. And look at what's happening instead.

Even at the height of the war rhetoric, even as India and Pakistan threatened each other with nuclear annihilation, the question of reneging on the Indus Water Treaty between the two countries did not arise. Yet in Madhya Pradesh (the state whose chief minister boasts of being the messiah of Dalits and adivasis), the police and administration entered adivasi villages with dozers. They sealed handpumps, demolished school buildings and clearfelled trees in order to force people from their homes. They sealed handpumps. And so, the indefinite hunger-strike.

Any government's condemnation of terrorism is only credible if it shows itself to be responsive to persistent, reasonable, closely argued, non-violent dissent. And yet, what's happening is just the opposite. The world over, non-violent resistance movements are being crushed and broken. If we do not respect and honour them, by default we privilege those who turn to violent means. Across the world when governments and the media lavish all their time, attention, funds, research, space, sophistication and seriousness on war talk and terrorism, then the message that goes out is disturbing and dangerous: If you seek to air and redress a public grievance, violence is more effective than non-violence. Unfortunately, if peaceful change is not given a chance, then violent change becomes inevitable. That violence will be (and already is) random, ugly and unpredictable. What's happening in Kashmir, the North-eastern states, Andhra Pradesh is all part of this process.

Right now the Narmada Bachao Andolan is not just fighting Big Dams. It's fighting for the survival of India's greatest gift to the world: non-violent resistance. You could call it the Ahimsa Bachao Andolan.

Over the years our government has shown nothing but contempt for the people of the Narmada valley. Contempt for their argument. Contempt for their movement.

In the 21st century the connection between religious fascism, nuclear nationalism and the pauperisation of whole populations because of corporate globalisation is becoming impossible to ignore. While the Madhya Pradesh government has categorically said it has no land for the rehabilitation of displaced people, reports say that it is preparing the ground (pardon the pun) to make huge tracts of land available for corporate agriculture. Which in turn will set off another cycle of uprootment and impoverishment.

Can we prevail on Mr Digvijay Singh - the secular, 'green' chief minister, the very public advocate of 'good governance', the right to information and decentralised water management systems - to substitute some of his PR with a real change in policy? If he did, he would go down in history as a man of vision and true political courage.

If the Congress party wishes to be taken seriously as an alternative to the destructive Right-wing religious fundamentalists who have brought us to the threshold of ruin, it will have to do more than condemn communalism and participate in empty nationalist rhetoric. It will have to do more than lock up MLAs in five star resorts (a zoo would be cheaper, surely?) to prevent them from selling themselves to rival parties. It will have to do some real work and some real listening to the people it claims to represent.

As for the rest of us, concerned citizens, peace activists, et al - it's not enough to sing songs about giving peace a chance. Doing everything we can to support movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan is how we give peace a chance. This is the real war against terror.

Go to Bhopal. Just ask for Tin Shed.

Originally published in The Hindustan Times, text courtesy, Znet

## Maan Dam - From Arundhati Roy To Digvijay Singh

### From Arundhati Roy To Digvijay Singh

ARUNDHATI ROY

Fax Number: 0755 - 540501

To  
The Chief Minister  
Government of Madhya Pradesh  
Bhopal 462004

June 15th 2002

Dear Mr Digvijay Singh

Thank you for your letter.

I am a little puzzled and embarrassed that you chose to write to me and not to those who have been petitioning you for your attention for the past 25 days. Today is the 26th day of the hunger fast of the four NBA activists demanding rehabilitation for those who are being displaced by the Maan dam. Two days ago you tried to arrest them. They escaped and are now underground. This correspondence takes place in the shadow of their death or permanent debilitation.

First, I would like to clarify in no uncertain terms that I am not a member of the NBA. I do not represent the Andolan, I cannot and do not wish to negotiate on its behalf. I am merely someone who has taken the trouble to find out what is actually happening on the ground (as opposed to on paper) in the Narmada Valley. And frankly, the more I learn, the more appalled I am.

The facts in your letter are incorrect and misleading. I have passed your letter on to Dr Nandini Sundar who was a member of the Tribunal headed by Justice G.G. Loney which published a report on the Maan project. I'm enclosing her point by point reply. Further to what I have already written, I have only a few general points to make.

You say it is not government policy to buy land and "allot" it to adivasi people. But this is not true. Under Section 3.2 (a) and (b) in the MP rehabilitation Policy for the Narmada valley, it is exactly what the government is supposed to do.

Your letter suggests that everything is as it should be - that the government has dealt fairly and generously with the people who are to be displaced. This is not the case. I have traveled to the Maan villages. I have spoken to people. I was told about the outrageous manner in which cash compensation was distributed. It is illegal even according to your own policy to distribute cash compensation like this.

It is simply not true that people were given the choice between land for land and cash. Most people said they were made to feel that they could take cash (I wouldn't go so far as to call it 'compensation') or get nothing at all. Many said they took cash because they were threatened with legal action and forced eviction. Many others did so for the simple reason that they were not aware of their rights - the Narmada Bachao Andolan was not active in the area at the time.

The stark fact is that displaced people cannot buy land with the special rehabilitation grant given by the government because land is too expensive. It is the government's responsibility to make up the difference between the value of the land to be purchased and the cash that was illegally distributed. The people, now aware of their entitlement, have offered to return every paisa they have received from the government, in return for land.

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Their demands, like the demands of the hundreds of thousands of others, have been ignored. Paltry cash 'compensation' to subsistence farmers, most of whom are already neck deep in debt to money lenders, is only a short detour on the road to destitution and penury. We all know that.

Now your government has bulldozed buildings, destroyed hand-pumps in an effort to forcibly evict people from their homes. This was the immediate provocation for the NBA's indefinite hunger fast. Even now there appears to be no accurate account of how many families will be affected.

In the light of all this, your government's much-publicized Dalit Agenda - like its rehabilitation policy for displaced people- is just a meaningless piece of paper. Hundreds of thousands of Dalits and Adivasis have been and will continue to be displaced without rehabilitation by the 29 dams (in various stages of completion) that you have planned on the Narmada.

To respect the human rights of the 'oustees' of one dam would put your government in the untenable position of having set a precedent for respecting human rights for the rest. And this, I can imagine is not a moral problem so much as a logistical one.

Your government has to choose between implementing its policies and protecting human rights. Obviously, it has chosen to proceed with its elaborate project of social engineering, banking on the fact that public opinion will, as it always does, sink into the bewildering swamp that stretches between what governments say and what they do.

In effect, the fragile communities of Dalits and adivasis which your 'Bhopal Document' claims to protect, are being systematically, mercilessly crushed. Unfortunately, we are driven to have this public conversation under terrifying circumstances, when every hour and every day pushes those on fast into a more critical stage.

And lest you misunderstand, let me say that while I do not support or encourage the idea of a 22year old adivasi girl starving herself to death to make her voice heard, I completely understand the urgency of her situation and am at a loss for words when she says to me "What else can I do?" I'd like to point her question to you - what else can she do? What else can she do when she and her community stand to lose everything they ever had?

When I spoke to Ram Kuar, I thought I should tell her that even if she didn't die, to go so long without food might make her an invalid for life.

She replied, "the government is stealing all our future meals away from all of us. If I stop eating now, perhaps we will be heard. Perhaps the rest of us will be saved."

The simple fact is that if there was no problem, why would the people be so agitated? Why on earth would young Ram Kuar be risking her life to demand justice? There can be no greater insult to someone who is doing that than suggesting they are doing it for some base motive or for no real reason.

In your letter you say that 'government buildings' are being demolished so that door and window frames are re-cycled and used elsewhere. You say nothing about forcibly sealing hand-pumps and destroying water sources, exposing people and cattle to unbearable thirst at the height of summer. Unfortunately, people cannot be re-cycled like door and window frames.

Finally, in what is perhaps the most disturbing part of your letter, you suggest that adivasi people on a fast unto death, demanding their rights to life, to livelihood, to water are "harming the interests of the tribal community". What could you possibly mean by that?

It really saddens me to have to write this letter to you. Truly. Because you're a good Chief Minister on paper - can you not match that with some real re-thinking, some real action on the ground?

Arundhati Roy



## Come September

**Text of the talk at Lensic Performing Arts Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico, on September 29, 2002**

**ARUNDHATI ROY**

[Text courtesy, Znet]

Thank you. I wish I could see you all better but it's quite dark out there. I'm so delighted to be here, and I'm so delighted that Howard Zinn is here to introduce me because I've never met him before but I think he's such a magical human being. Thank you, Howard. [Applause]

Just now, Howard asked me how do you decide what event or lecture you say yes to and how do you decide what you say no to? And I said I think it's perhaps one out of fifty on the average that I agree to do and I am very happy and proud to be doing this one because I know that those who have gone before me are people that I really admire and respect. So thank you to the Lannan Foundation for inviting me.

I have so many things to say and I hope I don't take too long to say them to you. I'm a writer, and so I've actually written what I want to say, for two reasons. One, because I'm sure that you are much more interested in the way I write than in the way I speak. And, second, because the things I have to say are complicated, dangerous things in these dangerous times and I think we have to be very, very precise about what we're saying and how we say them and the language that we use. So I hope it's okay if I read it out to you.

My talk today is called "Come September."

Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it's actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative - they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different techniques of story telling. For reasons that I don't fully understand, fiction dances out of me, and nonfiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning.

