

UNIMAGINED COMMUNITIES: DEVELOPMENTAL REFUGEES, MEGADAMS AND MONUMENTAL MODERNITY

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1. Rob Nixon, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,' in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Mati Bunzl et al (eds), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, p238.

2. See especially Lawrine Platzky and Cheryl Walker, *The Surplus People: Forced Removals in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1998.

3. While my essay focuses on the creation of ghosted communities during the neo-liberal era, it is important to note the role that the doctrine of terra nullius played in unimagining communities in order to appropriate indigenous resources during the high era of colonialism. The practice of imaginative evacuation - and accompanying material dispossession - occurred particularly, though not exclusively, in white settler colonies, most notoriously in Australia. But terra nullius was also invoked by the British in the 1840s in laying claim to New Zealand's South Island on the grounds that it was unoccupied by 'civilised people' and by white Canadian colonists laying claim to the north where they maintained that the First Nations never properly owned the land. Norway expressly invoked terra nullius in the

Where do people earn the Per Capita Income? More than one poor starving soul would like to know.

In our countries, numbers live better than people. How many people prosper in times of prosperity? How many people find their lives developed by development?

Eduardo Galeano, 'Those Little Numbers and People'

The highest expression of dignity can be summed up in the single word 'No!'

Dai Qing, 'China: Rivers and Dams,'
Goldman Environmental Prize speech

The idea of the modern nation-state is sustained by the production of imagined communities but also by the active production of unimagined communities. I refer here not to those communities that lie beyond the national boundaries but rather to those unimagined communities internal to the space of the nation-state, communities whose vigorously unimagined condition become indispensable to the maintenance of a highly selective discourse of national development. Narratives of national development -especially those that imply a unified redemptive trajectory - are highly partial narratives that depend on energetically inculcated habits of imaginative limit, habits that efface from view communities that inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of a unitary national ascent. Assaults on a nation's environmental resources frequently depend not just on the physical displacement of local communities, but on their imaginative displacement as well, indeed on the prior rhetorical and visual evacuation of those communities from the idea of the developing nation-state. The imaginative work of expulsion typically predates the arrival of the police, the dogs, the lorries, the bulldozers, and the engineers. Thus the direct violence of physical eviction becomes coupled to an indirect bureaucratic and media violence that creates and sustains the conditions for successfully administered invisibility. The result is what I have elsewhere called spatial amnesia, as communities, under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively displaced, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of a national future and a national memory.¹

We witnessed a classic instance of this process with the invention, under

apartheid, of what were called 'surplus people'. Largely women and children, these 'surplus people' were deemed superfluous to the labour market and to the idea of national development and were forcibly removed or barred from cities.² Trucked to remote rural areas - the so-called 'dumping grounds' - they were 'resettled' in overcrowded conditions with no viable means of sustenance. The consequences - human and environmental - were disastrous. Crucially, the dynamics of forced removal depended not just on direct police violence but on the administration of an imaginative violence whereby certain communities were designated indispensable to the nation and others designated expendable and driven out of sight. This invention of surplus people through the conjoined processes of imaginative expulsion and forced removal was far from unique to apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the production of ghosted communities who haunt the visible nation has been essential for maintaining the dominant narratives of national development, not least during the high era of neo-liberal globalisation.³ The intertwined processes of imaginative and physical eviction have assumed a particularly dramatic force around the construction of megadams, those iconic structures of monumental modernity that serve to concretise the idea that developing nations are 'catching up', as evidenced by spectacular, soaring feats of world-class engineering.

When it comes to narratives of resource development - whether of water, oil, gas, minerals, or forests - the people recast as 'surplus' are most often rural, or at least people sent ricocheting between rural and urban desperation. Usually they are (to invoke Madhar Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha's phrase) 'ecosystem people', dependent for their survival on the seasonal cycles of a web of ecosystems and therefore often living in circumstances of adaptable mobility. Often, too, their relationship to the land is historically deep but legally informal. Thus their imaginative expulsion from narratives of national development is facilitated by the frequent lack of official title deeds to the ecosystems that have sustained them for centuries or, in some cases, millennia.

In considering the unimagined communities cast into shadow by the looming imaginative edifice of the megadam, we may usefully append to the idea of surplus people two other concepts: 'developmental refugees' and 'uninhabitants'. The anthropologist, Thayer Scudder, coined the term 'developmental refugees' to convey the calamitous fallout of (largely World-Bank funded) megadams, which he had charted for decades in the global South.⁴ Scudder estimated the numbers displaced by such dams at somewhere between thirty to sixty million people.⁵ Almost without exception such displacements have resulted in declining key barometers of quality of life: nutrition, health, infant mortality, life expectancy, and environmental viability. Even the World Bank itself, in a 1994 study, determined that of 192 dam resettlement projects, only one had involved adequate compensation and rehabilitation for those resettled.⁶

The 'developmental refugee' is a poignantly paradoxical figure. Development implies positive growth, ascent towards a desirable end; refugee

1920s in colonising Greenland. Historically, versions of the doctrine of emptiness have been invoked in the US and South Africa by parties intent on appropriating land, water, and mineral resources. The literature on all this is vast. See, for example, Sven Lindqvist, *Terra Nullius. A Journey Through No One's Land*, Sarah Death (trans.), New York, Routledge, 2007; Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternate Geographies of Modernity*, New York, Routledge, 1992; Farley Mowat, *Canada North Now - The Great Betrayal*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976; Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land. Indians and Empires in the Early American West*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006; and Thomas Biolsi, 'Imagined Geographies: Sovereignty, Indigenous Space, and American Indian Struggle,' *American Ethnologist*, 32 (2005), 239-259.

4. Quoted Jacques Leslie, *Deep Water. The Epic Struggle over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment*, Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, p156.

5. On the basis of a country report by the World Commission on Dams, Arundhati Roy puts the figure for India's dam-displaced at 56 million, while Patrick McCully argues that - prior to the Three Gorges project

- Chinese dams alone may have displaced 60 million. David Barsamian and Arundhati Roy, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile*, Cambridge, Mass., South End Press, 2004, p25.

6. David Le Page, 'World Bank Defends its Dam Policies,' *Mail and Guardian*, 2 May, 2001, p7.

7. Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams. A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

8. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit commits herself to repopulating those places of cultural and imaginative evacuation. Her restorative ambitions are both temporal and spatial: she gives back to these deserts an environmental and cultural memory as well as connecting them globally, by tracing the Cold War links between Nevada and Kazakhstan. These links include new forms of imaginative awareness generated by a transnational protest movement.

9. Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, p154.

