

**“Dam” the Irony for *The Greater Common Good*:  
A Critical Cultural Analysis of the Narmada Dam Debate**

TABASSUM RUHI KHAN  
University of California, Riverside

Arundhati Roy’s essay, *The Greater Common Good*, frames her vehement opposition to the construction of the Narmada Dam in central India. Roy contends that the project benefited a few at the expense of India’s poor, and the protest against its construction was much more than a fight to save the river valley; it was a struggle to reinstate justice in Indian democracy. However, the pro-Narmada Dam lobby, in a formal response (by civil society activist B. G. Verghese), dismissed her contentions as antidevelopment diatribes. Exemplifying the critical trend in cultural studies, this article analyzes why Roy’s powerful criticism of Indian democracy was misread, by situating the debate in the surrounding contexts of neoliberal globalization. It argues that as texts are discursive practices, meaning is constructed, circulated, and received within specific political/economic/social circumstances and power equations.

The Narmada Dam debate is a longstanding and highly polemical struggle over a river valley whose factions are split between those rendered homeless in the wake of the dam’s construction and those others upholding the dam’s essentialness for the nation’s development and progress. The struggle marks an ongoing controversy over the meaning of development and its purported beneficiaries since Nehru’s (the first prime minister of independent India) endorsement of dam projects as “the temples of modern India” (Khilnani, 1998). The Narmada Dam debate is important not only because it exemplifies perseverance for human rights in the face of rising stridency in the struggle over precious resources in neoliberal globalizing India but also because it marks the emerging importance of mediated spaces as the site for both enunciation and contestation of environmental issues (see Hansen, 2010). This article analyzes the bitter media debate to illustrate how the meaning of development is appropriated to benefit a few. Focusing specifically on Arundhati Roy’s passionate criticism of the project and B. G. Verghese’s denial of her claims, it rhetorically analyzes the arguments to show how legitimate rights of the marginalized are obfuscated to protect privileges of the few. The centering of the mediated debate in the analysis also illuminates how mediated spaces have themselves become rarified spheres of decision making wherein even those in opposition enjoy a legitimacy not accorded to the victims of the

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Tabassum Ruhi Khan: ruhi.khan@ucr.edu

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development schemes. It is not to detract from the worthiness of Roy's (1999a) valiant critique of the Narmada Dam project in her landmark essay *The Greater Common Good*, which stands at the heart of this analysis, but even as the inhabitants of the valley staged a brave resistance for over two decades, Roy's celebrity status ensured that her voice was heard more clearly than were their anguished pleas.

Roy (1999a) scathingly denounces the project. She contends that while the dam promises electricity to urban Indians, brings water to big farmers, augments the power of government bureaucracies, and furnishes the rich with lucrative contracts, it flushes out "like rats" the indigenous and tribal populations from their forested homes, bringing them to the doorsteps of urban poverty and degradation. Her objections are succinctly expressed in the words of Justice Krishna Iyer (1999): "Who are 'We, the People of India'? Is there graded inequality and gross disparity among them? Whose interests invisibly influence the sub-conscious of the decision-makers, executive or judicative?" (p. 1). Roy questions the nature of Indian democracy and decries the inequitable development model it supports. However, in a formal response, veteran journalist and civil society activist B.G. Verghese (1999), in *A Poetic License*, derides her demands for justice and equality as inaccurate and fanciful musings from an acclaimed author of fiction, and he dismisses her urgent entreaties on behalf of the tribal citizens and small farmers as antidevelopment diatribe.

While the controversy surrounding the Narmada Dam continues to rage and the Maoists' anger against mining corporations erupts in a violent confrontation, this article attempts to deconstruct how the arguments for equitable development are being obfuscated and the ways in which criticisms of inequities inherent in Indian democracy are being bruted about as blanket condemnations of development. The analysis has relevance far beyond this particular debate, because environmental struggles and progressive movements across the world have suffered a similar fate. For example, the powerful opposition to the World Trade Organization and its policies, staged in Seattle in 1999, was derailed as being an out-of-control protest movement, rather than being seen for what it was—a regenerative and constructive struggle for alternative development (see Couch, 2001; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; McFarlane & Hay, 2003; "United States," 1999). Similarly, the hackers' image has been transformed from creative and progressive to criminal and antidemocratic in the interest of private property and government sovereignty (see Best, 2003; Halbert, 1997; Yar, 2005). This article argues that an analysis of Roy's arguments for greater justice and of Verghese's peremptory rejection of them as invective against progress presents an important opportunity for examining how powerful interests are able to suppress dissenting perspectives by first delegitimizing them in the discursive spheres.