The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as nonfiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. John Berger, that most wonderful writer, once wrote: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one." There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolutist ideology against another, but as a story-teller who wants to share her way of seeing. Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories; it's about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power. I believe that the accumulation of vast unfettered power by a State or a country, a corporation or an institution - or even an individual, a spouse, a friend, a sibling - regardless of ideology, results in excesses such as the ones I will recount here.

Living as I do, as millions of us do, in the shadow of the nuclear holocaust that the governments of India and Pakistan keep promising their brain-washed citizenry, and in the global neighborhood of the War Against Terror (what President Bush rather biblically calls "The Task That Never Ends"), I find myself thinking a great deal about the relationship between Citizens and the State.

In India, those of us who have expressed views on Nuclear Bombs, Big Dams, Corporate Globalization and the rising threat of communal Hindu fascism - views that are at variance with the Indian Government's - are branded 'anti-national.' While this accusation doesn't fill me with indignation, it's not an accurate description of what I do or how I think. Because an 'anti-national' is a person who is against his or her own nation and, by inference, is pro some other one. But it isn't necessary to be 'anti-national' to be deeply suspicious of all nationalism, to be anti-nationalism. Nationalism of one kind or another was the cause of most of the genocide of the twentieth century. Flags are bits of colored cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people's brains and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead. [Applause] When independent-thinking people (and here I do

not include the corporate media) begin to rally under flags, when writers, painters, musicians, film makers suspend their judgment and blindly yoke their art to the service of the "Nation," it's time for all of us to sit up and worry. In India we saw it happen soon after the Nuclear tests in 1998 and during the Kargil War against Pakistan in 1999. In the U.S. we saw it during the Gulf War and we see it now during the "War Against Terror." That blizzard of Made-in-China American flags. [Laughter]

Recently, those who have criticized the actions of the U.S. government (myself included) have been called "anti-American." Anti-Americanism is in the process of being consecrated into an ideology.

The term "anti-American" is usually used by the American establishment to discredit and, not falsely - but shall we say inaccurately - define its critics. Once someone is branded anti-American, the chances are that he or she will be judged before they are heard, and the argument will be lost in the welter of bruised national pride.

But what does the term "anti-American" mean? Does it mean you are anti-jazz? Or that you're opposed to freedom of speech? That you don't delight in Toni Morrison or John Updike? That you have a quarrel with giant sequoias? Does it mean that you don't admire the hundreds of thousands of American citizens who marched against nuclear weapons, or the thousands of war resisters who forced their government to withdraw from Vietnam? Does it mean that you hate all Americans?

This sly conflation of America's culture, music, literature, the breathtaking physical beauty of the land, the ordinary pleasures of ordinary people with criticism of the U.S. government's foreign policy (about which, thanks to America's "free press", sadly most Americans know very little) is a deliberate and extremely effective strategy. It's like a retreating army taking cover in a heavily populated city, hoping that the prospect of hitting civilian targets will deter enemy fire.

But there are many Americans who would be mortified to be associated with their government's policies. The most scholarly, scathing, incisive, hilarious critiques of the hypocrisy and the contradictions in U.S. government policy come from American citizens. When the rest of the world wants to know what the U.S. government is up to, we turn to Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Howard Zinn, Ed Herman, Amy Goodman, Michael Albert, Chalmers Johnson, William Blum and Anthony Amove to tell us what's really going on.

[Applause]

Similarly, in India, not hundreds, but millions of us would be ashamed and offended if we were in any way implicated with the present Indian government's fascist policies which, apart from the perpetration of State terrorism in the valley of Kashmir (in the name of fighting terrorism), have also turned a blind eye to the recent state-supervised program against Muslims in Gujarat. It would be absurd to think that those who criticize the Indian government are "anti-Indian" - although the government itself never hesitates to take that line. It is dangerous to cede to the Indian government or the American government or anyone for that matter, the right to define what "India" or "America" are or ought to be.

To call someone "anti-American", indeed to be anti-American, (or for that matter, anti-Indian or anti-Timbuktuan) is not just racist, it's a failure of the imagination. An inability to see the world in terms other than those the establishment has set out for you. If you're not a Bushie you're a Taliban. If you don't love us, you hate us. If you're not Good, you're Evil. If you're not with us, you're with the terrorists.

Last year, like many others, I too made the mistake of scoffing at this post- September 11th rhetoric, dismissing it as foolish and arrogant. But I've realized it's not foolish at all. It's actually a canny recruitment drive for a misconceived, dangerous war. Everyday I'm taken aback at how many people believe that opposing the war in Afghanistan amounts to supporting terrorism, of voting for the Taliban. Now that the initial aim of the war - capturing Osama bin Laden (dead or alive) - seems to have run into bad weather, the goalposts have been moved. It's being made out that the whole point of the war was to topple the Taliban regime and liberate Afghan women from their burqas, we are being asked to believe that the U.S. marines are actually on a feminist mission [laughter, applause]. (If so, will their next stop be America's military ally Saudi Arabia?) [Laughter]

Think of it this way: in India there are some pretty reprehensible social practices against "untouchables", against Christians and Muslims, against women. Pakistan and Bangladesh have even worse ways of dealing with minority communities and women. Should they be bombed? Should Delhi,

Islamabad and Dhaka be destroyed? Is it possible to bomb bigotry out of India? Can we bomb our way to a feminist paradise? [Laughter] Is that how women won the vote in the U.S? Or how slavery was abolished? Can we win redress for the genocide of the millions of Native Americans upon whose corpses the United States was founded by bombing Santa Fe? [Applause]

None of us need anniversaries to remind us of what we cannot forget. So it's no more than coincidence that I happen to be here, on American soil, in September - this month of dreadful anniversaries. Uppermost on everybody's mind of course, particularly here in America, is the horror of what has come to be known as 9/ 11. Nearly three thousand civilians lost their lives in that lethal terrorist strike. The grief is still deep. The rage still sharp. The tears have not dried. And a strange, deadly war is raging around the world. Yet, each person who has lost a loved one surely knows secretly, deeply, that no war, no act of revenge, no daisy- cutters dropped on someone else's loved ones or someone else's children, will blunt the edges of their pain or bring their own loved ones back. War cannot avenge those who have died. War is only a brutal desecration of their memory.

To fuel yet another war - this time against Iraq - by cynically manipulating people's grief, by packaging it for TV specials sponsored by corporations selling detergent and running shoes, is to cheapen and devalue grief, to drain it of meaning. What we are seeing now is a vulgar display of the business of grief, the commerce of grief, the pillaging of even the most private human feelings for political purpose. It is a terrible, violent thing for a State to do to its people. [Applause]

It's not a clever-enough subject to speak of from a public platform, but what I would really love to talk to you about is Loss. Loss and losing. Grief, failure, brokenness, numbness, uncertainty, fear, the death of feeling, the death of dreaming. The absolute relentless, endless, habitual, unfairness of the world. What does loss mean to individuals? What does it mean to whole cultures, whole people who have learned to live with it as a constant companion?

Since it is September 11th we're talking about, perhaps it's in the fitness of things that we remember what that date means, not only to those who lost their loved ones in America last year, but to those in other parts of the world to whom that date has long held significance. This historical dredging is not offered as an accusation or a provocation. But just to share the grief of history. To thin the mists a little. To say to the citizens of America, in the gentlest, most human way: "Welcome to the World." [Applause]

Twenty-nine years ago, in Chile, on the 11th of September 1973, General Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in a CIA-backed coup. "Chile should not be allowed to go Marxist just because its people are irresponsible," said Henry Kissinger, Nobel Peace Laureate, then the U.S. Secretary of State.

After the coup President Allende was found dead inside the presidential palace. Whether he was killed or whether he killed himself, we'll never know. In the regime of terror that ensued, thousands of people were killed. Many more simply "disappeared". Firing squads conducted public executions. Concentration camps and torture chambers were opened across the country. The dead were buried in mine shafts and unmarked graves. For seventeen years the people of Chile lived in dread of the midnight knock, of routine "disappearances", of sudden arrest and torture. Chileans tell the story of how the musician Victor Jara had his hands cut off in front of a crowd in the Santiago stadium. Before they shot him, Pinochet's soldiers threw his guitar at him and mockingly asked him to play.

In 1999, following the arrest of General Pinochet in Britain, thousands of secret documents were declassified by the U.S. government. They contain unequivocal evidence of the CIA's involvement in the coup as well as the fact that the U.S. government had detailed information about the situation in Chile during General Pinochet's reign. Yet, Kissinger assured the general of his support: "In the United States as you know, we are sympathetic to what you're trying to do," he said. "We wish your government well."

Those of us who have only ever known life in a democracy, however flawed, would find it hard to imagine what living in a dictatorship and enduring the absolute loss of freedom means. It isn't just those who Pinochet murdered, but the lives he stole from the living that must be accounted for too.

Sadly, Chile was not the only country in South America to be singled out for the U.S. government's attentions. Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, El Salvador, Peru, Mexico and Colombia - they've all been the playground for

## Arundhati Roy – Come September -

covert - and overt - operations by the CIA. Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been killed, tortured or have simply disappeared under the despotic regimes that were propped up in their countries. If this were not humiliation enough, the people of South America have had to bear the cross of being branded as people who are incapable of democracy - as if coups and massacres are somehow encrypted in their genes.