10. Across the world, the people who are reconstituted as uninhabitants seldom belong to large or powerful ethnic groups. This is true of all the desert nuclear test sites internationally: in the Nevada Test Site, in the deserts

implies flight from a grave threat - in this case, the threat of development-inflicted destitution or even, when it comes to megadams, of drowning. Thus, in horizontal terms, the notion of the developmental refugee holds in tension an official, centripetal logic of national development and a terrifying, centrifugal narrative of displacement, dispossession, and exodus. In vertical terms, the megadam as icon of national ascent is coupled to the descending prospects of communities who have become ecologically unmoored, cut off from a drowned commons that, however modestly or precariously, had proffered them a diverse diet, a livelihood, and a sustained temporal identity of continuity within change. In the wake of the megadam such communities are, in the most literal sense, inundated by development.

The idea of 'developmental refugees' overlaps with another paradoxical notion, 'uninhabitants', a term that appears in an interview Rebecca Solnit conducted for her superb meditation on the Nevada Test Site in *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*.⁷ Solnit's book stands as a powerful attempt to counter the Cold War reinvention of the Nevada Desert as an empty, isolated space, sealed against culture and memory. Solnit repopulates the emptiness by bringing into focus communities that had been turned into ghosted casualties by a federal project of imaginative self-enclosure that concealed them from view: the downwinders, the Western Shoshone on whose territory the nuclear tests were conducted, and their Soviet counterparts, the nomads of the Kazakhstan Desert/Semi-Palatinsk, people whose lands, culture and rights were decimated by Soviet explosions during the violently contrapuntal rivalry of Cold War nuclear 'development'. *Savage Dreams* offers a transnational bridge between those two desert spaces, spaces of amnesia predicated on imaginative evacuation.⁸

There is an especially telling incident in Solnit's nuclear journey that becomes central to the question with which this essay began - the question of the relationship between an actively imagined national community and actively unimagined communities on which the idea of national development depends. While travelling through southern Utah, 150 miles east of the Nevada Test Site, Solnit encounters a downwinder, Janet Gordon, who has lost many family and friends prematurely from cancer. The area Gordon and her family inhabited was largely Indian land. Yet in the build up to the nuclear explosions, this land was officially declared 'a virtually uninhabited area'. 'We became', Gordon observes in a mordantly resonant phrase, 'virtual uninhabitants'.⁹

Gordon's phrase is readily adaptable to the imaginative force field of the megadam, for it holds in equipoise ideas of presence and absence - absence not as originary but as imposed through a war against presence, as inhabitants drop off official maps and plummet into zones of invisibility. People like the Nevada Test site's Western Shoshone were evacuated not just from their lands but from public awareness - two intimately entangled processes of forced removal.¹⁰ Other residents of the area, like the Gordons, were not physically removed, but had their status downgraded from inhabitants to

virtual uninhabitants: they were and were not there, existing in a kind of vaporised dwelling.

This violent conversion of inhabitant to uninhabitant is a recurrent trauma in the spread of gargantuan dams across the so-called developing world. People viewed as irrational impediments to 'progress' are statistically - and sometimes fatally - disappeared. The story behind Guatemala's Chixoy Dam illustrates this forcefully. To quell opposition to the dam and to speed up the clearing of the submergence zone, Guatemalan paramilitary units conducted, in March 1980, a series of massacres, slaughtering 378 Maya Achi Indians. The brutality took a bloody, local form, but the decisive players were the invisible, bloodless transnational collaborators with the Guatemalan dictatorship: the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank who buttressed the dam with their loans. Their endeavours, in turn, were made possible by a consortium of American, Swiss, and German engineering consultants who declared in their feasibility report that 'in the tract of the study . . . there is almost no population'.¹¹ Thus, with the stroke of a pen, 3,400 'project-affected people' - including many who would soon be murdered for development - became virtual uninhabitants.¹²

MEGADAMS AND THE LIMITS OF POSTCOLONIALISM

The twentieth century was the century of the megadam: in 1900, no dam on our planet was higher than fifteen meters; a hundred years later, there were 36,562 dams that exceeded that height.¹³ This headlong rush not just to control the great rivers of the world, but to control them with gargantuan structures, had two primary political contexts. The first was the Cold War, which saw the superpowers vying to demonstrate greater scientific and engineering supremacy, in the hydrological as in the nuclear domain. The megdam, like the mushroom cloud, made an awesome, cinematic statement of superpower prowess in the race to be the *über*-master of natural mastery.¹⁴

Decolonisation became the second primary political motor behind the proliferation of megadams. Nasser, Nkrumah, and Nehru were all seduced by the symbolism of epic dams at a time when these leaders were striving to give material solidity to a newly acquired state of independence.¹⁵ Grandiose dams (like the High Aswan in Egypt and the Akosombo in Ghana) assumed a national psychological significance over and above their pragmatic promise. If the dam wars between the United States and the Soviet Union became one front in a Cold War rivalry for visible technological supremacy, in the newly independent nations of the global South the fervour for megadams became expressive of a different rivalry, one infused with an anxious politics of emulation: whatever our old colonial masters can do, we can do as well. Unlike, say, a rise in literacy rates or life expectancy, megadams served as highly visible, spectacular statements that new nations were literally soaring toward development, by mastering rivers and reaching for the sky. Constructions on such a scale rendered material the trope of nation building:

of Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and India, in the Central Desert in Australia, the French test sites in pre-independence Algeria, in western China, and in Southern Africa's Kalahari Desert. In all these areas, the people who are strategically recast as virtual uninhabitants are micro-minorities from marginalised ethnic groups. They are also very often nomads, people who traditionally have had to learn to live, through movement, within the limits of the land.

11. Quoted Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers. The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams. Enlarged and Updated Edition*, London, Zed, 2001, p75.

12. McCully, *Silenced Rivers*, op. cit., pp74-76.

13. Marq de Villiers, *Water. The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource*, Boston, Mariner Books, 2001, p120.

14. Zeyev Volfson, writing in the 1970s under the pseudonym Boris Komarov, proclaimed that 'there is far more important information about the history of hydro-electric construction in the USSR in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* than in all the textbooks on hydraulic engineering'. See Volfson, *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union*, Michel Vale and Joe Hollander (trans),

London, Pluto,
1980, p29.