This analysis calls for an approach that moves beyond the texts of the debate to include a study of the surrounding contexts. The theoretical and methodological argument of analyzing texts within their situated contexts is not especially new, but it is an approach that is rarely applied (see Babe, 2009; McChesney, 2000; Milner, 2002; Richardson, 2008). This article argues that it is imperative to pursue this line of investigation if we are to understand how hegemonic forces, embedded in social, economic, and political power structures, establish the salience of some viewpoints while negating or marginalizing others. It makes a case for exploring interconnections between texts and extant contexts, as well as for studying relationships between dominant ideas and entrenched power structures by illustrating how textual analysis alone cannot explain the scuttling of valid arguments against the Narmada Dam; instead,

the debate must also be understood with reference to the powerful compulsions underlying the globalizing Indian economy and society.

### Reading Texts in their Contexts

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's (2001) Encoding-Decoding model is among the earliest arguments to propose that texts are discursive practices and are constitutive of discrete and relatively autonomous moments of production, circulation, and reception. The model draws attention to social, political, economic, institutional, and technological contexts constructing communicative exchanges. However, despite these important examples, the determining nature of structural factors is not accustomed to be highlighted in cultural studies. The focus has almost always been on texts, with scant reference to material realities shaping them (Babe, 2009; Jansen, 2002; McRobbie, 2009, 2005; Milner, 2002). And even though cultural studies agenda has been identified as the unraveling of the workings of power (During, 1993), scholars argue that even as the discipline gained momentum, it lost much of its critical edge, owing to its engagement with post-structuralism and postmodernism (see Durham & Kellner, 2001; Jansen, 2002; McRobbie, 2009, 2005; Milner, 2002). The focus on text "often decontextualized from the economic, social, and historical conditions within which it is constructed, distributed, circulated and consumed" (Dines & Perea, 2006, p. 188) has reduced the field to nothing other than "literary studies reborn and expanded to encompass literary analyses of the 'texts' of popular culture," namely film, television, advertising, and fashion (Jansen, 2002, p. 10).

McRobbie (2005) argues that Hall's rejection of reductive Marxist analysis led to undue focus on cultural artifacts at the expense of material correlates of power. But Milner (2002) proposes that Hall's endorsement of specious connections among Marxism, structuralism, and culturalism undermines cultural studies' Marxist and materialist core (p. 2). He states that though Marxism's ambivalent status within cultural studies may not have been an issue when Hall began his work in 1970s, Marxist materialism must be forcefully foregrounded in the "mediatized, commodified and relativized" 21<sup>st</sup> century (p. 7). Both McRobbie and Milner call for developing a mode of analysis focusing on factors other than "textualized meanings," because ideas, beliefs, and values in advanced and complex modern societies develop their own materiality by becoming embedded in practices and institutions. For example, as anthropologist and Marxist philosopher David Harvey (2005) has noted, the word *freedom* has become implicated in establishing ascendancy of free-market philosophy over economic institutions and processes in the UK and the United States, as well as in legitimizing the most unjust of actions—ranging from the Iraq war to the paring down of social security for the poor in both America and Britain (p. 39).

The need to understand interconnections between structures of power and dominant discourses calls for dismantling of arbitrary barriers between political economy and cultural studies that undermine the power of both disciplines (Babe, 2009; Durham & Kellner, 2001; Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Jansen 2002). The need to combine analysis of texts with critical understanding of social, political, and economic contexts of their creation also resounds in other disciplines, including postcolonial studies (see Dirlik, 1999; Sarkar, 2002), critical discourse analysis (see Richardson, 2008), and even rhetorical studies where scholars are moving beyond the text to argue that audience's characteristics intimately inform selection of rhetorical tropes in persuasive arguments (Glasser & Ettema, 1993; Kaufer & Neuwirth, 1982; Tindale &

Gough, 1987); and to seek what Olson & Olson (2004) refer to as a "reader-centered perspective on rhetorical criticism" (p. 25).. As Booth (1974) argues, if even the most ordinary personal communication is replete with inferences and nuances, it is but natural that analysis of texts should consider the conditions of their existence.

But as the growing body of scholarship supports the investigation of discursive regimes and their imbrication in power structures and as increasing number of academic programs bring together media and cultural studies (see Hammer & Kellner, 2009; Valdivia, 2006), there are methodological implications to be addressed. According to Milner (2002), the deconstruction of discourses in a world where "everyday life has become progressively media-encultured, and in which hitherto relatively autonomous, non-market institutions for regulation of value have become progressively assimilated into each other by way of the market," requires "very different modes of analysis from those Hoggart had learnt from English literature" (p. 7). Journalism studies scholar Richardson (2008) argues that instead of excessive "linguistic logocentrism," there is a need to examine texts with respect to institutional settings, techniques, and practices of production and relationships with "agencies of political, judicial and economic power" (p. 152).