This list does not, of course, include countries in Africa or Asia that suffered US military interventions - Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, Laos, and Cambodia. For how many Septembers for decades together have millions of Asian people been bombed, and burned, and slaughtered? How many Septembers have gone by since August 1945, when hundreds of thousands of ordinary Japanese people were obliterated by the nuclear strikes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? For how many Septembers have the thousands who had the misfortune of surviving those strikes endured that living hell that was visited on them, their unborn children, their children's children, on the earth, the sky, the water, the wind, and all the creatures that swim and walk and crawl and fly? Not far from here, in Albuquerque, is the National Atomic Museum where Fat Man and Little Boy (the affectionate nicknames for the bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) were available as souvenir earrings. Funky young people wore them. A massacre dangling in each ear. But I'm straying from my theme. It's September that we're talking about, not August.

September 11th has a tragic resonance in the Middle East, too. On the 11th of September 1922, ignoring Arab outrage, the British government proclaimed a mandate in Palestine, a follow-up to the 1917 Balfour Declaration which imperial Britain issued, with its army massed outside the gates of Gaza. The Balfour Declaration promised European Zionists a national home for Jewish people. (At the time, the Empire on which the Sun Never Set was free to snatch and bequeath national homes like a school bully distributes marbles.)

How carelessly imperial power vivisected ancient civilizations. Palestine and Kashmir are imperial Britain's festering, blood-drenched gifts to the modern world. Both are fault lines in the raging international conflicts of today.

In 1937, Winston Churchill said of the Palestinians, I quote, "I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place." That set the trend for the Israeli State's attitude towards the Palestinians. In 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir said, "Palestinians do not exist." Her successor, Prime Minister Levi Eschol said, "What are Palestinians? When I came here (to Palestine), there were 250,000 non-Jews, mainly Arabs and Bedouins. It was a desert, more than underdeveloped. Nothing." Prime Minister Menachem Begin called Palestinians "two-legged beasts." Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir called them "grasshoppers" who could be crushed. This is the language of Heads of State, not the words of ordinary people.

In 1947, the U.N. formally partitioned Palestine and allotted 55 per cent of Palestine's land to the Zionists. Within a year, they had captured 76 per cent. On the 14th of May 1948 the State of Israel was declared. Minutes after the declaration, the United States recognized Israel. The West Bank was annexed by Jordan. The Gaza strip came under Egyptian military control, and formally Palestine ceased to exist except in the minds and hearts of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people who became refugees. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza strip.

Over the decades there have been uprisings, wars, intifadas. Tens of thousands have lost their lives. Accords and treaties have been signed. Cease-fires declared and violated. But the bloodshed doesn't end. Palestine still remains illegally occupied. Its people live in inhuman conditions, in virtual Bantustans, where they are subjected to collective punishments, twenty-four hour curfews, where they are humiliated and brutalized on a daily basis. They never know when their homes will be demolished, when their children will be shot, when their precious trees will be cut, when their roads will be closed, when they will be allowed to walk down to the market to buy food and medicine. And when they will not. They live with no semblance of dignity. With not much hope in sight. They have no control over their lands, their security, their movement, their communication, their water supply. So when accords are signed, and words like "autonomy" and even "statehood" bandied about, it's always worth asking: What sort of autonomy? What sort of State? What sort of rights will its citizens have?

Young Palestinians who cannot control their anger turn themselves into human bombs and haunt Israel's streets and public places, blowing themselves up, killing ordinary people, injecting terror into daily life, and eventually hardening both societies' suspicion and mutual hatred of each other. Each bombing invites merciless reprisal and even more hardship on Palestinian people. But then suicide bombing is an act of individual despair, not a revolutionary tactic. Although Palestinian attacks strike terror into Israeli citizens, they provide the perfect cover for the Israeli government's daily incursions into Palestinian territory, the perfect excuse for old-fashioned, nineteenth-century colonialism, dressed up as a new fashioned, twenty- first century "war".

Israel's staunchest political and military ally is and always has been the U.S. The U.S. government has blocked, along with Israel, almost every U.N. resolution that sought a peaceful, equitable solution to the conflict. It has supported almost every war that Israel has fought. When Israel attacks Palestine, it is American missiles that smash through Palestinian homes. And every year Israel receives several billion dollars from the United States - taxpayers money.

What lessons should we draw from this tragic conflict? Is it really impossible for Jewish people who suffered so cruelly themselves - more cruelly perhaps than any other people in history - to understand the vulnerability and the yearning of those whom they have displaced? Does extreme suffering always kindle cruelty? What hope does this leave the human race with? What will happen to the Palestinian people in the event of a victory? When a nation without a state eventually proclaims a state, what kind of state will it be? What horrors will be perpetrated under its flag? Is it a separate state that we should be fighting for or, the rights to a life of liberty and dignity for everyone regardless of their ethnicity or religion?

Palestine was once a secular bulwark in the Middle East. But now the weak, undemocratic, by all accounts corrupt but avowedly nonsectarian P.L.O., is losing ground to Hamas, which espouses an overtly sectarian ideology and fights in the name of Islam. To quote from their manifesto: "we will be its soldiers and the firewood of its fire, which will burn the enemies."

The world is called upon to condemn suicide bombers. But can we ignore the long road they have journeyed on before they have arrived at this destination? September 11, 1922 to September 11, 2002 - eighty years is a long time to have been waging war. Is there some advice the world can give the people of Palestine? Should they just take Golda Meir's suggestion and make a real effort not to exist?

In another part of the Middle East, September 11th strikes a more recent cord. It was on the 11th of September 1990 that George W. Bush, Sr., then President of the U.S., made a speech to a joint session of Congress announcing his government's decision to go to war against Iraq.

The U.S. government says that Saddam Hussein is a war criminal, a cruel military despot who has committed genocide against his own people. That's a fairly accurate description of the man. In 1988, Saddam Hussein razed hundreds of villages in northern Iraq, used chemical weapons and machine guns to kill thousands of Kurdish people. Today we know that that same year the U.S. government provided him with \$500 million in subsidies to buy American farm products. The next year, after he had successfully completed his genocidal campaign, the U.S. government doubled its subsidy to \$1 billion. It also provided him with high quality germ seed for anthrax, and helicopters and dual-use material that could be used to manufacture chemical and biological weapons. So it turns out that while Saddam Hussein was carrying out his worst atrocities, the U.S. and the U.K. governments were his close allies.

So what changed? In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. His sin was not so much that he had committed an act of war, but that he had acted independently, without orders from his master. This display of independence was enough to upset the power equation in the Gulf. So it was decided that Saddam Hussein be exterminated, like a pet that has outlived its owner's affection.

The first Allied attack on Iraq took place on January '91. The world watched the prime-time war as it was played out on T.V. (In India in those days you had to go to a five-star hotel lobby to watch CNN.) Tens of thousands of people were killed in a month of devastating bombing. What many do not know is that the war never ended then. The initial fury simmered down into the longest sustained air attack on a country since the Vietnam War. Over the last decade American and British forces have fired thousands of missiles and bombs on Iraq. In the decade of economic sanctions that followed the war, Iraqi civilians have been denied food, medicine, hospital equipment, ambulances, clean water - the basic essentials.

About half a million Iraqi children have died as a result of the sanctions. Of them, Madeleine Albright, then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, famously said, "It's a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it." "Moral equivalence" was the term that was used to denounce those of us who criticized the war on Afghanistan. Madeleine Albright cannot be accused of moral equivalence. What she said was just straightforward algebra.

A decade of bombing has not managed to dislodge Saddam Hussein, "the Beast of Baghdad". Now, almost 12 years on, President George Bush, Jr has ratcheted up the rhetoric once again. He's proposing an all-out war whose goal is nothing short of a regime change. The New York Times says that the Bush administration is following, quote, "a meticulously planned strategy to persuade the public, the Congress, and the Allies of the need to confront the threat of Saddam Hussein." Andrew. H. Card, Jr., the White House Chief of Staff, described how the administration was stepping up its war plans for the fall, and I quote, "From a marketing point of view", he said, "you don't introduce new products in August." This time the catch-phrase for Washington's "new product" is not the plight of Kuwaiti people but the assertion that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. "Forget the feckless moralizing of peace lobbies", wrote Richard Perle, a former advisor to President Bush, "We need to get him before he gets us."

Weapons inspectors have conflicting reports of the status of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and many have said clearly that its arsenal has been dismantled and that it does not have the capacity to build one. However, there is no confusion over the extent and range of America's arsenal of nuclear and chemical weapons. Would the U.S. government welcome weapons inspectors? Would the U.K.? Or Israel?

What if Iraq does have a nuclear weapon, does that justify a pre-emptive U.S. strike? The U.S. has the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world and it's the only country in the world to have actually used them on civilian populations. If the U.S. is justified in launching a pre-emptive strike on Iraq, why, then any nuclear power is justified in carrying out a pre-emptive strike on any other. India could attack Pakistan, or the other way around. If the U.S. government develops a distaste for, say, the Indian Prime Minister, can it just "take him out" with a pre-emptive strike?

Recently the United States played an important part in forcing India and Pakistan back from the brink of war. Is it so hard for it to take its own advice? Who is guilty of feckless moralizing? Of preaching peace while it wages war? The U.S., which George Bush has called "the most peaceful nation on earth", has been at war with one country or another every year for the last fifty.

Wars are never fought for altruistic reasons. They're usually fought for hegemony, for business. And then of course there's the business of war.

Protecting its control of the world's oil is fundamental to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. government's recent military interventions in the Balkans and Central Asia have to do with oil. Hamid Karzai, the puppet President of Afghanistan installed by the U.S., is said to be a former employee of Unocal, the American-based oil company. The U.S. government's paranoid patrolling of the Middle East is because it has two-thirds of the world's oil reserves. Oil keeps America's engines purring sweetly. Oil keeps the Free Market rolling. Whoever controls the world's oil, controls the world's market. And how do you control the oil?