15. See especially
McCully, pp239ff.

16. John Waterbury,
*Hydropolitics of the
Nile Valley*, New York,
Syracuse University
Press, 1979, p116.

17. Ibid.

18. Marq de Villiers,
*Water: The Fate of
Our Most Precious
Resource*, Boston,
Mariner Books,
2001, p121.

19. Decades later
Hoover still had the
power to terrorise
the Soviets into
playing catch up.

20. Leslie, op. cit.,
Deep Water, p117.

to erect a megadam was literally to concretise the postcolonial nation's modernity, prosperity, and autonomy. Each dam was simultaneously an act of national self-assertion - independence writ large across the landscape - and an act of natural conquest. 'Nasser and his associates', notes John Waterbury, 'could no longer regard the dam as simply a big engineering project, but rather came to hold it up as the symbol of Egypt's will to resist imperialist endeavours to destroy the revolution'.¹⁶ Such redemptive symbolism gained populist traction, as crowds flocked to the Egyptian parliament crying 'Nasser, Nasser, we come to salute you; after the Dam our land will be paradise'.¹⁷

Yet ironically, in economic and political terms, these glamorous hydrological regimes of independence doubled as invisible statements of dependence that threw into question the very condition of post-colonialism itself. Literally and metaphorically, the glittering prestige projects of the megadams depended on submergence: of disposable people and ecosystems, but also on the submerged structures of dependence that lay beneath the flamboyant engineering miracles. For the megadams of the South depended on vast loans (typically from the World Bank, the US or the Soviet Union) that shackled new nations with high debt loads. Moreover - as in the cases like the High Aswan and the Akosombo - when the pressures of Cold War competition and postcolonial aspiration converged, the dams unleashed torrents of political indebtedness to the superpowers of the first and second worlds. Structures of collusion arose between elites in the first and the neocolonial worlds around a related dynamic of invisibility: spectacular megadams required megafunding that offered seductive opportunities for masking gigantic graft.

The Hoover Dam became the gold standard in the rush to emulation.¹⁸ Though the Oregon Dam soon surpassed the Hoover Dam in scale, it was Hoover that established what became one of the signature discursive features of megadams, namely the contest over the language of transcendence. Hoover gave body to both practical purpose and aesthetic ideals by marrying a miraculous feat of American engineering to a sublime spectacle of grandeur.¹⁹ From Hoover onwards, megadams became places where the transcendentalisms of religion, nation, science, and art would converge. In this spirit Nehru would proclaim that 'dams are the Temples of Modern India' and the boosters of Kariba Dam, in what was then Southern Rhodesia, would marvel at that 'glorious castle in the sky'.²⁰ Kariba, as transcendental feat of engineering was accompanied by Kariba, the transcendental rescue epic - christened Operation Noah - to save the inundated valley's megafauna from drowning. (The eponymous documentary became a nature classic). Lost in the mix, overshadowed by the glorious sky castle and by Operation Noah, were the 57,000 displaced Gwembe Tsonga, forcibly driven from the valley they had inhabited for centuries and dumped in distant, semi-arid terrain, amidst unfamiliar and unsustainable ecologies.

MEGADAMS AND THE COUNTER-SUBLIME

Given America's historic role as megadam pioneer, it is perhaps predictable that so many of the twentieth century's most vocal literary opponents of hydraulic hubris - John Muir, Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and David Brower - would be concentrated in the US. All these writers, significantly, lived in the lightly populated American West and all were associated primarily with a wilderness ethic. But in the twentieth century's final year, a quite different strain of literary opposition to gargantuan dams rose to prominence with the publication of Arundhati Roy's 'The Greater Common Good', the first in a volley of polemics she launched against the serial damming of India's Narmada River. Some three thousand dams were slated for the river and its tributaries, including thirty giant dams, most notoriously, the mammoth Sardar Sarovar, which became a symbolic focus for activists from the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), led by Medha Patkar, a cause that Roy's voice helped amplify nationally and internationally. The historical timing, geopolitical circumstances, and rhetorical strategies of Roy's by now classic essay set it apart in significant ways from the dominant strains of American anti-megadam literature.

First, 'The Greater Common Good' is a post-Cold War essay whose backdrop is the hegemonic rise of neo-liberal globalisation, dominated by a single superpower in cahoots with the G8, and the corresponding ascent of an anti-globalisation movement. ('The Greater Common Good' appeared in 1999, the year of the Seattle WTO protests). A second major difference between Roy's invective and most American anti-dam writing derives from a historical and geographical shift in the global big dam industry. By 1999, India had become the world's third largest dam builder. Roy sought to expose the collusions between a fascist strain of Hindu nationalism at home and neo-liberal globalisers, notably the megadam boosters at the World Bank and in the Western-based dam industry which, one notes, like the tobacco industry, was shifting its exploitative centre of gravity to the global South, where huge profits could be accumulated in conditions where health, safety, and environmental regulations were absent, lax, or poorly enforced.

The third, critical difference is this: the giant dams that Roy opposed were located in rural areas densely populated with subsistence farmers, areas quite unlike the thinly peopled hinterland of the American West. Roy's rhetorical strategies are thus remote from those associated with the traditions of the wilderness ethic. Instead, her approach borrows from and advances the rhetoric of an international environmental justice movement that did not exist in any comparable form during the years when Edward Abbey, far less John Muir, was writing.

We can ground these differences by contrasting the strategies and circumstances of the Save the Narmada movement (and Roy's writerly role within it) to those that characterised the mid-1960s movement - in which both Abbey and Brower were prominent - that opposed Glen Canyon and other

Colorado River megadams. The driving spirit of the latter loose alliance of monkey wrenchers and desert rats was anarchist; their strategic vocabulary was drawn from the wilderness sublime, a discourse that enfolded elements of eulogy and elegy. The wilderness sublime became inseparable from a contest over the rhetoric of the monumental: a clash between transcendent engineering (in the spirit of Nehru's designation of dams as 'temples of modernity') and a transcendent geology invested with awe and grandeur. For Brower, 'the most beautiful place in all the region of Glen Canyon was a cavernous space, under the vaulting rock walls, that had been named the Cathedral in the Desert'.²¹ Brower, like Abbey, became a PR maestro in the language of the counter-sublime: 'Lake Powell is a drag strip for power boats . . . The magic of Glen Canyon is dead. Putting water in the Cathedral in the Desert was like urinating in the crypt of St Peter's'.²² An anti-dam coalition placed an advertisement in the *New York Times* demanding: 'Should we flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?'²³

21. John McPhee, *Conversations with the Archdruid*, N.Y., Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980, p200.

22. Brower, quoted in McPhee, *ibid.*, p240.

23. Susan Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement*, New York, Viking, 1993, p166.

24. Arundhati Roy, 'The Greater Common Good,' *The Cost of Living*, New York, Modern Library, 1999, p63.

Such strategies depended on a Manichean, trans-Atlantic split between a cultural and a natural sublime, whereby Europe's soaring, hallowed architecture became shorthand for Culture and the American West's soaring, geological edifices shorthand for Nature or, more specifically, Nature's Nation. Thirty years on, in the Narmada Valley, such polarities were not possible, for political, historical, and topographical reasons. At stake in the Narmada Valley were not metaphoric but literal temples, drowned, alongside the villages they had served for centuries, by the monsoon waters that rose higher each year with the ever-rising dam walls. When Roy writes that the Narmada dams were causing the 'submerging of culture', she refers to the literal inundation of densely populated village cultures inextricable from floodplain ecosystems in 'the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Stone Age'.²⁴ This is a far cry from the inundation of symbolic temples of Nature's Nation, temples whose paradigmatic witness is an anti-social, often misanthropic man roaming a wilderness in resplendent solitude.

