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Arundhati Roy's Critique of Big Projects: An Eco-Critical Perspective

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Abstract

The present article endeavors to analyze Arundhati Roy's critique of big dams and projects. An attempt is made to bring home various dimensions and commitments that inform her critique of the big dams which cause more damage and devastation than serving the needs of the people at large. The primary focus is on Ms. Roy's participation in the Narmada Bachao Andolan which is an Indian resistance movement that tries to prevent building of large dams, reservoirs and power plants. As the building of projects may lead to evacuation of villages and to lose immovable properties numerous environmentalists, humanists, activists and other personalities also have condemned the government for the decisions and implementations. Arundhati Roy is one among them who raises awareness of dangers of massive dams, of resulting forced relocation of people and of damage to environment. The present article is going to discuss the tireless and selfless service of Arundhati Roy and the NBA to tens of thousands of farmers, Adivasis and common people who are participating in the protest to oppose the aforementioned large structures constructed by the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA). In conclusion, the article also attempts to bring out the various aspects and convictions that informed Roy's critique of big projects.

Keywords: Rehabilitation, Displacement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Exploitation, Resistance, Habitation, Agitation, Activism, Environment, Projects.

Arundhati Roy is one of a very few prominent Indian socio-political activists and activist-writers who fights for preservation of sustainable environment. She craves also for well-being of fellow humans, mostly poor and innocent people. Her concern isn't limited to just local problems but national as well as international and it has many facets because she fights against multiple menaces in the world. Debarati Bandyopadhyay opines, "...she [Ms. Roy] had criticized both global and national political and economic policies and the mode of implementation of government decisions in terms of, again, both short-term and long-term impact on the population and the environment" (5). Ms. Roy supports the NBA which opposes construction of Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) on the Narmada River. The movement's leading figure is Indian activist Medha Patkar. The SSP is the biggest dam on the Narmada River and the reservoir of the dam encompasses more than 40,000 hectares. Both Medha Patkar and Ms. Roy oppose construction of India's major dam projects. They demand practical solutions that would aid impoverished people while preserving environment. They have advocated concern for dam-affected communities and sufficient rehabilitation and relocation of all residents there before their removal.

Ms. Roy claims that the Supreme Court's decision to let the Narmada Valley Projects to carry on with construction has been unexpected and has made things worse for the NBA than before. The court has ruled that the Prime Minister (P.M.) is the ultimate arbiter of any disputes pertaining to the building of the Dams. Ms. Roy questions how the court could give P.M. complete authority without a valid reason. If all the power is transferred to the P.M., there is no use of authorities, committees and ministries who also take part during the construction of the dams. In a conversation with Mr.N. Ram, Ms. Roy questions:

...a country in which it is left to the prime minister to clear a large dam project without any scientific studies being done, in which it is left to the prime minister to decide the final height of a dam regardless of how much water there is in the river, in which it is left to the prime minister to decide whether or not there is land available for resettlement—sounds very much like a Banana Republic to me. What is the point of committees and ministries and authorities if it's all up to Big Daddy in the end? (Roy, *The Shape of the Beast* 10).

A democracy that grants P.M. exclusive authority may run risk of becoming a dictatorship. In a democracy, people are free to choose what they want, what is right and what is wrong. Otherwise, common people of the country may suffer.

As a writer and activist, Arundhati Roy wants to know about the problems faced by those who live along the Valley of Narmada River so that she might lend a hand. She is disappointed by the poor quality of life of Adivasi people. Their civilization would be drowned in the waters of the river as a result of building the Sardar Sarovar reservoir. The native population would be uprooted from the area where they have lived for hundreds of years. The arrival of monsoon in 1999 brought them their displacement. In this connection the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister (P.M.) of India could be recollected as a fine example. He said to the villagers who were displaced by the Hirakud dam in 1948, "If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country..." (Ctd. Roy, *My Seditious Heart* 25). According to the statements of the Prime Minister,

the Adivasis and the impoverished should make sacrifices for the good of the country. But wealthy people don't do for the country in that way. They make absolutely no contribution to the advancement of the people who live in the forests. Both wealthy people and government have failed to aid the underprivileged people in the country. On the other hand, the people assist them by allowing for the building of the dams. The impoverished have been the victims several times during developmental projects.