The analysis of the Narmada Dam debate is informed by these exhortations. This article contends that Roy's and Verghese's contesting arguments must be examined with reference to extant socioeconomic-political conditions, because only an investigation of how these factors weigh upon the debate can help us understand why Roy's powerful plea fell on deaf ears. The study first textually/rhetorically analyzes Roy's essay and Verghese's response before delving into the material and discursive realities that shaped this debate.

#### **Arundhati Roy's Ironic Text: A Predilection for "Pure Persuasion"**

Roy's (1999a) aim was to forcefully foreground the controversial dam project in public consciousness from which it was fast fading, especially as the Supreme Court's judgment removing the stay on the dam's construction in February 1999 was being seen by the pro-Narmada Dam lobby as the end of the debate. A sense of ennui had set in, and Roy intended to revive the debate. The opening sentence of *The Greater Common Good*—"I stood on the hill and laughed out loud"—immediately grabs attention, especially as it is juxtaposed with Nehru's counsel to villagers displaced by the Hirakud Dam: "If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country." It provokes a query: Why do such pious nationalist sentiments of an iconic figure dominating national imagination evoke such merriment? And one is compelled to read on.

Roy (1999a) has introduced what rhetorical studies scholar Kenneth Burke (1945) calls the "strategic moment of reversal" (p. 517) creating a "perspective by incongruity" (Olson & Olson, 2004, p. 27) to participate in what was being considered as a lost cause. The ironical juxtaposition of irreverence with deeply revered sentiments is an attempt to shock and wake up the audience. According to rhetorical studies scholars, irony is one of the most persuasive of rhetorical tropes (see, Burke, 1945; Brown, 1972; Karstetter, 1964; Knuf, 1994; Olson & Olson, 2004), as ironic texts "persuade us in particularly forceful way," and "raise us from our lethargy" (Tindal & Gough, 1987, p. 6). The play on incongruity, creating tension between symbols of discordant signification displacing "the normal frame of reference" (Knuf,

1994, p. 186)—such as when “disease-cure, hero-villain, active-passive” are placed in a synecdochic pattern, thus inferring a relationship—prompts the reader to “‘ironically’ note the function of the disease in ‘perfecting’ the cure, or the function of the cure in ‘perpetuating’ the influences of the disease” (Burke, 1945, p. 512), thereby allowing the readers to “read between the lines” and to “see beneath the surface” (Glasser & Ettema, 1993, p. 324). Roy’s audacious juxtaposition of hooting laughter with Nehru’s counsel intends to lay bare the hollowness of the rhetoric of sacrifice (deeply rooted in Indian psyche), which has elevated the national subject into place, suturing the diversities, disparities, and inequalities of India’s vast and diverse population (see Chatterjee, 1993; Shiva, 2005). According to Roy, however, the idea has been repeatedly mobilized only to serve dominant interests. Her laughter pierces the myths ensconcing the pious nationalist sentiments, exposing the iniquitous nature of development projects.

Roy’s (1999a) rhetorical efforts are directed toward undermining all certitudes, institutions, rules, and laws that ride roughshod over the rights of ordinary and voiceless citizens. She wishes to expose how heavy handedness of power and politics masquerades as righteousness. Often, her voice registers in high decibel notes because Roy is deeply distressed, as the even Supreme Court, the last resort for seeking justice, has capitulated to the interests of dominant powers and has allowed the dam’s construction to proceed, destroying a way of life and pristine habitat. The Narmada River Valley has been home to indigenous tribes for thousands of years, long before the advent of Hinduism (see Basham, 1968). But the dam would flood the equatorial forests and force the tribal populations to make their life in city slums or in some inhospitable space allotted by the government. Roy is particularly concerned, because the tribal populations possess neither the skills nor the wherewithal to meet the challenges of the urban jungles. The future would entail only a free fall into spiraling poverty. What she is furious about is the cavalier fashion in which the destruction of lives is being ordered, and she resorts to irony to express her rage.