Nobody puts it more elegantly than The New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman. In an article called, "Craziness Pays", he said, "The US has to make it clear to Iraq and US allies that...American will use force without negotiation, hesitation or UN approval." His advice was well taken. In the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan as well as in the almost daily humiliation the U.S. government heaps on the U.N. In his book on globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Friedman says, and I quote, "The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist. McDonalds cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas...and the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps." Perhaps this was written in a moment of vulnerability, but it's certainly the most succinct, accurate description of the project of corporate globalization that I have read.

After the 11th of September 2001 and the War Against Terror, the hidden hand and fist have had their cover blown - and we have a clear view now of America's other weapon - the Free Market - bearing down on the Developing World, with a clenched, unsmiling smile. The Task That Never Ends is America's perfect war, the perfect vehicle for the endless expansion of American imperialism. In Urdu,

the word for Profit, as in "p- r-o-f-i-t", is fayda. Al Qaida means The Word, The Word of God, The Law. So, in India, some of us call the War Against Terror, Al Qaida versus Al Fayda - The Word versus The Profit (no pun intended.)

For the moment it looks as though Al Fayda will carry the day. But then you never know...

In the last ten years of unbridled Corporate Globalization, the world's total income has increased by an average of 2.5 percent a year. And yet the numbers of poor in the world has increased by 100 million. Of the top hundred biggest economies, 51 are corporations, not countries. The top 1 percent of the world has the same combined income as the bottom 57 percent and that disparity is growing. And now, under the spreading canopy of the War Against Terror, this process is being hustled along. The men in suits are in an unseemly hurry. While bombs rain down on us, and cruise missiles skid across the skies, while nuclear weapons are stockpiled to make the world a safer place, contracts are being signed, patents are being registered, oil pipe lines are being laid, natural resources are being plundered, water is being privatized, and democracies are being undermined.

In a country like India, the "structural adjustment" end of the Corporate Globalization project is ripping through people's lives. "Development" projects, massive privatization, and labor "reforms" are pushing people off their lands and out of their jobs, resulting in a kind of barbaric dispossession that has few parallels in history. Across the world, as the "Free Market" brazenly protects Western markets and forces developing countries to lift their trade barriers, the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer. Civil unrest has begun to erupt in the global village. In countries like Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia and India, the resistance movements against Corporate Globalization are growing. To contain them, governments are tightening their control. Protesters are being labeled "terrorists" and then being dealt with as such. But civil unrest does not only mean marches and demonstrations and protests against globalization. Unfortunately, it also means a desperate downward spiral into crime and chaos and all kinds of despair and disillusionment which as we know from history (and from what we see unspooling before our eyes), gradually becomes a fertile breeding ground for terrible things - cultural nationalism, religious bigotry, fascism and of course, terrorism.

All these march arm-in-arm with corporate globalization.

There is a notion gaining credence that the Free Market breaks down national barriers, and that Corporate Globalization's ultimate destination is a hippie paradise where the heart is the only passport and we all live happily together inside a John Lennon song. ("Imagine there's no country...") But this is a canard.

What the Free Market undermines is not national sovereignty, but democracy. As the disparity between the rich and poor grows, the hidden fist has its work cut out for it. Multinational corporations on the prowl for "sweetheart deals" that yield enormous profits cannot push through those deals and administer those projects in developing countries without the active connivance of State machinery - the police, the courts, sometimes even the army. Today Corporate Globalization needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, preferably authoritarian governments in poorer countries to push through unpopular reforms and quell the mutinies. It needs a press that pretends to be free. It needs courts that pretend to dispense justice. It needs nuclear bombs, standing armies, sterner immigration laws, and watchful coastal patrols to make sure that it's only money, goods, patents, and services that are being globalized - not the free movement of people, not a respect for human rights, not international treaties on racial discrimination or chemical and nuclear weapons, or greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, or god forbid, justice. It's as though even a gesture towards international accountability would wreck the whole enterprise.

Close to one year after the War against Terror was officially flagged off in the ruins of Afghanistan, in country after country freedoms are being curtailed in the name of protecting freedom, civil liberties are being suspended in the name of protecting democracy. All kinds of dissent are being defined as "terrorism". All kinds of laws are being passed to deal with it. Osama bin Laden seems to have vanished into thin air. Mullah Omar is supposed to have made his escape on a motorbike. (They could have sent TinTin after him.) [Laughter] The Taliban may have disappeared but their spirit, and their system of summary justice is surfacing in the unlikeliest of places. In India, in Pakistan, in Nigeria, in America, in all the Central Asian republics run by all manner of despots, and of course in Afghanistan under the U.S.-backed, Northern Alliance.

Arundhati Roy – Come September -

Meanwhile down at the mall there's a mid-season sale. Everything's discounted - oceans, rivers, oil, gene pools, fig wasps, flowers, childhoods, aluminum factories, phone companies, wisdom, wilderness, civil rights, eco-systems, air - all 4,600 million years of evolution. It's packed, sealed, tagged, valued and available off the rack. (No returns). As for justice - I'm told it's on offer too. You can get the best that money can buy.

Donald Rumsfeld said that his mission in the War Against Terror was to persuade the world that Americans must be allowed to continue their way of life. When the maddened king stamps his foot, slaves tremble in their quarters. So, standing here today, it's hard for me to say this, but "The American Way of Life" is simply not sustainable. Because it doesn't acknowledge that there is a world beyond America.

[Applause]

But fortunately, power has a shelf life. When the time comes, maybe this mighty empire will, like others before it, overreach itself and implode from within. It looks as though structural cracks have already appeared. As the War Against Terror casts its net wider and wider, America's corporate heart is hemorrhaging. For all the endless, empty chatter about democracy, today the world is run by three of the most secretive institutions in the world: The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, all three of which, in turn, are dominated by the U.S. Their decisions are made in secret. The people who head them are appointed behind closed doors. Nobody really knows anything about them, their politics, their beliefs, their intentions. Nobody elected them. Nobody said they could make decisions on our behalf. A world run by a handful of greedy bankers and C.E.O.'s whom nobody elected can't possibly last.

Soviet-style communism failed, not because it was intrinsically evil but because it was flawed. It allowed too few people to usurp too much power. Twenty-first century market-capitalism, American style, will fail for the same reasons. Both are edifices constructed by the human intelligence, undone by human nature.

The time has come, the Walrus said. Perhaps things will become worse and then better. Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

Thank you. [Applause]

Thank you.

I just want to say that, you know, I was so terrified of coming to America, because, when you read the papers and when you watch whatever you get to see on TV, which is Fox News, you know, in India [laughter], you know... this corporate media just makes out as if everybody in America is, you know, a clone of George Bush. [laughter] I'm just so glad that I came because it just reaffirms my faith in humanity to see you here and to not have tomatoes thrown at me.

Thank you. [Applause]

#### CONVERSATION

Howard Zinn: We're just going to sit up here. [Laughter] Arundhati just said to me, Well, we can talk about the things I left out. [Laughter] Well, I guess. . . . what did you leave out? [Laughter] I was sitting there, listening to you, and thinking: there it was. There it is.

Arundhati Roy: OK. Let's go. [Laughter]

Zinn: You don't want me to say anything nice about? OK. But really, what I thought as I was sitting there, is there is this mastery of detail, all expressed in the most poetic and beautiful way. That combination is so hard to achieve. I know this is not a lead-in to a conversation, it's a final statement. [Laughter] [Applause]

Let me ask you this, Arundhati. How did you come to decide, after writing *The God of Small Things*, that you were not going to immediately sit down and write another novel?



Roy: Well, actually, I would have had to decide to sit down and write another novel. In that I've never believed in this thing of having a single profession and doing it, doing the same thing all your life. It's like your brain is growing in one direction, like some tumor. I never...a lot of people keep saying to me that you must be under a lot of pressure from your publishers to write another book. Well, I think that's, I mean, it's a bit dishonest to put it that way for me because no one can pressurize me, you know. They don't have a handle on me. It's a relief. If I wanted to accept that pressure, it would be a pressure.

And I just think that very soon, actually, very soon after I finished writing *The God of Small Things*, and it came out, India did, you know, its nuclear tests, and I recognized the fact that here was, you know, the papers, and lots of public people, and writers and painters, and everybody was standing up and applauding this horrible act. And I realized then that, you know, staying quiet was as political an act as speaking out. and I had this space to make a statement. And if I didn't, it was something that I couldn't live with. Which was when I wrote *The End of Imagination*.

And also, I think being involved in the kinds of things I've been involved in in the last few years have been wonderful for me because I've met the most extraordinary people. I've been close to the most extraordinary political happenings. And I also know that when I'm ready to write another book, if I'm ready to write? I keep saying *The God of Small Things* was a collaboration between me and a little bit of magic. And you have to know how to wait, you know. It'll come. If it doesn't, that's all right, but if it does, it will come. You can't, you can't just force...you know it's not some factory product.

Zinn: No one would accuse that of being a factory product.

Roy: No. [Laughter] No, I mean the next.