The aesthetic contrasts embedded in all this are deeply informed by divergent economic structures. The contest over the Colorado dams remained internal to the US: the economics of the megadams was federal, nationally contained. By contrast, the damming of the Narmada Valley, typically for the global South, from Panama and Belize to Cameroon, Cambodia, and Krygystan, was dependent on transnational funding structures of neo-liberal globalisation. Hence the Sardar Sarovar became an iconic battle with ramifications far beyond India. This is where Roy, for all her contentiousness within India, became an indispensable translator for international audiences of the wider implications of the Narmada Valley struggle for the environmental justice movement. She assumed this role by exposing the global machinery of the big dam industry, the paradigmatic plight of downstream tribals, the ecological costs and the connection of all of these elements to a hegemonic neo-liberal global order.

If, as I'm suggesting, big dams themselves are (beyond any possible utility) a kind of national performance art, it was the genius of Abbey and his gonzo anarchists to recognize the dam wall as a blank staging ground for outsize guerrilla theatre that could be projected into the homes of the first television nation. Abbey understood, viscerally, the high stakes politics of spectacle and counter-spectacle. The massive dam face represented the monumentalism of national modernity, but it could also represent - especially amidst 1960s Cold War paranoia - the monumentalism of the apocalypse. Onto the blank canvas of the televised dam wall could be projected a nation's hopes, but also its fears. Long before one could photoshop nuclear explosions into a landscape, Abbey and his fellow gonzos unfurled a three hundred foot sheet of black polyurethane down the face of the Glen Canyon wall. This plausible crack, picked up with alarm by television stations, linked the elegiac anger of the anti-dam anarchists to an apocalyptic visual rhetoric.²⁵

THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY, THE POLITICS OF SCALE

Two epochal Indian environmental events occasioned Roy's decision to redirect her creative energies from fiction toward the polemical, interventionist essay. The desert nuclear tests that the BJP government conducted in May 1998 (and to which Pakistan responded in kind) were followed in February 1999 by an apparently unrelated development: after a four-year legal stay, the Supreme Court of India gave the go ahead to resume construction on the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. With two small essays on two outsize subjects - the mega-weapon and the megadam - Roy launched her second career as an international writer-activist whose central preoccupations are the politics of visibility, distance, and scale. What she alighted on, in these pre-9/11 essays, was the way a populist visual rhetoric of nationalism - a visual rhetoric one might describe as fusing the technological sublime with the sacralising of spectacle - expressed and helped enable a fascist turn in India. That turn diminished the rights of the citizenry, widened the gap between haves and have-nots, and quickened the centralising of economic power and privilege. Roy's instincts for this dynamic foreshadowed what would become one of her signature, expansive themes over the next decade: during the post-9/11 'war on terror', she would rail in essay after essay against a hubristic, neo-liberal order that was widening the gulf, inside the nation and beyond, between development's beneficiaries and development's casualties. To borrow Gadgil and Guha's useful opposition, the rift was widening, in particular, between resource omnivores and ecosystem people, within India and transnationally.

By pairing her essays on India's nuclear tests and the Narmada Valley dams, Roy sought - controversially - to bring big dam building into the domain of violence. Through these essays, Roy gives focus to a larger drama: the way India's outsize, self-assertive modernity depends on rendering invisible stories of national exclusion. As such, her interrogation of what counts as modernity

25. The death of Glen Canyon became a leit motif of Abbey's writing. Symptomatically, perhaps for legal reasons, his activist response is generically divided, vacillating between nonviolence in his nonfiction and violence in his fiction. The closest he comes in his nonfiction to advocating direct anti-dam violence - what one might euphemistically call the informal decommissioning of Glen Canyon Dam - occurs in *Desert Solitaire*, where he fantasises about 'the loveliest explosion ever seen by man, reducing the great dam to a heap of rubble in the path of the river. The splendid new rapids thus created we will name Floyd E. Dominy Falls' (p165). However, in his most celebrated novel, *The Monkeywrench Gang*, Abbey moves beyond both fantasy and gonzo theatre and has his eco-anarchists push the lever that detonates the wall.

becomes inseparable from her tenacious attentiveness to the conjoined politics of scale and the politics of invisibility.

Together, Roy's paired essays on the bomb and the megadam pose one central question: at the turn of the millennium, what did it mean to be a major modern nation? Or rather, what did it mean, as a nation, to *display* modernity? The detonation of a 'Hindu' bomb became a spectacle staged simultaneously as a declaration of great nation status, via the mastery of science and nature, and as a supernatural portent: 'The desert shook,' the government of India informed us . . . 'The whole mountain turned white', the government of Pakistan replied . . . One scientist on seeing [the blast] said, 'I can now believe stories of Lord Krishna lifting a hill'.²⁶ On both sides of the border the bombs set off serial media explosions of national self-aggrandisement expressed through the languages of the technological sublime, national religious destiny, and a virile jingoism. ('We have proved we are not eunuchs any more'; 'We have superior strength and potency'; 'These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests').²⁷ The convergence of the technological sublime, manifest destiny, and a hubristic, jingoistic refusal of limit has, of course, its own variant in the entangled nuclear and hydrological histories of the American West. 'What do you do', Wallace Stegner asks, 'if you are a nation accustomed to plenty and impatient of restrictions and led westward by pillars of fire and cloud? You try to engineer it out of existence'.²⁸ The very notion of the Bureau of Reclamation is suggestive of such national hubris: the federal agency was tasked not with claiming the desert through megadams and irrigation, but with reclaiming it, as if the arid West were once fertile federal property wrongfully seized by sinister desert forces.

In both Roy's nuclear and her megadam essays, one senses a mistrust of her government's outsize technological assertions of India's modernity, of the way these purportedly unifying spectacles of imagined community have been predicated on violent habits of imaginative disconnection - what I'm calling the unimagined communities of the nation. The much-vaunted survivable nuclear war against Pakistan rested on such a dissociative fantasy: that contiguous nations sharing sky, air, and water could avoid being radiated and poisoned in unbounded ways when citizens on both sides of the nuclear divide are also ineluctably regional citizens of an unpartitioned earth. One senses a similar turn in 'The Greater Common Good', where Roy exposes the imaginative disconnect between 'the most ambitious river valley development project ever conceived in human history' and the human and ecological disasters that flow from that grandiose project of national reengineering.²⁹

Roy's radical, controversial move was to view the Indian government's nuclear and hydrological hubris as two versions of a single mindset, rather than dividing them into a purely malign and a purely benign spectacle of modernity.³⁰ Her conjoining of her anti-nuclear and anti-megadam polemics suggests that this pairing can help shift our perspective on what qualifies as modernity. This - at least implicitly - is one alternative definition of modernity: 'The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further

26. Roy, *The Cost of Living*, op. cit., p93.

27. *Ibid*, p106.

28. Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, New York, Random House, p75.

29. *The Cost of Living*, op. cit., ix. The Narmada Valley project has since been surpassed - both in the scale of its engineering and the scale of environmental calamity - by the Three Gorges Dam.

30. If the advent of the nuclear age has inspired a long tradition of activist polemic - from John Hersey, Jonathan Schell, Rebecca Solnit, Rachel Carson to Kobo Abe, E.P. Thompson, and Martin Amis - the rise of the megadam has prompted a much more modest literature, largely, as I've suggested, associated with the wilderness ethic of the American West. This is beginning to change with the growth of an anti-megadam literature in China in particular.

and further apart from each other . . .³¹ As William Finnegan observes in another context: ‘It is simplistic, even misleading, to talk about whole nations as winners or losers under the current globalisation regime, since there are, in every country, significant groups of both winners and losers’.³² Thus, at the heart of Roy’s exposé of the megadam as a grandiose, highly selective, divisive fiction of Indian modernity lies an integrative ambition: the desire to imagine the Narmada Valley dams not just from the distant orbit of the powerful modernisers (those who, in her phrase, conduct ‘imperialism by email’) but from the more intimate orbit of the powerless as well, that is, from the vantage point of those we might variously call modernity’s surplus people, its developmental refugees, its virtual uninhabitants.

31. Roy, ‘The End of Imagination’, *The Cost of Living*, op. cit., p125.

32. William Finnegan, ‘The Economics of Empire: Notes on the Washington Concensus,’ *Harper’s*, May 1, 2003, p53.

THE WRITER-ACTIVIST AND THE SUBMERGENCE ZONE

At the heart of Roy’s polemical method is the very writerly subject of imaginative limit. If her nuclear essay engages the quandary of how to give sensory definition to the unimaginable - the more or less even handed disaster of atomic apocalypse - the companion essay protesting the mass damming of the Narmada River engages the imaginative dilemmas posed by an unequally distributed catastrophe. Here the primary quandary becomes how to bring into imaginative focus threatened communities and ecosystems rendered invisible by the celebratory developmental rhetoric that gushes from big dam technocrats, cabinet ministers, World Bankers, and media moguls. (The World Bank, a larger than life character in Roy’s nonfiction, made an early, premonitory cameo appearance in *The God of Small Things*, when Estha strolls ‘along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans’.³³ The very notion of the World Bank, one notes, contains a dead aquatic metaphor. Banks shore up investments, control streams of capital and global flows. If we pause to reflect on the submerged metaphor of the World Bank we see that a river runs through it.)

33. Roy, *The God of Small Things*, New York, Random, 1997, p14.

Across scores of essays, Roy returns to the connection between the tyranny of scale and the politics of a violent invisibility. These have become the signature subjects - the great binding themes - of her writings on environmental justice, globalisation, empire, and the war on terror. It is no accident that, in the triumphal aftermath of *The God of Small Things*, she turned to confront the secular and religious gods of mammoth things: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the American empire, the Murdoch empire, religious fundamentalism, the war on terror, nuclear proliferation, and the megadam. Her novel’s outsize success had bestowed on Roy a sudden, unexpected visibility that she chose to channel into challenging the largely opaque collusions between transnational and national forces that imperil the weave of human and biotic communities. Her essays acknowledge that the mechanisms of these giant, shape-shifting forces are difficult to track, visualise, dramatise, and expose - and hence successfully oppose - not least when they promote the megadam as a munificent, luminous

icon of triumphal national progress, a bright beacon on the road to great nation status.

In contrast to the encomiums that greeted the Hoover Dam, Roy's approach to India's most iconic megadam focuses not on the scale of the modern edifice but on the scale of the very modern forced removals it incurs. The dam's outsize dimensions are easily calculable yet, symptomatically, the outsize dimensions of the displacements remain unknown. A direct relationship emerges between the massive imaginative displacement required to sustain the developmental fantasy of a benign, redemptive dam and the imaginative displacement required to suppress the fate of the human and nonhuman casualties of the 'submergence zone'. The bureaucratic euphemism of the 'submergence zone' itself suggests the drowning out of developmental refugee voices, voices rendered inaudible by the floodwaters of gung-ho developmental rhetoric.

Roy's obsession with the politics of scale and the politics of visibility call to mind a similar preoccupation in the writings of John Berger, one of our most astute contemporary writer-activists on the links between neo-liberal globalisation and the devastation of place, as community and ecosystem. In his preoccupation with ways of seeing and not seeing - with the invisibility industry - Berger is especially insightful on the violence wrought by the rationalising developmental rhetoric of the zone:

Extensive areas which were once rural places are being turned into zones. The details of the process vary . . . The initial dismembering, however, always comes from elsewhere and from corporate interests pursuing their appetite for ever more accumulation, which means seizing natural resources (fish in Lake Victoria, wood in the Amazon, petrol wherever it is to be found, uranium in Gabon, etc.), regardless of to whom the land or water belong . . . People in such zones lose all sense of residence . . . Once this has happened, to restore any sense of domesticity takes generations. Each year of such accumulation prolongs the Nowhere in time and space.³⁴

34. John Berger, 'Ten Dispatches about Place', *Hold Everything Dear*, pp122-23.

Berger's outrage is directly pertinent to the transformation of places of residential subsistence and ecological complexity into hydrological submergence zones which, in the violence of their euphemised effects, are second cousins to the so-called 'sacrifice zones' of military strategy. The patriotic-cum-technocratic discourse of the zone displaces place, creating conditions whereby inhabitants may be recast as surplus people, barely visible beside the seductive image of the megadam as towering miracle of achieved modernity.

When refugees are severed from environments that have provided ancestral sustenance they find themselves stranded not just in place but in time as well. Their improvised lives in makeshift camps are lives of temporal impoverishment. When a megadam obliterates a flood plain whose ebb

and flow has shaped the agricultural, fishing, fruit and nut harvesting - and hence nutritional - dynamics of a community, it also drowns the past: the submergence zone swallows place-based connections to the dead, the dead as living presences who move among past, present, and future, animating time with connective meaning. It is in this sense that I read Berger's warning of the generations it takes to rebuild 'domesticity'. For if forced removal involves agonising adjustments to bleak accommodation, unfamiliar ecologies, and typically barren, hostile terrain, it involves the additional challenge posed by temporal violence: how to survive in a truncated, severed present, torn by involuntary displacement from the numinous fabric that had woven extended meaning from time-in-place.