Roy (1999a) writes that “the highest court in the land” has “sanctioned” that the homes of the tribal citizens “be drowned this monsoon,” and adds,

I suddenly remembered the tender concern with which the Supreme Court judges in Delhi . . . enquired whether tribal children in the resettlement colonies would have children’s parks to play in . . . but that was before vacating the legal stay on further construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. (p. 1)

As the lawyers hastened to assure the judges “that indeed there would be, and what’s more that there were seesaws and slides and swings in every park,” Roy is again unable to control her mirth. She writes, “I looked up at the endless sky and down at the river rushing past and for a brief, brief moment the absurdity of it all reversed my rage and I laughed. I meant no disrespect” (p. 1). Roy’s ironic impertinence draws attention to the proceedings of the highest adjudicating body in the country and highlights its inability to comprehend the immense loss suffered by Narmada River Valley’s inhabitants. She laughs at the travesty of concern for the children who were to lose the vastness and nourishment of the forests and be recompensed with concrete parks and metal swings, because such is the ludicrousness of the largess doled out by the powerful to the powerless.

Roy (1999a) evokes what Olson & Olson (2004) refer to as "perspective by incongruity" (p. 27), riddled with symbolic tensions, to undermine arguments supportive of the dam. For example, she first presents their efficacy and then ferociously attacks their logic. Turning her ironic gaze to the way numbers are stacked up to give weight to the dam's development benefits, she states that there should be nothing amiss with "resettling 200,000 people in order to take (or pretend to take) drinking water to 40 million." But then she points out that "there is something very wrong with the scale of operations here," because, according to her, "this is Fascist Maths [*sic*]," as it "strangles stories," "bludgeon details," and blinds people with its spurious vision (p. 17). In the calculations of advantages flowing from the dam, there is no accounting of the suffering of the displaced populations. To highlight the government's sheer incompetence in keeping track of the human cost, Roy flippantly asks the reader to "whip out your calculators" and then proceeds to argue that if each dam displaced a mere 10,000 people, then the 3,300 dams in India destroyed 33 million lives. However, even this figure is a conservative estimate, as N. C. Saxena, Secretary Planning Commission of India, admitted in a private lecture, the figure is close to 50 million. These numbers must be murmured "for fear being accused of hyperbole"; and they are branded as rumors because the narratives of India's progress are unable to accommodate such harsh truths (p. 4).

Roy's (1999a) caustic humor hides a serious appeal in glib wordplay. She writes,

Already 50 million people have been fed into the Development Mill and have emerged as air-conditioners and popcorn and rayon suits—subsidised air-conditioners and popcorn and rayon suits (if we must have these nice things and they are nice, at least we should be made to pay for them). (p. 6)

Roy argues that the Narmada Dam can only be constructed because the poor, the voiceless, the tribals, and the *Dalits* are subsidizing India's progress and modernization. The sufferings of the populations on the margin are beyond most peoples' imagination. Hence, monstrous development projects can go unchallenged because "the ethnic 'otherness' of the victims takes some pressure off the Nation Builders" (p. 4), and "democracy (or our version of it) continues to be the benevolent mask behind which a pestilence flourishes unchallenged" (p. 6).

The deeply ironic turn in Roy's prose is described by Burke (1955) as a tendency for "pure persuasion," a desire to engage with symbol making simply for its own sake and without any "attainable advantages" (p. 274). In Burke's lexicon, "a persuasion that succeeds, dies" (p. 274), as pure persuasion "delights in and seeks to prolong the dance of symbolic courtship for its own sake" (Olson & Olson, 2004, p. 26). Roy (1999a) definitely delights in the play on words, going so far as to give full expression to her ribald sense of humor. Consider this passage:

The Government of India has detailed figures for many million tonnes [*sic*] of food-grain, of edible oils the country produces . . . it can tell you how much bauxite is mined in a year . . . it's not hard to find out how many graduates India produced, or how many men had vasectomies in any given year. But the Government of India does not have a figure for the number of people that have been displaced by dams or sacrificed in other ways at the altar of "National Progress." (p. 4)

Roy's off-the-cuff jocularly only sharpens her criticism of the government's insensitivity toward the poor and calls attention to the gravity of the very issue that she so mocks. For example, the reference to vasectomies, perhaps in bad taste, evokes one of the most sordid episodes of the government's highhandedness during the imposition of a state of emergency in 1975 when thousands of poor and unemployed men were subject to forced vasectomies, and the real and/or forged numbers were displayed as impressive markers of progress toward population control (Tarlow, 2003). On the other hand, the seemingly inane reference to "rayon suits" is a veiled allusion to the petro-chemical empire of the Ambanis and the highly beneficial collusion between government bureaucracy and big business, which benefits them to the detriment of the vast majority of India's population.