The residents that live near the Narmada River have not supported the construction of the Sardar Sarovar project. In fact, they are the ones with the legal authority to use the resources of the river and the forest. The government must get the approval of the residents who use resources of river before constructing any dam on it. The government is evicting people by building dams without getting their consent. It has put an end to their agitation when they have resisted against construction of the projects by using army, police, courts, bureaucrats, etc. According to Ms. Roy dam affected and displaced individuals are being treated in a harsh manner (Roy, *The End of Imagination* 109). Against the despotic activities of the government towards the innocent people a few individuals have taken the responsibility of leading the movement of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and have tried to provide justice to the dam affected people. The activists in the movement are preparing to get the support of common people in the valley. Nepal opines that the movement could influence many people in the last two decades. He says, "[t]he NBA, which started as a struggle of the innocent, simple tribals has undergone a sea change in its course of over 20 years" (Nepal, *How Movements Move? Evaluating the Role of Ideology and Leadership in Environmental Movement Dynamics in India with Special Reference to the Narmada Bachao Andolan* 28). The activists in the NBA fight for justice rather than their own self-interest. They exclusively oppose large dams, not smaller ones. Each person in a position of authority tends to act in support of huge dams in India. They don't take little details into account. The big projects, according to Ms. Roy, should not be encouraged. In many ways, the idea of

“large” is linked to devastation. Ms. Roy has given a list of destructive things those are big in concept and size. She says:

We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, 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 right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 39).

Ms. Roy says that small dams are beneficial and they are not risky, but large dams pose various risks. Thousands of people are displaced by large dams, but the advantages are generally fewer. Even these less significant benefits are diverted to a few wealthy people. Government needs to evaluate negative effects of large dams and reveal the results to the public. According to Morose and Berger, neither Indian government nor the World Bank has evaluated harmful effects of SSP. They say, “[t]he Bank and India both failed to carry out adequate assessments of human impacts of the Sardar Sarovar Projects” (9). The authorities should estimate the pros and cons of the project because it is the largest one on the Narmada river. The poorest people of the country suffer a lot as a result of development of the project and resulting relocation of population. Ram Bai was one of many who lost her peaceful life as a result of the Bargi dam being built on the Narmada River. She cried, “[w]hy didn’t they just poison us? Then we wouldn’t have to live in this shithole and the government could have survived alone with its precious dam all to itself” (Ctd. Roy, *The End of Imagination* 111). Ram Bhai’s remarks portray the appalling situation of those affected by dams. All of the individuals impacted by the dam are in a similar pitiful condition to hers. Politicians and bureaucrats are unable to comprehend their problems. Speaking at a public gathering in the submergence area of the Pong dam in 1961, Morarji Desai remarked, “[w]e 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” (Ctd. Roy, *My Seditious Heart* 29). Most of leaders in power may not understand the pitiful circumstances

of the helpless and underprivileged people. They just consider their aims only but don’t consider hardships of common folks. Because of this, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, could extol dams. He said, “Dams Are the Temples of Modern India” (Ctd. Roy, *The End of Imagination* 111), but, what about common masses? The people may not be taken into consideration by the leaders while planning the developmental activities in the country. That’s why it’s possible that the P.M. Nehru did not consider the perspectives of the victims, but just his own. He wouldn’t have spoken those things if he had considered the victims’ perspective.

The Government of India hasn’t collected any information about the people who have been displaced by dams. It doesn’t have an important thing of the list of people who have sacrificed everything they have for progress of the country. Ms. Roy laments:

...the government of India does not have a figure for the number of people who 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 has 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? (Roy, *My Seditious Heart* 31-2).

The government of India should collect data of people who have sacrificed for development of the nation. As per the study on 54 big dams by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, it is estimated by an average that 44,182 people have been displaced only by a big dam in the country. On an average, thirty three million people have been displaced by the big dams only in the first fifty years of independence. There are many more such developmental projects in the country. Ms. Roy says that the number might be 50 million people, if the other means of displacement are added. Among all the displaced people Adivasis are about 57.6% in the case of only the Sardar Sarovar dam (Ctd. Roy, *My Seditious Heart* 32-3). Large dams affect lives of not only tribals but also people of other communities who depend on natural resources like forest, river, etc.

A government must have complete details of a dam, area it covers, height of it, location where it is built, cost of it, the details of the people who are displaced and the compensation that is going to be paid to the affected people etc. In fact, the officials don't have any of the mentioned information. In spite of this deplorable lack of infrastructure, bureaucrats and leaders boast that the Narmada Valley Projects are the most prestigious projects in the history of the country. It is proposed that 3,200 dams are going to be built in the valley. Among them thirty are major dams, 135 are medium dams and the remaining dams are smaller ones (Ctd. Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 53-4). Among the thirty major dams two are multipurpose dams. Government wants to build the biggest reservoir in India between the Narmada Sagar and the Sardar Sarovar in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat respectively. Due to the construction of the reservoir, lives of 25 million people and thousands of square kilometers of land will also be affected badly.