The megadam, as one of the most visually arresting spectacles of development, readily deflects attention from the undertow of violent underdevelopment that follows in its wake, especially in densely populated societies like India and China. The construction of Sardar Sarovar, Roy argues, involves 'an unacknowledged war'. Symptomatically, no official figures for the casualties of this war exist. The problem is not that such people have been reduced to statistics but that they've been reduced to non-statistics, a whole different level of dehumanisation - indeed, one definition of surplus people. To gain a more textured sense of the conversion of inhabitants of 'hydrological zones' into uninhabitants who (if represented at all) figure as backward impediments to the developmental advancement of the nation proper we need to consider the specific violent and nonviolent strategies deployed.

Five main strategies have been used to deny the rights of 'hydrological zone' inhabitants. The first is the blunt threat of direct violence: forced removal at military or paramilitary gunpoint or via the barrel of a dam. (Here is Morarji Desai, addressing villagers in the submergence zone of the Pong dam in 1961: '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'.)³⁵ The second strategy (often used in tandem with direct violence) involves a rhetorical appeal to selective self-sacrifice: your loss, your suffering is for the greater good - a heroic offering on the pyre of national development. (Here is Nehru, in 1948, exhorting the communities about to be dispossessed by the Hirakud Dam: 'If you suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country'.)³⁶

The third strategy for denying 'hydrological zone' inhabitants their rights and diminishing their visibility involves the indirect violence of euphemism and acronym. The official terminology favoured by the World Bank (for decades the core backer of megadams in the global South) is PAPs - Project-Affected People. This bloodless, technocratic, deviously neutral term obscures the fact that those affected are inevitably negatively affected - often doomed - by the project in question. 'Project-affected' translates as involuntary eviction, loss of land, community dispersal, and plummeting life prospects. To cut through the pseudo-neutrality of such bureaucratic jargon big dam opponents

35. Quoted *The Cost of Living*, op. cit., p13.

36. C.V.J. Sharma (ed), *Modern Temples of India: Selected Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru at Irrigation and Power Projects*, New Delhi, Central Board of Irrigation and power, 1989, p40.

have preferred a more direct language that underscores the violence involved, advancing terms that range from 'oustees' (an Indian neologism that has since garnered international currency) to Scudder's 'developmental refugees'.

Sometimes (the fourth strategy) the rights of those inhabiting a projected submergence zone are dismissed on the grounds that such people are culturally inferior - or indeed lack any culture to speak of. This strategy did not end with the waning of direct colonialism: in post-independence India, the Adivasis or tribals who, together with the Dalits, make up the majority of oustees, have been treated as expendable because they're widely viewed as culturally contemptuous and marginal to the core Hindu nationalist parameters of Indian civilisation, although the Adivasis' presence in India long predates Hinduism's advent.³⁷ I.M. Shah, a leading engineer in the Sardar Samovar, advocated sterilising all Adivasis, while Vidhut Joshi of Gujarat's Gandhi Labour Institute argued that 'a culture based on lower level of technology and quality of life is bound to give way to a culture with superior technology and higher quality of life. This is what we call development'.³⁸

The treatment of such people as inconveniencing anachronisms in a globalising economy is often vindicated through fused discourses of environmental and cultural utilitarian control, whereby the convergent unruliness of 'irrational' river people and an 'irrational' river must be straightened out and channelled into a national culture of rational development. We thereby witness - and this is far from unique to India - a combined assault on an 'unregulated' river and purportedly 'lawless' people. Such communities can be readily dismissed as living benighted lives; they belong, in the fullest sense of the dead metaphors, to a cultural backwater not the national mainstream.³⁹

The plight of river-reliant Adivasis and Dalits leads us to the fifth strategy for abrogating the rights of those dispossessed by hydrological megaschemes. For the question of cultural recognition - of what counts as a culture - is intimately connected to the question of what counts as belonging. The Adivasis - and indeed most oustees in the global South - do not have title deed to the riverbanks, floodplains, river-dependent forests, and catchments areas that have sustained them, sometimes for millennia. Such people may belong to the land but, within a Lockean logic of private property, the land doesn't belong to them. Thus in terms of the right to remain (not to speak of the right to just compensation) they can readily be cast as uninhabitants, residual presences from a pre-capitalist era whose anachronistic criteria for dwelling may be overridden by the legal logic of private property as self-development within a larger narrative of national development. In these terms, oustees can be displaced without being dispossessed.

For floodplain, as for desert people, to live adaptively on the land through cycles of mobility makes environmental and nutritional sense.⁴⁰ But it becomes politically hazardous in terms of Lockean notions of what constitutes land possession. In Lockean (and in Jeffersonian) terms, to dwell in movement is an unacceptable, uncivilised, irrational contradiction: you are improving

37. McCully estimates that 40 per cent of oustees are Adivasis.

38. Quoted Jacques Leslie, *Deep Water*, op. cit., p54.

39. Regarding the rationalising of irrational rivers, Maxim Gorky observed how 'Soviet dam builders sought to make "mad rivers sane"'. Quoted McCully, op. cit., p17.

40. To say as much is not to romanticise ways of life that are often arduous, fraught with danger, and may at times result in resource mismanagement. For example, recession agriculture, which depends on the seasonal vagaries of the river, may involve a deeply cultural but always approximate dynamic. However, the perils of mobile adaptation to the risky, unpredictable provisions of river, flood plain, and the forests they sustain pale beside the perils of the life of the megadam refugee.

neither the physical land nor yourself and, by extension, you're failing to advance the national interest. Thus what counts as productive, legitimate, bureaucratically authenticated residence becomes inextricable from the politics of visible self-improvement and the civilisational spectacle of the nation. Thus, through the logic of a selective enlightenment that discriminates against environmentally sound mobility, a deep temporal belonging is made shallow by the designation 'informal residents'. From there, borrowing from the pervasive discourse of the global 'war on terror', it is only one rhetorical step to downgrading 'informal residents' who protest eviction as 'insurgents'.

Through the invention of emptiness - emptiness being the wrong kind of presence - 'underdeveloped' people on 'underdeveloped' land can be rendered spectral uninhabitants whose territory may be cleared for the staging of the national theatrics of megadams and nuclear explosions, those certifiable acts that mark the 'developing' nation's ascent into modernity's pantheon. Emptiness is an industry that needs, constantly, to be rhetorically and physically reengineered: the promotion of megadams depends on such emptying out, on the active administration of invisibility. Within these dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility, the myths of emptiness generate unimagined - or at the very least, underimagined - communities. The rationalising logic of forced removal and resource theft thereby suppresses an environmental justice variant of Walter Rodney's insight: that underdevelopment is not as an original condition of backwardness crying out for modernisation, but in large measure an inflicted condition, the legacy of a very modern external plunder by far off forces.

