

“The Narmada contains a microcosm of the universe”

Tuesday 2 May 2006, by [CHAUDHURY Shoma](#), [ROY Arundhati](#) (Date first published: 2 May 2006).

Over several days of conversation with Shoma Chaudhury, followed up with written responses, Arundhati Roy clarifies the complex, vexed questions surrounding the Narmada.

The media has been playing the Supreme Court Verdict on the dam as a victory for all sides. How do you read it? What does this verdict really mean?

It may well be a victory for the Gujarat Government but it's by no means a victory for the NBA. What it does do is signal formal entry by the Supreme Court as well as the Prime Minister into treacherous new territory. The Prime Minister has washed his hands off an unequivocal report by members of his own cabinet. The Minister for Water Resources Saifuddin Soz had the rare courage to put down on paper what he actually found - the fact that rehabilitation in Madhya Pradesh has been disastrous. It's true that on a one-day visit, ministers cannot possibly come away with an exhaustive survey, but you don't need to spend more than a day in the Narmada valley to see that there is a massive problem on the ground.

There is a huge disjunct between the paperwork and the reality on the ground. What will be submitted to the court - what has always been submitted to the court is more paperwork. Two years ago, when I went to Harsud which was being submerged by the Narmada Sagar Dam, I also went to the so-called New Harsud, which the government claimed was a fully functioning new city. There was absolutely nothing there - no houses, no water, no toilets, no sewage. Just a few neon street lights and a huge expanse of land. But officials produced photographs taken at night with star filters making it look like Paris!

At the last hearing on April 17, the logical thing for the Supreme Court to do would have been to say, stop construction of the dam. We know there's a problem, let's assess the problem before we go ahead. It did the opposite. It said we have a problem, let's magnify the problem. Every meter the dam goes up, an additional 1500 families come under the threat of submergence. This interim order is clearly in contempt of its own October 2000 and March 2005 Narmada judgements as well as the

Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal Award, which state in no uncertain terms that displaced people must be resettled six months before submergence. What do you do when Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers and Supreme Court judges commit contempt of court?

Water for Gujarat is obviously an urgent issue. How does one reconcile these polarities?

The urgency is a bit of a red herring. Gujarat has managed to irrigate only 10% of the land it could have irrigated and provide only a fraction of the drinking water that it could have provided at the current dam height. This is because the canals and delivery systems are not in place. In other words, it has not been able to use the water at even the current dam height. This is an old story with the Narmada Dams. The Bargi dam completed in 1990, at huge cost to the public exchequer and to thousands of displaced people, today irrigates less land than it submerged because canals haven't been built. In the case of the Sardar Sarovar, in fact, raising the dam height immediately is just hubris. It has no practical urgency. The fair thing to do would be to stop the construction of the dam and ask the Gujarat government to construct the canals to use the water it already has. That will buy time to do a decent job of rehabilitation.

If we could go back to the beginning of your involvement - why were you drawn to the Narmada issue? Why has this become such a powerful symbol?

Because I believe that it contains a microcosm of the universe. I think it contains a profound argument about everything - power, powerlessness, deceit, greed, politics, ethics, rights and entitlements. For example - is it right to divert rivers and grow water-intensive crops like sugar cane and wheat in a desert ecology?

Look at the disaster the Indira Gandhi canal is wreaking in Rajasthan. To me, understanding the Narmada issue is the key to understanding how the world works. The beauty of the argument is that it isn't human-centric. It's also about things that most political ideologies leave out. Vital issues - rivers, estuaries, earth, mountains, deserts, crops, forests, fish. And about human things that most environmental ideologies leave out. It touches a raw nerve, so you have people who know very little about it, people who admit that they know very little and don't care to find out, coming out with passionate opinions.

The battle in the Narmada Valley has raised radical questions about the top heavy model of development India has opted for. But it also raises very specific questions about specific dams. And to my mind, though much of the noise now is centered around the issue of displacement and resettlement, the really vital questions that have not been answered are the ones that question the benefits of dams. Huge irrigation schemes that end up causing waterlogging, salinisation and eventual desertification have

historically been among the major reasons for the collapse of societies, beginning with the Mesopotamian civilisation. I recommend Jared Diamond's wonderful book Collapse to all those who wish to take a slightly longer, and less panicked view of 'development'. India already has thousands of acres of waterlogged land. We've already destroyed most of our rivers. We have unsustainable cropping patterns and a huge crisis in our agricultural economy.

Even vast parts of the command area of our favourite dam - the Bhakra - is water-logged and in deep trouble. So the real issue is not how ordinary farmers in Gujarat will benefit from the Sardar Sarovar, but how they will eventually suffer because of it.

P.S.

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