

Arundhati Roy's The Greater Common Good Dams, Development, and Democracy in India



By Paige Johnson Tan

Arundhati Roy, a contemporary writer from India, is best known globally for her Booker-Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). In addition to being a celebrated novelist, Roy is also a passionate activist who rails against globalization, multinational corporations, alleged US global hegemony, Hindu-Muslim violence, nuclear weapons, and, of course, big dams. The following essay is an account of how I use one of Roy's works in conjunction with a variety of other materials to teach contemporary India, development issues, and, perhaps most important, critical thinking skills.

Roy's *The Greater Common Good*, written in 1999, is an advocacy piece available free online at the Web site of the Friends of River Narmada (<http://www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html>). The essay grew out of Roy's on-the-ground involvement fighting the construction of the Narmada River dams and, in particular, the projected 139-meter-high Sardar Sarovar dam. Dams are, according to Roy, "India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster."

Greater Common Good is a screech against big dams and, in a broader sense, against all "Big Projects" dreamt up by government notionally to improve the lives of the people as a whole, but which impose seemingly intolerable costs on particular people. Roy dreams:

Perhaps that's what the twenty-first 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?

The quotation above gives the reader a glimpse into why Roy's piece is such an arresting addition to the curriculum. Roy marshals data but she writes with passion and a love of language; in short, she argues like a novelist. Roy says she was drawn to what was happening in the Narmada Valley because, as a writer, she is drawn to stories "the way vultures are drawn to kills." And she believes she found the story of a lifetime, the story of India in the twentieth century. Roy's writing will jar some readers. This is not a sterile tale, and the author uses staccato sentences and even occasional vulgarities to move the reader. Some readers will be inspired. Roy invites: "Listen



Protesters, called *satyagrahis* in the tradition of Gandhi, defying the rising waters in Domkhedi, September 1999. The protesters were eventually forcibly removed by the government.

Source: <http://www.narmada.org/images/haripics/harikrishna.pictures1.html>
Photo courtesy of the Friends of the River Narmada organization.

then, to the story of the Narmada Valley. Understand it. And, if you wish, enlist. Who knows, it may lead to magic." Some readers will recoil. At least both sets of readers will feel something, too rare with classroom material.

I use Roy's essay each semester in my Introduction to Global Politics class at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. (It is probably suitable for advanced high schoolers as well. Younger students might watch the video *Dam/Age*. See the resource list at the conclusion of the article.) Often, in this survey course, I have time only for one

session on development, and it is around this reading that I structure the class' consideration. I assign the piece not to proselytize against dams, but rather because of the richness of the resource for teaching critical thinking as well as important issues surrounding India's development and democracy.

The piece invites students to engage in a critical reading and evaluation of Roy's argument. Who is this author? What is her argument against big dams? Is the argument credible? How does she back it up? Enterprising students will search the Internet to find out more about Roy and also contrary views on India's dams (suggested Web sites both pro and con are below).

The resource is rich as a tale of India's development as well. The big dams against which Roy rails are part and parcel of the development strategy fostered by Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's independence-era prime minister. To Nehru, dams were "the temples of modern India," typical of the government mega-projects that would allow a dispassionate and benevolent state to mastermind rational development and lift millions out of poverty. In contrast, Gandhi, India's non-violent independence activist, would not have approved of these baubles of modernity. Gandhi favored relatively self-sufficient village-level political and economic units in which men would be connected to their fellows, their God, and their environment. While Nehru favored the big, to Gandhi, small was beautiful. Roy dislikes viewing the dam controversy through the "old bottle" of Nehru versus Gandhi, but the great men do hover in the background. In the tale of the Narmada, big government (Nehru) touts the many benefits the dams will bring, extolling the good of the many over the good of the few, while activists and peasants engage in non-violent resistance (à la Gandhi) on the ground to save their homes and way of life.

ONLINE RESOURCE

Beyond the Nehru/Gandhi debate, Roy's essay speaks to one of the core issues of development. Development always involves choices. Something will be lost and gained when development occurs (teachers can draw a comparison to a development issue in their own locality, the effects of Walmart stores, for example). Roy, who insists she is no "anti-development junkie" and aware of "the isolation, the inequity and the potential savagery of" village life, would likely argue that when we engage in development we should at least go in with our eyes open, aware of who will win and who will lose, what costs will be paid (and by whom), and for what benefits (and for whom). In the particular case of the Narmada, Roy argues the villagers lose everything while the beneficiaries are far away in the cities and in the government. "India doesn't live in her villages. India dies in her villages."

Roy also questions whether the dam will even deliver the benefits promised by the government. She details that, despite India's fascination with record keeping, there is no single figure of the number of people displaced by India's big dams. Using what numbers are available, Roy conjectures a figure of 33 million people displaced by India's big dam building since independence. And this is likely a con-



Occupation of one of the dam sites by citizen groups, January 2000.
Source: <http://www.narmada.org/images/IAN112000PICS/women.jpg>
Photo courtesy of the Friends of the River Narmada organization.

servative figure, the real number probably 40 or 50 million. Thinking of that army of displaced people, the population of Spain or South Korea, Roy feels "like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave."