In the national and transnational resource wars, a double paradox asserts itself. First, in what one might call the resource law of inverse longevity, the longer a people have dwelled in an area in a condition of mobile adaptation, the less they officially belong there, their tenure rendered precarious by a Lockean logic of what counts as belonging. Their residence, if acknowledged at all, can be dismissed as extra-legal. Second, in what one might call the resource law of inverse proximity, the closer people live to the resources being 'developed' the less likely they are to benefit from that 'development,' be it water from megadams or oil pumped from beneath their lands.

SMALL FORMS AND THE DISEASE OF GIGANTISM

In his latter years, Nehru, formerly enamoured of big dams as statements and vehicles of independence, became disenchanted with them, recognising them as travesties of scale, destructive of local bonds and failing to deliver on their outsize promises. Addressing the Central Board of Irrigation and Power in November 1958, Nehru concluded that:

For some time past, I have been beginning to think that we are suffering from what we may call 'the disease of gigantism'. We want to show that

we can build big dams and do big things. This is a dangerous outlook developing in India . . . the idea of big - having big undertakings and doing big things for the sake of showing that we can do big things - is not a good outlook at all.⁴¹

41. Quoted C.V.J. Sharma, *Modern Temples of India*, op. cit., pp52-56.

The sustainable future, he continued, lay in 'the small irrigation projects, the small industries and the small plants for electric power'. Nehru's prescient volte face critiqued the seductive - yet typically inefficient and destructive - forms of modernity engineered on a vast scale.

During the high era of neo-liberal globalisation, the 'disease of gigantisms' manifested itself in concrete and on paper. For the physical hubris of giant dams was accompanied and enabled by an insufficiently studied yet potent cluster of outsize genres, prominent among them the World Bank feasibility study and the environmental impact report. (The latter, in the global South, was ordinarily ex post facto, published well after dam work had begun). This issue of genre and scale is of direct pertinence to Arundhati Roy's turn to the essay as a small, nimble form that allowed her to take on the weighty, leaden genres that gave ballast to the culture of the megadam and, beyond that, to the culture of developmental gigantism. Her quarrel with the genre of the report had several facets to it: she loathed the form, the diction, the voice and the way all three colluded to render inaccessible what ought to be public knowledge. As a writer, this then, was her primary contribution to the NBA (the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a grassroots organisation campaigning against the Sardar Sarovar dam) and to the international environmental justice movement: to expose the insidious, traumatic violence inflicted on the most vulnerable, human and nonhuman, by the affectless language of technospeak. 'Language is the skin of my thought', Roy observes. '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 is to mask intent . . . They breed and prosper in the space that lies between what they say and what they sell'.⁴²

42. Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics*, Cambridge, Mass., South End Press, p43.

Roy returns obsessively to that space between: that distance - of diction, genre, and geopolitics - which concentrates power and dissipates responsibility.⁴³ Her writings against the 'disease of gigantism' speak into that gap, speak to the calamitous consequences, especially for ecosystems and ecosystem people, of development as remote control. The contest over access - to resources, power, and audiences - prompted Roy to shift her creative centre from the novel to the essay, a form that allowed her to participate more directly and flexibly in the showdown between social movements, a showdown that acquired a generic dimension whereby the agile, personal essay was set against the ponderous, strategically impersonal epic report.

43. See for example her critique of 'a corporate globalization because it has increased the distance between the people who take decisions and the people who have to suffer those decisions', Roy and Barsamian, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile*, op. cit., p73.

Roy's essays stage intimate assaults on the calculated opacity, the profoundly consequential tedium, of the technocratic report that camouflages violence while clearing a path for it in a language scoured of emotion. Extrapolating from her style, one can posit a connection between the uninhabited language

of forum speak, policy speak, boardroom speak, and environmental impact speak and the failures of imagination that scour 'hydrological zones' of life, replacing threatened living forms with virtual uninhabitants.

In all her writing, Roy teases out the relationship between distance and transgressive intimacies that cross chasms of caste, class, gender, nation, region, and religion. Her concern with the abstracting of life by distance reflects her concern with hierarchies of visibility: the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the untouchable. If Roy writes against distance in many forms, one crucial variant is the distance between the incorporeality of corporate power and its convulsive, material effects. This gap poses particular challenges for the environmental justice movement, hence her call for writers

who can translate cash-flow charts and boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives. Stories about what it's like to lose your home, your land, 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.⁴⁴

44. Roy, *Power Politics*, op. cit., 2001, p32.

Roy thus turns to the essay as a form that, in temporal and sensory terms, holds the promise of the immediate, of a quick, inhabited retort to the unimaginable - and unimaginative - culture of the colossus. In this spirit, she calls for an art committed to undoing verbally and bureaucratically inflicted absence: 'an art that makes the impalpable palpable, makes the intangible tangible, and the invisible visible. An art which can draw out the incorporeal adversary and make it real. Bring it to book'.⁴⁵

45. Ibid, p32.

In bringing to book the deadly, long-distance administration of living rivers via the silted language of the hydro-bureaucrat's report, Roy returns, repeatedly, to questions of narrative monopoly. The shrinking of knowledge to expertise and the centralising of power - not least the power to tell - renders us unsighted, making it harder to inhabit the lived consequences of neo-liberalism's densely rationalised developmental narratives.

Roy's vocal tactics, by contrast, are expressly decentred. There's a productive instability to her voice that keeps her audience off balance. She belongs, in that sense, to the tradition of the essay as environmental polemic, a tradition that includes figures as diverse as Edward Abbey and Jamaica Kincaid. All three writers are cantankerous, rowdy, irreverent, but also by turns tenderly specific, alternating between blasts of sarcasm, parody, vehemence and blunt anger on the one hand and, on the other, an evocative lyricism toward detailed life forms. Roy, Kincaid, and Abbey are all exponents of what Raymond Williams called 'militant particularism', but are equally exponents of the calculated overgeneralisation. In the process, they jettison any ambition to build a quiet, readerly rapport, far less universal admiration. By seceding from what one might call the emotionally miniaturist tradition of the nature essay, Roy, Abbey, and Kincaid explode the form with outsize sentiments directed at outsize adversaries: developers, the international tourist industry,

empire, the World Bank's hydrological regimes.