It is widely felt that the government of India has neglected the dam affected people. They have become unwanted citizens to it. But many voluntary organizations have sprouted to help them in the region of the valley. The NBA has taken a pivotal role in building the alliances with the NGO's to fight for the rights of dam affected people. Padam Nepal says:

At the national level the movement has established contacts with various peasant movements and tribal and women's organizations, and working in coordination with various activists and organizations nationwide. At the global scale, the movement has links with the Peoples' Global Action (PGA), International Rivers Network (IRN), Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), The Friends of the Earth, Human and Indigenous Rights Organisations, etc. (Nepal, *Dynamics and transformations of environmental movements in India: a study of the Chipko movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan* 263).

The NBA has taken the initiation to unite many organizations. Ms. Roy has supported the NBA for its selfless service. The Narmada Valley Development Projects (NVDP) is also called as India's Greatest

Planned Environment Disaster by critics like Ms. Roy. The NVDP is going to spoil the environment besides the lives of the millions of poor people along the river. The NBA has taken the main responsibility to save the nature and the lives of the people in the catchment area. All the other organizations also must unite together to bring justice to the common people. To create awareness among the people, to give full details about the disaster and to tell the future of their lives Medha Patkar has visited the villages in the forest. She has gathered a lot of information and has spread it too. Her primary aim is that every person, every family and every village in the region of Narmada valley should be resettled in a proper way. They all must be rehabilitated comfortably. The NBA, which is a combined union of many activists and organizations, could come forward to fight for the welfare of the people of the valley. Ranjit Dwivedi also praises selfless effort of the NBA led by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte. He says:

...the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan led by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte' received the Right Livelihood Award 'for their steadfast opposition to the ecologically and socially disastrous Narmada Dams-the largest river development project in the world-and their clear articulation of an alternative water and energy strategy that would benefit both the rural poor and the natural environment (Ctd. Dwivedi 15).

The NBA has been actively working against the NVDP since 1988. The movement has formally demanded that all the work related to big projects should be stopped. If the work hasn't been stopped right then, the agitators have been prepared even to drown themselves in the river. With assistance from other resistance organizations, the fight has grown more intense year after year. In a context Padam Nepal opines, "...the movement has undergone metamorphosis several times, with changes in its thematic orientations, changes in strategies, changes in support bases, and finally changes in the structure of the movement, from a local movement to a national one, and finally becoming a movement of global significance" (Nepal, *How Movements Move? Evaluating the Role of Ideology and Leadership in Environmental Movement Dynamics in India with Special Reference to the Narmada*

Bachao Andolan 28). The NBA has developed itself to the international level finally. It has gathered support from other movements even from other countries.

The people in the NBA have a lot of energy to fight against the government. In the communities of the dam affected region, there has been no indication of a school, any roads, or any medical assistance. It may be stated that the Adivasis in the area have rejected the benefits of modern developments (Big Dams). They fear that the developments may bring them doom in their lives. Ms. Roy says about the consequences of the developments in a nutshell, “[r]oads brought surveyors. Surveyors brought trucks. Trucks brought policemen. Policemen brought bullets and beatings and rape and arrest, and in one case murder” (Roy, *The End of Imagination* 127). Every development should provide everyone with comforts but here they pluck the lives of poor people away.

Through their plans and strategies, the activists of the NBA could spread message about damage to ecology as well as to people caused by big dams worldwide. The NBA could gather people together from India as well as overseas. Pratyusha Basu has said that the NBA has sought support from activists from the US, Germany and Japan. The writer says, “[t]he Andolan has been willing and able to take its struggles to the overseas headquarters of the multinationals that are investing in the Narmada dams, seeking support from activists in the U.S., Germany and Japan”(108). Ms. Roy welcomes all types of people in the movement against the construction of big dams.

Ms. Roy invites everyone to take part in the big battle for the preservation of nature, including journalists, students, teachers, athletes, physicians, attorneys, artists, singers, and performers. Kothari opines that many people participated in the movement non-violently. He says, “[a] wide range of nonviolent strategies were adopted and the country’s intelligentsia and political opinion makers, as well as other democratic movements in the country, were mobilized” (235). Ms. Roy also encourages supporters of the campaign from all backgrounds. Due to these mobilizations, the NBA could be able to push the World Bank appoint a committee to assess

construction of the SSP and its effects on the people and environment.