In fact, Roy asserts the dams will cost more, deliver less, and displace more people than the government claims. In the case of the Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada, the government has maintained it was building the dam to deliver water to thirsty villages, a noble cause. Roy is dubious, noting that the water would have "to negotiate its way past the ten sugar mills, the golf-courses, the five-star hotels, the water parks," the cash crops, and several big cities to get to the thirsty villages. She considers it unlikely the water will ever reach those thirsty villagers. To update Roy's piece, indeed the thirsty cities have taken their share (and the government of the state of Gujarat has claimed that as a success as well). The canal delivering water to the parched area of Kutch is sometimes bone dry.

The *Greater Common Good* highlights the plight of those tens of thousands of people, many lower caste and from India's tribal groups, who will lose the most because of the Narmada dams. The government is only obligated to provide a cash compensation in the event of displacement by an infrastructure project like a dam. But many tribal peoples have no formal title to their lands, thus making collecting compensation nearly impossible. Even where title exists, residents are often inadequately compensated or relocated to hard-scrabble areas; some have died of starvation in their new homes. Frequently, whole communities are split up and sent to different relocation sites. There is a loss of culture, language, temples, archaeological record, and a once self-sufficient lifestyle. "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 labor (that builds more projects that displace more people)." Roy quotes a resident removed from the dam area: "Why didn't they just poison us? Then . . . the Government could have survived alone with its precious dam all to itself."

Embedded in the story of dams and development is also a story of India's democracy, notionally the largest in the world. Yet, on the ground in the Narmada Valley, residents would be hard-pressed to say they control their own destiny. In Roy's telling, the politicians and their allies in the bureaucracy, the dam-building industry, the international aid community, and India's urban areas lord over the people of the valley. To Roy, projects like the dam take power away from the people and put it in the hands of a single authority who will decide who gets what water when, essentially the power of life and death. India's democracy, for Roy, is "the benevolent mask behind which a pestilence flourishes unchallenged."

"It's time," Roy says, "to puncture the myth about the inefficient, bumbling, corrupt, but ultimately genial, essentially democratic, Indian State. Carelessness cannot account for fifty

MUSEUM QUALITY EXHIBITS



"MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE"—40 panels (2' x 4') of photographs with captions on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

"INDIA—THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND"—more than 100 color photographs taken over 40 years by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

"BEAUTY IN STONE"—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

Also—smaller portable exhibits (mailed via postal service), video cassettes (including biographical documentaries of Gandhi), and other resources available for loan.

Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapith University in India founded in 1920).

THE GANDHI MEMORIAL CENTER

P.O. Box 9515
Washington, D.C. 20016
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Website: www.gandhimc.org
Email: resources@gandhimc.org

million disappeared people. Nor can Karma. Let's not delude ourselves. There is method here, precise, relentless, and one hundred percent man-made."

The unstoppable state builds its resources while using its powers to prevent opposition to its plans. In the case of the Narmada, Roy details the government's use of the country's Official Secrets Act to prevent demonstrators from gathering. Non-violent demonstrators have been beaten and arrested (Roy herself was briefly jailed for her dam activism). Protesters who vowed to remain in villages as the waters behind the dams rose were forcibly removed, to deprive the anti-dam movement of martyrs. In the end, Roy asks the most fundamental question of all: "Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish?" Basically, who has the right?

The *Greater Common Good* is a spellbinding window into contemporary India by a thoughtful, lucid, and passionate participant. With this story of dams, development, and democracy, Arundhati Roy has indeed told an important tale of India's post-independence experience.

RELATED RESOURCES

For the Dams (Pro):

Sardar Sarovar Dam (official): <http://www.sardarsarovardam.org/>

Narmada Control Authority: http://www.ncaindia.org/index_.htm

Ministry of Water Resources of India: <http://www.wrmin.nic.in/>

Narmada Valley Development Authority <http://www.nvda.nic.in/>

An interview with the head of Sardar Sarovar in 2000:

<http://www.spannerfilms.net/?lid=805>

Against the Dams (Con):

International Rivers Network, South Asia Campaign:

<http://www.irn.org/programs/india/>

Non-partisan World Commission on Dams: <http://www.dams.org/>

Friends of River Narmada: <http://www.narmada.org>

More on Roy:

For some students, it may be easier to learn about the dam controversy by watching a video. Aradhana Seth has directed a fifty-minute documentary, featuring Arundhati Roy, in which Roy primarily narrates her own story of involvement in the popular campaign against the dam. The video echoes much of the same information as is available in *The Greater Common Good*. The film is *Dam/Age: A Film with Arundhati Roy*, First Run/Icarus, 2002. The film sells for \$390 and is available at <http://www.frif.com>. Alternatively, a less clear, but still watchable, version of the film is available free online at http://www.freespeech.org/fsitv/fscm2/contentviewer.php?content_id=686.

There is also an excellent seven-minute video of Roy discussing the broader issues posed by the dams on PBS available at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/dammed/#>. Mishal Husain, the interviewer, asks Roy tough questions, speaking for many readers in challenging Roy's sometimes facile moralism. ■

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