(Text courtesy, Znet)

## 'Honored And Delighted'

**The celebrated writer's statement accepting the Fourth Annual Prize for Cultural Freedom by Lannan Foundation -- \$350,000 in prize money, which, she has announced, will be shared by 50 people's movements, publications, educational institutions, theater groups, and individuals in India.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

*Lannan Foundation is a private family foundation located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Funding is focused on special cultural projects and ideas that promote and protect cultural freedom, diversity, and creativity. The foundation established the Prize for Cultural Freedom in 1999. The first recipient was the writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano of Uruguay. Claudia Andujar, a photographer from Brazil, received the award in 2000 for her lifelong work on behalf of the Yanomami Indians. In 2001 the foundation awarded the Prize to the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.*

*In September 2002 Roy spoke in Santa Fe for the foundation's Readings & Conversations series, where she delivered the lecture Come September, a critical examination of the effects of U.S.-led corporate globalization, the "war on terrorism" and the history of U.S. intervention in Chile, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and in Iraq.*

#### Text of the statement

I am honored and delighted to accept the Cultural Freedom Prize from the Lannan Foundation, whose work I respect and admire. It is a privilege to be in the company of writers like Eduardo Galeano and Mahmoud Darwish, who have won the prize in previous years.

I accept this prize knowing that there are many people around the world who deserve it more than I do. Unknown, invisible people who are raising their voices and fighting the fight at much greater cost to themselves than I could ever claim. In these times, when all over the world democratic spaces are being usurped and violated in the name of corporate globalization and the "war against terror," when fascism is staring us in the face (in India, it is beating down the doors), it is a sign of great hope that there are so many people's movements and individuals who see through the charade and are committed to resisting this process.

It has not been easy to decide what to do with the considerable sum of money that comes with the prize. I am more than delighted to announce that the money will be shared by at least a few of those who are engaged in the struggle of making India a real democracy instead of just a notional one.

The money, \$350,000 will be received by me. After taxes have been deducted by the government of India, this sum will be shared by the 50 remarkable people's movements, publications, educational institutions, theater groups, and individuals that are listed below .

Each of them is in their own way working to challenge the entrenched power structure of the society in which we live. The list was drawn up over a period of several weeks, after a great deal of thought and discussion with a range of friends, colleagues, and activists from across the country. To them, a big thank you.

I should also like to say that I am aware that there are many people and organizations whose names are not on the list, not because they don't deserve to be, but because of the limited nature of our task. I would have liked to share at least part of the money with independent and alternative media groups in the United States — Democracy Now!, Indymedia, and Alternative Radio — all of whom are staging a courageous and formidable battle against their own government's propaganda.

Unfortunately, Indian law does not permit me to do this. So to all those groups — apologies — and, as we say here in India, Zindabad (long live!).

## Confronting Empire

**I've been asked to speak about "How to confront Empire?" It's a huge question, and I have no easy answers....**

### **ARUNDHATI ROY**

I've been asked to speak about "How to confront Empire?" It's a huge question, and I have no easy answers.

When we speak of confronting "Empire," we need to identify what "Empire" means. Does it mean the U.S. Government (and its European satellites), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and multinational corporations? Or is it something more than that?

In many countries, Empire has sprouted other subsidiary heads, some dangerous byproducts — nationalism, religious bigotry, fascism and, of course terrorism. All these march arm in arm with the project of corporate globalization.

Let me illustrate what I mean. India — the world's biggest democracy — is currently at the forefront of the corporate globalization project. Its "market" of one billion people is being prised open by the WTO. Corporatization and Privatization are being welcomed by the Government and the Indian elite.

It is not a coincidence that the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Disinvestment Minister — the men who signed the deal with Enron in India, the men who are selling the country's infrastructure to corporate multinationals, the men who want to privatize water, electricity, oil, coal, steel, health, education and telecommunication — are all members or admirers of the RSS. The RSS is a right wing, ultra-nationalist Hindu guild which has openly admired Hitler and his methods.

The dismantling of democracy is proceeding with the speed and efficiency of a Structural Adjustment Program. While the project of corporate globalization rips through people's lives in India, massive privatization, and labor "reforms" are pushing people off their land and out of their jobs. Hundreds of impoverished farmers are committing suicide by consuming pesticide. Reports of starvation deaths are coming in from all over the country.

While the elite journeys to its imaginary destination somewhere near the top of the world, the dispossessed are spiraling downwards into crime and chaos. This climate of frustration and national disillusionment is the perfect breeding ground, history tells us, for fascism.

The two arms of the Indian Government have evolved the perfect pincer action. While one arm is busy selling India off in chunks, the other, to divert attention, is orchestrating a howling, baying chorus of Hindu nationalism and religious fascism. It is conducting nuclear tests, rewriting history books, burning churches, and demolishing mosques. Censorship, surveillance, the suspension of civil liberties and human rights, the definition of who is an Indian citizen and who is not, particularly with regard to religious minorities, is becoming common practice now.

Last March, in the state of Gujarat, two thousand Muslims were butchered in a State-sponsored pogrom. Muslim women were specially targeted. They were stripped, and gang-raped, before being burned alive. Arsonists burned and looted shops, homes, textiles mills, and mosques.

More than a hundred and fifty thousand Muslims have been driven from their homes. The economic base of the Muslim community has been devastated.

While Gujarat burned, the Indian Prime Minister was on MTV promoting his new poems. In January this year, the Government that orchestrated the killing was voted back into office with a comfortable majority. Nobody has been punished for the genocide. Narendra Modi, architect of the pogrom, proud member of the RSS, has embarked on his second term as the Chief Minister of Gujarat. If he were Saddam Hussein, of course each atrocity would have been on CNN. But since he's not — and since the Indian "market" is open to global investors — the massacre is not even an embarrassing inconvenience.

## Arundhati Roy – Confronting The Empire -

There are more than one hundred million Muslims in India. A time bomb is ticking in our ancient land.

All this to say that it is a myth that the free market breaks down national barriers. The free market does not threaten national sovereignty, it undermines democracy.

As the disparity between the rich and the poor grows, the fight to corner resources is intensifying. To push through their "sweetheart deals," to corporatize the crops we grow, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the dreams we dream, corporate globalization needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, authoritarian governments in poorer countries to push through unpopular reforms and quell the mutinies.

Corporate Globalization — or shall we call it by its name? — Imperialism — needs a press that pretends to be free. It needs courts that pretend to dispense justice.

Meanwhile, the countries of the North harden their borders and stockpile weapons of mass destruction. After all they have to make sure that it's only money, goods, patents and services that are globalized. Not the free movement of people. Not a respect for human rights. Not international treaties on racial discrimination or chemical and nuclear weapons or greenhouse gas emissions or climate change, or — god forbid — justice.

So this — all this — is "empire." This loyal confederation, this obscene accumulation of power, this greatly increased distance between those who make the decisions and those who have to suffer them.

Our fight, our goal, our vision of Another World must be to eliminate that distance.

So how do we resist "Empire"?

The good news is that we're not doing too badly. There have been major victories. Here in Latin America you have had so many — in Bolivia, you have Cochabamba. In Peru, there was the uprising in Arequipa, In Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez is holding on, despite the U.S. government's best efforts.

And the world's gaze is on the people of Argentina, who are trying to refashion a country from the ashes of the havoc wrought by the IMF.

In India the movement against corporate globalization is gathering momentum and is poised to become the only real political force to counter religious fascism.

As for corporate globalization's glittering ambassadors — Enron, Bechtel, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson — where were they last year, and where are they now?

And of course here in Brazil we must ask ...who was the president last year, and who is it now?

Still ... many of us have dark moments of hopelessness and despair. We know that under the spreading canopy of the War Against Terrorism, the men in suits are hard at work.

While bombs rain down on us, and cruise missiles skid across the skies, we know that contracts are being signed, patents are being registered, oil pipelines are being laid, natural resources are being plundered, water is being privatized, and George Bush is planning to go to war against Iraq.

If we look at this conflict as a straightforward eye-ball to eye-ball confrontation between "Empire" and those of us who are resisting it, it might seem that we are losing.

But there is another way of looking at it. We, all of us gathered here, have, each in our own way, laid siege to "Empire."

We may not have stopped it in its tracks — yet — but we have stripped it down. We have made it drop its mask. We have forced it into the open. It now stands before us on the world's stage in all its brutish, iniquitous nakedness.

## Arundhati Roy – Confronting The Empire -

Empire may well go to war, but it's out in the open now — too ugly to behold its own reflection. Too ugly even to rally its own people. It won't be long before the majority of American people become our allies.

Only a few days ago in Washington, a quarter of a million people marched against the war on Iraq. Each month, the protest is gathering momentum.

Before September 11th 2001 America had a secret history. Secret especially from its own people. But now America's secrets are history, and its history is public knowledge. It's street talk.

Today, we know that every argument that is being used to escalate the war against Iraq is a lie. The most ludicrous of them being the U.S. Government's deep commitment to bring democracy to Iraq.

Killing people to save them from dictatorship or ideological corruption is, of course, an old U.S. government sport. Here in Latin America, you know that better than most.

Nobody doubts that Saddam Hussein is a ruthless dictator, a murderer (whose worst excesses were supported by the governments of the United States and Great Britain). There's no doubt that Iraqis would be better off without him.

But, then, the whole world would be better off without a certain Mr. Bush. In fact, he is far more dangerous than Saddam Hussein.

So, should we bomb Bush out of the White House?

It's more than clear that Bush is determined to go to war against Iraq, regardless of the facts — and regardless of international public opinion.

In its recruitment drive for allies, The United States is prepared to invent facts.

The charade with weapons inspectors is the U.S. government's offensive, insulting concession to some twisted form of international etiquette. It's like leaving the "doggie door" open for last minute "allies" or maybe the United Nations to crawl through.

But for all intents and purposes, the New War against Iraq has begun.