If, as I've suggested, Roy's defining subjects are the politics of visibility, distance, and scale, one witnesses through her activism a showdown between two highly engineered spectacles of modernity - the mega-dam and the mega-celebrity, in this case a Booker Prize-winning author and icon of Indian national cultural pride. By appending her garlanded visibility to the environmental justice movement that opposed the Sadar Samovar Dam, Roy plunged headfirst into the political quagmires of representation and displacement. She would be duly accused, among other things, of celebrity showboating, of ethical egotism, of impetuous self-involvement, of strategic naivety, and of squandering her novelistic gifts on mere polemics.⁴⁶ Some of these charges were specific to millennial Indian politics, others echo familiar accusations against novelists, from James Baldwin to Nadine Gordimer, who have activated the essay's polemical possibilities to advocate for political causes. Roy, through her celebrity persona, found herself in a paradoxical position: she represented the distance of privilege, so had to strive to surmount the suspicions that distance provoked by grounding her credentials through the Andovar movement. Moreover, while arguing for the devolution of the power to narrate, she herself would have to ward off charges that she was recentering narrative authority through her hyper-visibility.

In contrast to a writer-activists like Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wangari Maathai, Roy was not a founding member of an environmental justice movement but a late affiliate. This complicated the fraught politics of representation and left her more vulnerable to attack on grounds of privilege, insensitivity, and usurpation. However, she persisted in using her celebrity visibility to try to amplify the cause of the Narmada River's resource rebels. Moreover, she became a vital translator in four ways. First, she translated an impenetrably technocratic discourse into more accessible language and storylines. Second, she gave an Indian story an international audience of an order it would not otherwise have achieved. Third, alongside the NBA, Medha Pratkar, and Vandana Shiva, she articulated the battle over the Narmada River megadams to the international water wars, helping make the Narmada campaign an iconic struggle. Fourth, Roy articulated the destructive, hubristic hydrological regimes to the broader contexts of neo-liberalism's ascendant hegemony and the international opposition which that ascendancy provoked. Through this last act of translation, Roy became, alongside Naomi Klein, the primary, invigorating voice for a whole new generation of anti-globalisation activists.

In concert, the notions of surplus people, developmental refugees, and uninhabitants give us a language for contesting the grand narrative of the redemptive megadam as spectacular symbol of rational deliverance from unreasonable rivers and irrational cultures. At stake is submergence: of

46. See Leslie, *Deep Water*, op. cit., p20, and Ramachandra Guha, 'The Arun Shourine of the Left', *The Hindu*, Dec. 10, 2000. Even before her nonfictional turn, Roy was no stranger to controversy. The inter-caste relationship in *The God of Small Things* resulted in Roy being charged with obscenity and Kerala's Communist Party railed against her fictional depiction of local Marxist history. She was taken to court for 'corrupting public morality'. Aijaz Ahmed, though admiring the novel's style and ambition, takes Roy to task for her depiction of left history and for the novel's reliance on an erotic plotting of the political. See Ahmed, 'Reading Arundhati Roy Politically', *Frontline* 14 (August 8, 1997): 103-111.

communities, ecosystems, and voices as the emissaries of gigantism seek to drown out the narrative diversity that would expose the short-lived, impossibly contradictory combinations of permanent plenitude such emissaries promise in the name of a forward-thrusting (but selectively delimited) nationalism. Megadams, however, are themselves transients, temporary sojourners in the long life of the river. All too often, they silt up, spread salination, poison the soil. They are also steeped in well-timed deceptions: in 1985, the World Bank estimated the Sardar Sarovar project would displace 33,000 people; eight years later, with the dam safely underway, the bank re-estimated the displaced upwards to 320,000.

As George Perkins Marsh recognized as far back as 1864, large hydrological schemes redistribute more than water: 'The tendency of irrigation as a regular agricultural method is to promote the accumulation of large tracts of land in the hands of single proprietors, and consequently to dispossess the smaller land-holders'.⁴⁷ Patrick McCully, our own age's nonpareil critic of large dams, underscores this point: 'The story is a familiar one from Rajasthan to California. Irrigation schemes are promoted with the promise of land to the tiller, but end up delivering it to the absentee landlord'.⁴⁸ Often, those who are not driven away, end up on what was formerly their land as bonded labourers.

Big dams are thus diversionary in a triple sense. They divert water - and, through water, land - from the powerless to the powerful. But they also divert attention, their glistening enchantments throwing into shadow unimagined communities. One recalls, in this spirit, Roy's portrait of globalisation as 'like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can't be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it's no longer possible to see it'.⁴⁹

Vandana Shiva is right: 'the water crisis is an ecological crisis with commercial causes but no market solutions . . . Ending the water crisis requires rejuvenating ecological democracy'.⁵⁰ For that to be achieved we have a long way to go. As I write, the all-too-predictable script of hydrological hubris is repeating itself in Ethiopia, in an unequal battle between resource omnivores and ecosystem peoples. Dam work has begun on the Omo River: the contract for the dam, which will create the second largest reservoir in sub-Saharan Africa, was signed for 1.3 billion pounds with an Italian dam construction company. No tenders were made and the first environmental impact report was published two years after the dam's construction had begun. The procedures were so scandalously immoral that even the World Bank withdrew its funding, leaving the government of Ethiopia - one of the poorest, most debt-laden nations - saddled with a shortfall of 350 million pounds.

The Omo River megadam may deliver electricity and graft to the capital's elite, but the downstream tribes whose livelihoods and ecosystems are most at risk will be left literally and metaphorically in the dark. Informed by a BBC reporter of the imminent damming of their river, they declared they would

47. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, David Lowenthal (ed), Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2003, p27. *Man and Nature* first appeared in 1864.

48. McCully, op. cit., p174. In *The Cost of Living*, Roy acknowledges McCully's book as 'the rock on which this work stands'. It is indeed the finest book on global water politics to date. McCully is especially strong in addressing alternative ways of conserving and distributing water to the culture of the megadam.

49. Roy, *The Cost of Living*, op. cit., p123.

50. Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*, Boston, South End Press, 2002, p15.

take up arms against the government. (The tribes in Ethiopia's impoverished southwest are awash with arms that have flooded in from the neighbouring conflict in southern Sudan). One elder observed that the survival of his people depended on three rocks that 'hold up the pot': cattle, crops grown on higher ground in the rainy season, and, in the dry season, floodplain (recession) agriculture. If the river is narrowed and controlled from above, two of those rocks will be removed: 'the pot will topple over and my people will starve'. The most probable scenario is this: the deadening of the river's seasonal pulse will intensify desperation, provoking resource wars among the heavily-armed tribes who live downstream from development.⁵¹

51. 'Frontline,'
BBC2, March 28,
2009.

This hydrological story - as happens so often - doesn't end at the border. The Omo drains into the largest lake in northern Kenya, where tribes find sustenance through a mix of fishing, cattle herding, agriculture, and hunting. Once the dam throttles the inflow of fresh water to a trickle, the waters of this vast lake, whose salinity is already rising, will become fatally salty: unfit for humans, cattle, wildlife, crops and fish. The ecosystem - and the cultures of the ecosystem peoples - are under serious risk of collapse. Together the dam, and the conflicts it stirs up on both sides of the border, will result, yet again, in wave upon wave of developmental refugees.

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