



musings

# The Greater Common Good

by Arundhati Roy

HERE 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 deviant 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 brought only horror. Roads brought surveyors. Surveyors brought trucks. Trucks brought policemen. Policemen brought bullets and beatings and rape and arrest and, in one case, murder. 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?

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 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 unveils 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.

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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.

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.

To be continued

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## reflections

# An Evening with Dominique Lapierre (Part 3)

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

"Life is a wealth, keep it  
Life is love, enjoy it  
Life is mystery, know it  
Life is a promise, fulfill it."

—Mother Teresa

To appreciate what Lapierre and others like him are doing unselfishly in the slums of old Calcutta, we have to understand and appreciate the engine that drives these people to become a do-gooder. That engine is — humanism. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word humanism as follows: "A system of thought that centers on human beings and their values, capacities, and worth." The other definition for humanism that I found in the same dictionary is — "Concern with the interests, needs, and welfare of human beings." And of course there is also a broader definition of humanism from the perspective of secular thoughts. Thus, humanism is also "a cultural and intellectual movement of the Renaissance that emphasized secular concerns as a result of the rediscovery and study of and study of the literature, art, and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome." Historically speaking, the humanism movement became started with the Italian Renaissance. The writings of Italian thinkers like Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94), and others emphasized the liberation of humanity from the thrall of the mediaeval church and state. Humanism, thus contrasts the tenets of church or any other organized religion, and emphasizes the importance of a person above anything else.

Two other Europeans from the same period who made remarkable contribution in the field of humanism are Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) and Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), an English statesman. Both of these writers fought with the church authorities at the time. Erasmus wrote his satire "Encomium Morae" (1509, The Praise of Folly) and

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much concern for a particular class of people who are ostracized by the mainstream community of Bengal. These people are lepers of Bengal. Perhaps through the word of mouth, lepers of Bengal had learned that there was a safe haven for them in *Ananda Nagar*. The leper colony had existed a longtime before Lapierre had set his foot in Calcutta.

But the leper colony was as best a squalor. There was no hospital nearby or anywhere in Calcutta that can deliver a healthcare suited to leper's need, i.e., amputation and that sort of unpleasant things.

ten years later published his masterpiece "Colloquia," in which he details the audacious handling of church abuses. The Englishman Thomas More also laid the foundation of Humanism by writing a book entitled "Utopia" (1516) in Latin. Nevertheless, the writer paid a very dearly refusing to recognize the King of England, Henry the VIII, as the Head of the English Church. He was imprisoned by the order of the king and was beheaded in 1535.

Humanism with strong roots in Europe, therefore, flourished all over Central Europe in later centuries. Our subcontinent also received a dose of humanism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul's poems in the 1930s and 40s show the influence of humanism. I recall one poem where wrote, "...manusher cheye bodo kichu neti, nohe kichu mohiyani..." (there is no other thing bigger and nobler than human being). Kazi Nazrul very often wrote against religious prejudices and he tried as best he could through his fiery poems to uplift the human spirit. Nazrul wrote so much on humanism that he never received any encomium from Muslim clerics of his time.

It is rather befitting that late twentieth century's humanist and philanthropist Dominique Lapierre had zeroed in his humanistic activities in a city that was considered home away from home for Kazi Nazrul. Nazrul and Calcutta were inseparable. The city's

culture flourished especially in the field of drama and music in the glorious 30s and 40s.