What can we do?

We can hone our memory, we can learn from our history. We can continue to build public opinion until it becomes a deafening roar.

We can turn the war on Iraq into a fishbowl of the U.S. government's excesses.

We can expose George Bush and Tony Blair — and their allies — for the cowardly baby killers, water poisoners, and pusillanimous long-distance bombers that they are.

We can re-invent civil disobedience in a million different ways. In other words, we can come up with a million ways of becoming a collective pain in the ass.

When George Bush says "you're either with us, or you are with the terrorists" we can say "No thank you." We can let him know that the people of the world do not need to choose between a Malevolent Mickey Mouse and the Mad Mullahs.

Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness — and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe.

The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling — their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability.

Remember this: We be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them.

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

(Arundhati Roy was speaking at Life After Capitalism at the World Social Forum, 2003, Porto Alegre, Brazil, January 27, 2003, organised by Znet)

## 'You Have Blood On Your Hands, Sir'

**The text of the letter to the Kerala Chief Minister protesting the brutal police action against Adivasi encroachers in the protected forests of Wayanad in Kerala. [More Coverage](#)**

**ARUNDHATI ROY**

To  
The Chief Minister  
Government of Kerala  
Thiruvananthapuram

27th February 2003

Dear Sir,

There are some moments in the life of a society when something happens to put its moral fibre on public display. This is one such moment.

The Muthanga atrocity will go down in Kerala's history as a government's attempt to decimate an extraordinary and historical struggle for justice by the poorest, most oppressed community in Kerala. It will go down in history because, unlike most 'struggles' in Kerala, it is not a petty, cynical fight between political parties jockeying for power. It is the real fight of the truly powerless against the powerful. It is the stuff of which myths are made.

I visited the Muthanga sanctuary (partly used as a eucalyptus plantation for Grasim's Gwalior Rayons factory, which has recently been closed) where the Kerala Police opened fire on hundreds of adivasis. I visited the Sultan Bathery hospital where the wounded have been admitted. I visited some adivasi settlements close to the sanctuary. I also visited the Calicut jail and met C.K. Janu and Geethanandan, both of whom are recovering after having been badly beaten by the police. Apart from this I spoke with several eyewitnesses to the firing.

For the Kerala Police to open fire on a group of hundreds of people including women, children, old people and infants is an act that has few parallels in recent history. The event that comes to mind is Jallianwallah Bagh. According to eyewitness accounts the official death toll of two is completely untrue. The people I spoke to reported a much higher toll. Had they belonged to any other community that mattered to mainstream political parties, the manner in which the crisis and its fallout were handled would have been quite different.

There is absolutely no justification or excuse for what happened. Even the police version of being provoked by a 'hostage' crisis is not a justification. To open fire like that with no attempt to negotiate shows a deep lack of respect for human life -- not just adivasi lives, but also the lives of the policeman and the forest official who were taken hostage. It is not the way governments in the past have dealt with kidnappings and hijackings by real militants. While those who killed the policeman must certainly be punished, you cannot hold all the people present there -- or the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha or indeed the entire adivasi community -- responsible for that act.

Survivors who I spoke to in hospital were less traumatised by their own injuries than by the fact that many of their family members including small children had gone missing. I met a man whose child had fallen from his arms when he was brought down by a police lathi and has been missing since then. There are others, women and old people missing. It is not known whether they are dead, or alive or hiding, hurt and hungry in the sanctuary.

A week has passed and no effort has been made to draw up lists of the missing and crosscheck them with jail and hospital records and reassure those who are rigid with grief and uncertainty about their loved ones. Can you even bear to think how you would feel in their place?

Meanwhile the police is terrorising adivasis in the region. Policemen enter settlements and arbitrarily arrest the men folk, beating them and dragging them away. Their families have no idea what has

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become of them. When we approached the villages we found ghost-settlements with only a few frightened women and children.

The men who remained all ran away. It took a lot to persuade them that we were not government officials or police-informers. Clearly the intention is to stamp out the struggle completely. By visiting this kind of vicious reprisal on the whole community, the government hopes that people will blame their leaders for putting them on the path that lead to such terrible times for them. It is a ruthless political game by accomplished players.

Journalists and cameramen have been threatened and intimidated. After the firing they were denied access to the interiors of the sanctuary where people went to hide. For fifteen hours after the firing the place was closed to the media. Nobody knows what really happened during that period. In an attempt to terrorise members of civil society who may have any sympathies with the adivasis, the police have arrested a DIET (District Institute for Educational Training) lecturer K.K. Surendran. He was tortured in custody and reports say that he has a ruptured ear drum. At the moment he is being held in Kannur jail.

The result of this police-raj is that adivasis are too frightened to go to work. People are frightened to employ them. In effect, they are starving to death in their villages -- their ration cards have been burnt in the carnage. This is an exacerbation of the situation that led them to fight for the return of their alienated lands in the first place.

This is to urge you to immediately release people who have been held on baseless charges and see that they are able to return safely to their villages. Most have lost all their worldly possessions -- they have no food, no vessels to carry water, and no clothes to wear. (People and well-wishers had to take them clothes in jail). Everything has been burned and destroyed by the police in their 'action'.

Forgotten in the reportage about the carnage and its aftermath is the fact that this confrontation was the outcome of yet another cynical promise by the Government of Kerala to provide land to 53,000 adivasi families by the end of December 2002. It was another link in the chain of 28 years of unforgivable manipulation. Ours is a nation built on the jagged shards of politicians' broken promises.

You have blood on your hands, sir. You need to make amends. And quickly.

Yours truly,

(Signed)  
Arundhati Roy

P.S: A small observation: In its eagerness to restore the Eucalyptus plantation to its pristine condition, apart from killing human beings, between bouts of firing the police squadron had a picnic lunch. The plastic cups and plates scattered on the 'eco-sensitive' battlefield tell a story. This one meal by the guardians of the State produced more non- biodegradable waste than the homes and worldly possessions of one thousand adivasis families.

Arundhati Roy

## Mesopotamia. Babylon. The Tigris And Euphrates

**How many children, in how many classrooms, over how many centuries, have hang-glided through the past, transported on the wings of these words? And now the bombs are falling, incinerating and humiliating that ancient civilisation.**

### ARUNDHATI ROY

On the steel torsos of their missiles, adolescent American soldiers scrawl colourful messages in childish handwriting: For Saddam, from the Fat Boy Posse. A building goes down. A marketplace. A home. A girl who loves a boy. A child who only ever wanted to play with his older brother's marbles.

On March 21, the day after American and British troops began their illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, an "embedded" CNN correspondent interviewed an American soldier. "I wanna get in there and get my nose dirty," Private AJ said. "I wanna take revenge for 9/11."

To be fair to the correspondent, even though he was "embedded" he did sort of weakly suggest that so far there was no real evidence that linked the Iraqi government to the September 11 attacks. Private AJ stuck his teenage tongue out all the way down to the end of his chin. "Yeah, well that stuff's way over my head," he said.

According to a New York Times/CBS News survey, 42 per cent of the American public believes that Saddam Hussein is directly responsible for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. And an ABC news poll says that 55 per cent of Americans believe that Saddam Hussein directly supports al-Qaida. What percentage of America's armed forces believe these fabrications is anybody's guess.

It is unlikely that British and American troops fighting in Iraq are aware that their governments supported Saddam Hussein both politically and financially through his worst excesses.

But why should poor AJ and his fellow soldiers be burdened with these details? It does not matter any more, does it? Hundreds of thousands of men, tanks, ships, choppers, bombs, ammunition, gas masks, high-protein food, whole aircrafts ferrying toilet paper, insect repellent, vitamins and bottled mineral water, are on the move. The phenomenal logistics of Operation Iraqi Freedom make it a universe unto itself. It doesn't need to justify its existence any more. It exists. It is.

President George W Bush, commander in chief of the US army, navy, airforce and marines has issued clear instructions: "Iraq. Will. Be. Liberated." (Perhaps he means that even if Iraqi people's bodies are killed, their souls will be liberated.) American and British citizens owe it to the supreme commander to forsake thought and rally behind their troops. Their countries are at war. And what a war it is.

After using the "good offices" of UN diplomacy (economic sanctions and weapons inspections) to ensure that Iraq was brought to its knees, its people starved, half a million of its children killed, its infrastructure severely damaged, after making sure that most of its weapons have been destroyed, in an act of cowardice that must surely be unrivalled in history, the "Allies"/"Coalition of the Willing"(better known as the Coalition of the Bullied and Bought) - sent in an invading army!

Operation Iraqi Freedom? I don't think so. It's more like Operation Let's Run a Race, but First Let Me Break Your Knees.

So far the Iraqi army, with its hungry, ill-equipped soldiers, its old guns and ageing tanks, has somehow managed to temporarily confound and occasionally even outmanoeuvre the "Allies". Faced with the richest, best-equipped, most powerful armed forces the world has ever seen, Iraq has shown spectacular courage and has even managed to put up what actually amounts to a defence. A defence which the Bush/Blair Pair have immediately denounced as deceitful and cowardly. (But then deceit is an old tradition with us natives. When we are invaded/ colonised/occupied and stripped of all dignity, we turn to guile and opportunism.)



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Even allowing for the fact that Iraq and the "Allies" are at war, the extent to which the "Allies" and their media cohorts are prepared to go is astounding to the point of being counterproductive to their own objectives.