In June 1991, the World Bank appointed a commission for evaluation of the SSP. The independent review commission’s chairman, Bradford Morse, is a former director of the United Nations Development Program who intended to do a complete and in-depth examination of the project. The manner in which the committee members gathered material reveals their commitment to the evaluation process. They calculated the effect of the dams on drainage, salinity, health, and wildlife. Ranjit Dwivedi is of the opinion that targeted environmental and resettlement works haven’t been fulfilled correctly. He says, “...the Ministry of Environment and Forests as well as the Narmada Control Authority asked for construction work to be stopped, citing failure to meet conditionalities regarding the environmental work and resettlement” (17). Bradford Morse provided his 357-page final report in an objective manner. The submitted report claims that the Sardar Sarovar project has created and would create problems. It is impossible to fully rehabilitate and resettle everyone. The project will harm environment. The effects of the project on the lives of people, animals, birds and environment are not taken into consideration before it is started. A lot of money has been invested on the dam without considering the loss (Ctd. Roy, *The End of Imagination* 129).

For construction of projects, the land of Adivasis, common people, fisher folk, farmers, etc. are required, but their lives are thrown in various far-off locations. As they reside along the river without any formal records about the ownership of land, it is extremely difficult to identify project affected people to provide compensation by the government. Routledge says that the SSP involves multiple works which should also be taken into consideration while implementing rehabilitation and reconstruction facilities to the people. He says:

The construction of the SSP involves a series of other associated developments. These include an immense canal network (to channel the Narmada’s waters to Gujarat), compensatory afforestation, catchment area treatment schemes, construction worker colonies, a

wildlife sanctuary at Shoolpaneeshwar, and secondary displacement for the rehabilitation of the Narmada oustees. None of the people who will be impacted by these developments are considered PAPs by the government (247).

All of the aforementioned concerns must be taken into consideration by government of Gujarat. However, it is unable to help the residents of at least 19 communities. They have been dispersed among 175 rehabilitation camps. The government's actions have harmed the neighborhood, relationships, etc. Social ties of the people have been severed. However, 226 villages in the states of MP and MH need to be rehabilitated after being submerged (Roy, *The End of Imagination* 132). The government's promise of relocation and rehabilitation has failed and turned into a fantasy. Only a small number of the population receives some land, and when they do, it is often rocky and unusable. According to Flood, many victims haven't received sufficient compensation. The writer says, "...there are all those who, though harmed in various ways by the dam project, are not receiving even the inadequate compensation of rehabilitation, because they hold no formal title to the land or waters that they use for economic livelihood purposes" (17). A few people have acquired land that is permanently flooded. For the land that the people lose, the government should offer sufficient compensation in the form of new land.

It is widely felt that engineers haven't assessed the relationship among rivers, forests and rainfall. Although various environmentalists and conservationists have issued warnings against it, no officer, no engineer, or no politician has provided a supportive response. The alert has gone useless. The destruction of wildlife and biodiversity has been made possible by the obstinate actions of political figures and bureaucrats. Berger contends that adequate research hasn't been done on the effects of dam building. He says, "[t]he human and environmental consequences of the Sardar Sarovar have not been properly studied" (45). Every government has to analyze the pros and cons of every project properly.

When a government doesn't fulfill its responsibility appropriately, before they take up huge projects that affect large number of people,

organizations like the Narmada Bachao Andolan and people like Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy come forward to enlighten people and to lead them in their protest to exercise their rights in the face of the governmental indifferences. Thus, the organization and the people take part in development of society. Ms. Roy has gathered tonnes of information in the jungle about relocation of dam affected people and help them with the assistance of some of the organizations like the NBA and people like Medha Patkar because she is concerned about the well being of impoverished people who live in the forest. By highlighting the struggles of the poor and Adivasis during the construction of huge dams and other projects, she hopes to do justice to them with the help of the NBA. Ms. Roy appreciates selfless service of the organization. Ms. Roy advises officials of government to halt building of dam and to use the remaining funds to develop regional water-harvesting projects in towns and villages. Ms. Roy advises that only developmental activities should be funded using the tax money that is collected from the public, otherwise, the use of money would be meaningless. A comprehensive consideration of Ms. Roy's views on big projects evinces her concern for the holistic development for the long term effects for the needs of the marginalized and above all for ecological balance and sustainability.

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