In his March 26, 1999, speech given in the music auditorium of Loyola University in New Orleans, Lapierre showed much concern for a particular class of people who are ostracized by the mainstream community of Bengal. These people are lepers of Bengal. Perhaps through the word of mouth, lepers of Bengal had learned that there was a safe haven for them in *Ananda Nagar*. The leper colony had existed a longtime before Lapierre had set his foot in Calcutta. But the leper colony was as best a squalor. There was no hospital nearby or anywhere in Calcutta that can deliver a healthcare suited to leper's need, i.e., amputation and that sort of unpleasant things.

destitute of Bengal. He mentioned in his talk that his foundation had already bought one motor launch and retrofitted it with medical devices and turned the boat into a mobile hospital. Now the boat goes to Sundarban area located south and southeast of Calcutta. Because of massive siltation, new landmass had developed in that part of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Lapierre had mentioned that not a single hospital could be located in that tract of islands. As one can imagine, all sorts of tropical diseases are prevalent in that waterlogged area. Tuberculosis, water-borne gastrointestinal diseases are on the rise over there due to lack of clean drinkable water supplies. It is good to know that Lapierre's medical boat makes house calls in the monsoon months to treat poor folks in these far-off places where public medical facilities are non-existent. I was amazed to learn that Lapierre Foundation's boat is even equipped with an X-ray machine for diagnosis of tuberculosis, which they use routinely.

Lapierre's talk also touched on financial issues like income disparities among the people of industrialized West and the rest of the world. Being a humanist Lapierre had warned us that in the post Cold War world, the gap between those who have and have not is growing fast. He thinks we ought to bridge the gap. Otherwise, some social problem may lie ahead of us. He cited a dismal statistic indicating that about 1.3 billion people in this world,

constituting roughly one-fourth of the total world population, are living a wretched life — living practically hand-to-mouth — with an average income of \$1.50 a day. There is a gross inequality in the distribution of wealth all across the globe. He cites that three richest man in the world, viz., Microsoft's Bill Gates, Sultan of Brunei, and Berkshire Hathaway's Warren Buffett, had combined wealth enough to match the GDP of 48 poorest nation in this world. The other frightening statistics I heard from Lapierre are that 223 richest people on this earth had enough wealth to provide food, healthcare, and water supplies for the entire population on earth for a year. The New World order, which is so dependent upon 'information technology,' is producing new billionaires instantaneously. These days, there is not a single day that goes by we do not hear about initial public offering (IPO) of the sales of shares in the open market. When those IPOs do come, new millionaires are born before you can count even ten. Microsoft's chairman Bill Gates assets rose from about \$ 170 million (1986) when his company went IPOs to a dizzying \$ 60 billion in just 13 years. How much of Bill Gates newly found wealth (thanks to Wall Street for that) is earmarked for philanthropy? Not much! Lapierre's apprehension about a social upheaval in the coming millennium cannot be ruled out entirely as long as the world produces more of the Bill Gates (Microsoft), Paul Allen (Microsoft), Michael Dell (Dell Computer), and Steven Ballmer (Microsoft).

Let me change the focus now from the world of rich folks to the world of common and ordinary people. Lapierre's latest book "A Thousand Suns" had chronicled the heroism of very ordinary people. These people are not rich by any stretch of imagination. But these ordinary people are doing some extraordinary things in far away land. He talked about a Brit by the name James Stevens in his new book, who sold his property in England only to come to Calcutta in 1969. There he opened a poor folk's home naming it 'Resurrection Home.' Stevens' resources were very limited and he was on the verge of closing down the place for the lack of adequate funding. Hearing Stevens' quagmire Lapierre ran a story on 'Resurrection Home' in the French magazine *La Vie* and appealed to the readers for help. A few days later a postal van showed up at the front door of a building where Lapierre had a flat. Altogether 9 postal bags containing 7,000 envelopes were delivered to Lapierre. Enough collection came in small donations for 'Resurrection Home' through the mail that day. Stevens' home for poor in Calcutta was saved by the action of one humanist. The poor and hapless children from *Ananda Nagar*'s Lepre Colony without realizing who had rescued the 'Resurrection Home' from financial ruins kept on going to the school founded by James Stevens.

When ordinary folks do extraordinary things for the love of fellow human beings, the story needs to be told. The actions need to be lauded. Dominique Lapierre's new book "A Thousand Suns" is a cornucopia of such tales. It is a feast for eyes. A testament that humanism is alive and well even in the most wretched place on earth.

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