When Saddam Hussein appeared on national TV to address the Iraqi people after the failure of the most elaborate assassination attempt in history - "Operation Decapitation" - we had Geoff Hoon, the British defence secretary, deriding him for not having the courage to stand up and be killed, calling him a coward who hides in trenches. We then had a flurry of Coalition speculation - Was it really Saddam, was it his double? Or was it Osama with a shave? Was it pre-recorded? Was it a speech? Was it black magic? Will it turn into a pumpkin if we really, really want it to?

After dropping not hundreds, but thousands of bombs on Baghdad, when a marketplace was mistakenly blown up and civilians killed - a US army spokesman implied that the Iraqis were blowing themselves up! "They're using very old stock. Their missiles go up and come down."

If so, may we ask how this squares with the accusation that the Iraqi regime is a paid-up member of the Axis of Evil and a threat to world peace?

When the Arab TV station al-Jazeera shows civilian casualties it's denounced as "emotive" Arab propaganda aimed at orchestrating hostility towards the "Allies", as though Iraqis are dying only in order to make the "Allies" look bad. Even French television has come in for some stick for similar reasons. But the awed, breathless footage of aircraft carriers, stealth bombers and cruise missiles arcing across the desert sky on American and British TV is described as the "terrible beauty" of war.

When invading American soldiers (from the army "that's only here to help") are taken prisoner and shown on Iraqi TV, George Bush says it violates the Geneva convention and "exposes the evil at the heart of the regime". But it is entirely acceptable for US television stations to show the hundreds of prisoners being held by the US government in Guantanamo Bay, kneeling on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs, blinded with opaque goggles and with earphones clamped on their ears, to ensure complete visual and aural deprivation. When questioned about the treatment of these prisoners, US Government officials don't deny that they're being ill-treated. They deny that they're "prisoners of war"! They call them "unlawful combatants", implying that their ill-treatment is legitimate! (So what's the party line on the massacre of prisoners in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan? Forgive and forget? And what of the prisoner tortured to death by the special forces at the Bagram airforce base? Doctors have formally called it homicide.)

When the "Allies" bombed the Iraqi television station (also, incidentally, a contravention of the Geneva convention), there was vulgar jubilation in the American media. In fact Fox TV had been lobbying for the attack for a while. It was seen as a righteous blow against Arab propaganda. But mainstream American and British TV continue to advertise themselves as "balanced" when their propaganda has achieved hallucinatory levels.

Why should propaganda be the exclusive preserve of the western media? Just because they do it better? Western journalists "embedded" with troops are given the status of heroes reporting from the frontlines of war. Non-"embedded" journalists (such as the BBC's Rageh Omaar, reporting from besieged and bombed Baghdad, witnessing, and clearly affected by the sight of bodies of burned children and wounded people) are undermined even before they begin their reportage: "We have to tell you that he is being monitored by the Iraqi authorities."

Increasingly, on British and American TV, Iraqi soldiers are being referred to as "militia" (ie: rabble). One BBC correspondent portentously referred to them as "quasi-terrorists". Iraqi defence is "resistance" or worse still, "pockets of resistance", Iraqi military strategy is deceit. (The US government bugging the phone lines of UN security council delegates, reported by the Observer, is hard-headed pragmatism.) Clearly for the "Allies", the only morally acceptable strategy the Iraqi army can pursue is to march out into the desert and be bombed by B-52s or be mowed down by machine-gun fire. Anything short of that is cheating.

And now we have the siege of Basra. About a million and a half people, 40 per cent of them children. Without clean water, and with very little food. We're still waiting for the legendary Shia "uprising", for the happy hordes to stream out of the city and rain roses and hosannahs on the "liberating" army. Where are the hordes? Don't they know that television productions work to tight schedules? (It may

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well be that if Saddam's regime falls there will be dancing on the streets of Basra. But then, if the Bush regime were to fall, there would be dancing on the streets the world over.)

After days of enforcing hunger and thirst on the citizens of Basra, the "Allies" have brought in a few trucks of food and water and positioned them tantalisingly on the outskirts of the city. Desperate people flock to the trucks and fight each other for food. (The water we hear, is being sold. To revitalise the dying economy, you understand.) On top of the trucks, desperate photographers fought each other to get pictures of desperate people fighting each other for food. Those pictures will go out through photo agencies to newspapers and glossy magazines that pay extremely well. Their message: The messiahs are at hand, distributing fishes and loaves.

As of July last year the delivery of \$5.4bn worth of supplies to Iraq was blocked by the Bush/Blair Pair. It didn't really make the news. But now under the loving caress of live TV, 450 tonnes of humanitarian aid - a minuscule fraction of what's actually needed (call it a script prop) - arrived on a British ship, the "Sir Galahad". Its arrival in the port of Umm Qasr merited a whole day of live TV broadcasts. Barf bag, anyone?

Nick Guttman, head of emergencies for Christian Aid, writing for the Independent on Sunday said that it would take 32 Sir Galahad's a day to match the amount of food Iraq was receiving before the bombing began.

We oughtn't to be surprised though. It's old tactics. They've been at it for years. Consider this moderate proposal by John McNaughton from the Pentagon Papers, published during the Vietnam war: "Strikes at population targets (per se) are likely not only to create a counterproductive wave of revulsion abroad and at home, but greatly to increase the risk of enlarging the war with China or the Soviet Union. Destruction of locks and dams, however - if handled right - might ... offer promise. It should be studied. Such destruction does not kill or drown people. By shallow-flooding the rice, it leads after time to widespread starvation (more than a million?) unless food is provided - which we could offer to do 'at the conference table'."

Times haven't changed very much. The technique has evolved into a doctrine. It's called "Winning Hearts and Minds".

So, here's the moral maths as it stands: 200,000 Iraqis estimated to have been killed in the first Gulf war. Hundreds of thousands dead because of the economic sanctions. (At least that lot has been saved from Saddam Hussein.) More being killed every day. Tens of thousands of US soldiers who fought the 1991 war officially declared "disabled" by a disease called the Gulf war syndrome, believed in part to be caused by exposure to depleted uranium. It hasn't stopped the "Allies" from continuing to use depleted uranium.

And now this talk of bringing the UN back into the picture. But that old UN girl - it turns out that she just ain't what she was cracked up to be. She's been demoted (although she retains her high salary). Now she's the world's janitor. She's the Philippino cleaning lady, the Indian jamadarni, the postal bride from Thailand, the Mexican household help, the Jamaican au pair. She's employed to clean other peoples' shit. She's used and abused at will.

Despite Blair's earnest submissions, and all his fawning, Bush has made it clear that the UN will play no independent part in the administration of postwar Iraq. The US will decide who gets those juicy "reconstruction" contracts. But Bush has appealed to the international community not to "politicise" the issue of humanitarian aid. On the March 28, after Bush called for the immediate resumption of the UN's oil for food programme, the UN security council voted unanimously for the resolution. This means that everybody agrees that Iraqi money (from the sale of Iraqi oil) should be used to feed Iraqi people who are starving because of US led sanctions and the illegal US-led war.

Contracts for the "reconstruction" of Iraq we're told, in discussions on the business news, could jump-start the world economy. It's funny how the interests of American corporations are so often, so successfully and so deliberately confused with the interests of the world economy. While the American people will end up paying for the war, oil companies, weapons manufacturers, arms dealers, and corporations involved in "reconstruction" work will make direct gains from the war. Many of them are old friends and former employers of the Bush/ Cheney/Rumsfeld/Rice cabal. Bush has already asked Congress for \$75bn. Contracts for "re-construction" are already being negotiated. The news doesn't hit the stands because much of the US corporate media is owned and managed by the same interests.

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Operation Iraqi Freedom, Tony Blair assures us is about returning Iraqi oil to the Iraqi people. That is, returning Iraqi oil to the Iraqi people via corporate multinationals. Like Shell, like Chevron, like Halliburton. Or are we missing the plot here? Perhaps Halliburton is actually an Iraqi company? Perhaps US vice-president Dick Cheney (who is a former director of Halliburton) is a closet Iraqi?

As the rift between Europe and America deepens, there are signs that the world could be entering a new era of economic boycotts. CNN reported that Americans are emptying French wine into gutters, chanting, "We don't want your stinking wine." We've heard about the re-baptism of French fries. Freedom fries they're called now. There's news trickling in about Americans boycotting German goods. The thing is that if the fallout of the war takes this turn, it is the US who will suffer the most. Its homeland may be defended by border patrols and nuclear weapons, but its economy is strung out across the globe. Its economic outposts are exposed and vulnerable to attack in every direction. Already the internet is buzzing with elaborate lists of American and British government products and companies that should be boycotted. Apart from the usual targets, Coke, Pepsi and McDonald's - government agencies such as USAID, the British department for international development, British and American banks, Arthur Anderson, Merrill Lynch, American Express, corporations such as Bechtel, General Electric, and companies such as Reebok, Nike and Gap - could find themselves under siege. These lists are being honed and re-fined by activists across the world. They could become a practical guide that directs and channels the amorphous, but growing fury in the world. Suddenly, the "inevitability" of the project of corporate globalisation is beginning to seem more than a little evitable.

It's become clear that the war against terror is not really about terror, and the war on Iraq not only about oil. It's about a superpower's self-destructive impulse towards supremacy, stranglehold, global hegemony. The argument is being made that the people of Argentina and Iraq have both been decimated by the same process. Only the weapons used against them differ: In one case it's an IMF chequebook. In the other, cruise missiles.

Finally, there's the matter of Saddam's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. (Oops, nearly forgot about those!)

