

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.

By Arundhati Roy

Continued from last week

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—subsidiised air-conditioners 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.

Its 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

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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.)

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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 12,600. 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 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.

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, hu-

mane 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 people's 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 Ferkwa 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.