In the fog of war - one thing's for sure - if Saddam's regime indeed has weapons of mass destruction, it is showing an astonishing degree of responsibility and restraint in the teeth of extreme provocation. Under similar circumstances, (say if Iraqi troops were bombing New York and laying siege to Washington DC) could we expect the same of the Bush regime? Would it keep its thousands of nuclear warheads in their wrapping paper? What about its chemical and biological weapons? Its stocks of anthrax, smallpox and nerve gas? Would it?

Excuse me while I laugh.

In the fog of war we're forced to speculate: Either Saddam is an extremely responsible tyrant. Or - he simply does not possess weapons of mass destruction. Either way, regardless of what happens next, Iraq comes out of the argument smelling sweeter than the US government.

So here's Iraq - rogue state, grave threat to world peace, paid-up member of the Axis of Evil. Here's Iraq, invaded, bombed, besieged, bullied, its sovereignty shat upon, its children killed by cancers, its people blown up on the streets. And here's all of us watching. CNN-BBC, BBC-CNN late into the night. Here's all of us, enduring the horror of the war, enduring the horror of the propaganda and enduring the slaughter of language as we know and understand it. Freedom now means mass murder (or, in the US, fried potatoes). When someone says "humanitarian aid" we automatically go looking for induced starvation. "Embedded" I have to admit, is a great find. It's what it sounds like. And what about "arsenal of tactics?" Nice!

In most parts of the world, the invasion of Iraq is being seen as a racist war. The real danger of a racist war unleashed by racist regimes is that it engenders racism in everybody - perpetrators, victims, spectators. It sets the parameters for the debate, it lays out a grid for a particular way of thinking. There is a tidal wave of hatred for the US rising from the ancient heart of the world. In Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe, Australia. I encounter it every day. Sometimes it comes from the most unlikely sources. Bankers, businessmen, yuppie students, and they bring to it all the crassness of their conservative, illiberal politics. That absurd inability to separate governments from people: America is a nation of morons, a nation of murderers, they say, (with the same carelessness with which they say,

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"All Muslims are terrorists"). Even in the grotesque universe of racist insult, the British make their entry as add-ons. Arse-lickers, they're called.

Suddenly, I, who have been vilified for being "anti-American" and "anti-west", find myself in the extraordinary position of defending the people of America. And Britain.

Those who descend so easily into the pit of racist abuse would do well to remember the hundreds of thousands of American and British citizens who protested against their country's stockpile of nuclear weapons. And the thousands of American war resisters who forced their government to withdraw from Vietnam. They should know that the most scholarly, scathing, hilarious critiques of the US government and the "American way of life" comes from American citizens. And that the funniest, most bitter condemnation of their prime minister comes from the British media. Finally they should remember that right now, hundreds of thousands of British and American citizens are on the streets protesting the war. The Coalition of the Bullied and Bought consists of governments, not people. More than one third of America's citizens have survived the relentless propaganda they've been subjected to, and many thousands are actively fighting their own government. In the ultra-patriotic climate that prevails in the US, that's as brave as any Iraqi fighting for his or her homeland.

While the "Allies" wait in the desert for an uprising of Shia Muslims on the streets of Basra, the real uprising is taking place in hundreds of cities across the world. It has been the most spectacular display of public morality ever seen.

Most courageous of all, are the hundreds of thousands of American people on the streets of America's great cities - Washington, New York, Chicago, San Francisco. The fact is that the only institution in the world today that is more powerful than the American government, is American civil society. American citizens have a huge responsibility riding on their shoulders. How can we not salute and support those who not only acknowledge but act upon that responsibility? They are our allies, our friends.

At the end of it all, it remains to be said that dictators like Saddam Hussein, and all the other despots in the Middle East, in the central Asian republics, in Africa and Latin America, many of them installed, supported and financed by the US government, are a menace to their own people. Other than strengthening the hand of civil society (instead of weakening it as has been done in the case of Iraq), there is no easy, pristine way of dealing with them. (It's odd how those who dismiss the peace movement as utopian, don't hesitate to proffer the most absurdly dreamy reasons for going to war: to stamp out terrorism, install democracy, eliminate fascism, and most entertainingly, to "rid the world of evil-doers".)

Regardless of what the propaganda machine tells us, these tin-pot dictators are not the greatest threat to the world. The real and pressing danger, the greatest threat of all is the locomotive force that drives the political and economic engine of the US government, currently piloted by George Bush. Bush-bashing is fun, because he makes such an easy, sumptuous target. It's true that he is a dangerous, almost suicidal pilot, but the machine he handles is far more dangerous than the man himself.

Despite the pall of gloom that hangs over us today, I'd like to file a cautious plea for hope: in times of war, one wants one's weakest enemy at the helm of his forces. And President George W Bush is certainly that. Any other even averagely intelligent US president would have probably done the very same things, but would have managed to smoke-up the glass and confuse the opposition. Perhaps even carry the UN with him. Bush's tactless imprudence and his brazen belief that he can run the world with his riot squad, has done the opposite. He has achieved what writers, activists and scholars have striven to achieve for decades. He has exposed the ducts. He has placed on full public view the working parts, the nuts and bolts of the apocalyptic apparatus of the American empire.

Now that the blueprint (The Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire) has been put into mass circulation, it could be disabled quicker than the pundits predicted.

Bring on the spanners.

Originally published in The Guardian. Courtesy Znet

## 'The Outline Of the Beast'

**America has been stripped of its mask. Its secret history of brutal interventions and unforgivable manipulations is street talk. The dots have been joined, and the outline of the beast has emerged.**

### **ANTHONY ARNOVE**

**Anthony Arnove:** The Corporate media ask the question over and over again: What can be done about Saddam Hussein? What's your response?

**Arundhati Roy:** The question is disingenuous. Let's turn it around and ask instead: What do we do with George Bush and Tony Blair? Should we just stand by and watch while they bomb and kill and annihilate people? Saddam Hussein is a killer, and in the past, the U.S. and the UK governments have supported many of his worst excesses.

The U.S. and UK have bombed Iraq's infrastructure, fired depleted uranium into Iraq's farmlands, blocked vaccines and hospital equipment, contributing to hundreds of thousands of deaths of children under five. Denis Halliday, the former UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, has called the sanctions a form of genocide.

If you lifted the sanctions, Iraqi society might have gained the strength to overthrow their dictator (just like the people of Indonesia, Serbia, Romania overthrew theirs).

And if it's repression, sectarianism and human rights abuses we're concerned about, let's also turn our attention to Colombia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Central Asian Republics, Israel, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Burma and, of course, America...Shall we pre-empt Saddam and bomb them all? Then he won't have anyone left to kill.

The greatest threat to the world today is not Saddam Hussein, it's George Bush (joined at the hip to his new foreign secretary, Tony Blair).

**Bush says that he's leading an "international coalition" against Iraq. What's your reaction to that?**

The international Coalition of the Bullied and the Bought is what that coalition is more commonly called.

The important thing to keep in mind is that it is governments that have been coerced, one way or another. Even the major "shareholders" in the coalition--governments of countries like Spain and Australia--don't have the support of the majority of their people.

There have been some interesting studies showing the nature of the regimes of some of the countries in this "coalition." Many of them are high up on the list of human rights violators--and have no business to criticize Saddam Hussein given their own reputations.

Bush also says that this war is "defensive," and that it would be "suicidal" not to attack Iraq.

That's like an elephant taking a long run-up to smash an ant to death--and then saying that it was "defensive," and that to let the ant remain alive would have been suicidal. It would be fair to call the elephant paranoid and unstable.

Oh, and that doesn't include the business of using the UN to disarm the ant before the elephant attacks. Apart from calling it paranoid and unstable, you could also call it a coward and a cheat.

**In an interview on the Pacifica Radio program "Democracy Now!" you spoke about the "murder of language." Can you elaborate on that?**

Anthony Arnove – 'The Outline Of the Beast'-

Freedom means mass murder now. In the U.S., it means fried potatoes (freedom fries). Liberation means invasion and occupation. When you hear the words "humanitarian aid," it's advisable to look around for induced starvation. We all know what collateral damage means.

Of course, none of this is new. When the U.S. invaded South Vietnam and bombed the countryside, killing thousands of people and forcing thousands to flee to cities where they were held in refugee camps, Samuel Huntington called this a process of "urbanization."

**The New York Times Magazine recently ran a cover that read "The New American Empire: Get Used to It." How is that message playing in India and elsewhere outside the United States?**

In India, there is a dissonance between what people think of the war and the American Empire, and the deliberately ambiguous position of the Indian government. This war against Iraq has fuelled a lot of anger among a majority of people, but there are the opportunists, among the elite in particular, who are rather stupidly hoping to be thrown some crumbs in the "reconstruction" era. They're like hyenas. Vultures.

No one's going to "get used" to the American Empire--no one can. This is because that empire can only survive and hold its position if it continues with its agenda of mass murder and mass dispossession.

These are not things people get used to, however hard they try. You can expect to be killed, but you can't get used to the idea.

It will be a bloody battle, this battle for the establishment and perpetuation of hegemony. The world is not a static place. It's wild and unpredictable. The American Empire isn't going to have all that easy a ride. The people of the world will not be lining the streets raining roses on the emperor.

**More than 10 million people demonstrated around the world on February 15, including millions in the countries leading the war on Iraq. Why do you think we are seeing such large protests?**

I think that there's only one reason. America has been stripped of its mask. Its secret history of brutal interventions and unforgivable manipulations is street talk. The dots have been joined, and the outline of the beast has emerged.

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