Roy's (1999a) use of irreverence shares commonalities with Mark Anthony's evocation of Brutus as an honorable man in his speech before the senate after Caesar's fall. According to Kaufer and Neuirth (1982), Mark Anthony's "audience knows well that Brutus has failed to meet Anthony's standards of honorability" (p. 30). However, Anthony avoids any explicit reference to Brutus' violations and deliberately appears contradictory to highlight Brutus' very fallibilities. In a similar fashion, Roy (1999a) avoids explicit moralization and depends on witty, though scathing references to illuminate the nefarious nexus between development and exploitation. Her tongue-in-cheek manner allows her to subject even the most unassailable ideas and figures (Nehru and Gandhi and their notions of progress and growth) to critical scrutiny, "based on assumptions of inherent morality" (p. 2). The iconography and ideology of both Nehru and Gandhi have shaped the social, political, and ethical fabric of the Indian nation (see Khilnani, 1998; Prakash, 1999; Varma, 1998). Often, their thoughts have been negatively assessed, but rarely have they been so acerbically critiqued. Nevertheless, Roy (1999a), bent on shaking all shibboleths, delivers a very serious message with irreverent aplomb. She writes, "Nehru and Gandhi were generous men" while Nehru's "paternal, protective morality" and Gandhi's "nurturing, maternal morality" would work "if only we all wore *khadi* and suppressed our base urges—sex, shopping, dogging-spinning lessons and being unkind to the less fortunate" (p. 2). Dismissing Nehru's and Gandhi's idealism because it inadvertently supports a development model in which "India's poorest people are subsidizing the life-style of the rich" (p. 4), Roy asserts that big dam projects are among the most "brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich" (p. 3). Therefore, it is not surprising that "certainly India has progressed but most of its people haven't" (p. 5).

However, even as Roy (1999a) is an incisive critic of the dam, she is well aware that her status as a writer of fiction would undermine her arguments. The pro-Narmada Dam lobbyists would challenge her intellectual and academic authority to handle a debate curtailed to technical spheres and limited to "special interest readership" (p. 2). To counter their stance, Roy uses Socratic irony. Calling attention to her very inadequacies as a writer of fiction, she surrenders to the associated premises and prejudices and concedes that, yes, she got involved in the Narmada controversy "because writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to kills" (p. 2). She admits that she "set aside Joyce and Nabokov" to focus on "reports on drainage and irrigation" (p. 1). Roy does not hide her limited knowledge or the fact that she had to tutor herself to undertake this task. In accepting her ignorance, she establishes a rapport with her readers, who have been deterred from questioning the project because they are overwhelmed by the obscurantist technical jargon. However, once Roy digs into the morass of technicalities, she tears through the tribunals' decisions of the past years and gets to the critical point in the politics of big dams—that

disinformation and incomplete understanding exists not because laymen are unable to follow technical reasoning but because specialized interest groups use secrecy and complexity to hide their own inadequate and incomplete arguments.

One of the most farcical facts that Roy (1999a) discovers through her research is that, even after so many years, neither the government nor its experts have the least idea about the exact flow of the river on which dams worth billions of dollars, destroying millions of lives, are to be built. She says that the first task of any Tribunal "was to find out how much water there was in the river" because all other calculations, extending from the height of the dam to the area to be irrigated, would flow from these calculations" (p. 7). However, this estimate was arrived at by fuzzy estimations of rainfall received in the region. In a country so dependent upon the famously erratic monsoons, these calculations are open to questioning. According to Roy, the Central Water Commission does agree that "there is less water in the Narmada than had previously been assumed" (p. 7). However, the situation becomes completely farcical when the government refuses to review the findings of the Tribunal and states "that clause II (of the Decision of the Tribunal) relating to determination of dependable flow as 28 maf is nonrenewable [!]" (p. 7). Hence, Roy says, the construction of the dam is based on the premise that like all other creatures poor and helpless, the government of India can also command nature to follow its dictate—"the Narmada is legally bound by human decree to produce as much water as the government of India commands it to produce" (p. 7). This brilliant stroke of satire exposes the inefficiencies plaguing the project, along with the Indian government's most profound arrogance, which emasculates the democratic ethos.

According to Roy, it is of course shameful that such a large project should be undertaken on the basis of flawed and inadequate research. But what is even more reprehensible is the way a state, lauded for its democratic credentials, dispossesses and suppresses the poorest of its poor, using the most unethical of machinations in the harshest of manners, and is still able to maintain the farce of democracy, or as Roy (1999a) puts it in her inimitable manner—manages to emerge "smelling nice" (p. 6). Decrying the unjust appropriation of natural resources through force, Roy demands,

Who owns this land? Who owns its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. They are being taken seriously by the State. They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command—the army, the police, the bureaucracy, the courts. And not just answered but answered unambiguously, in bitter, brutal ways. (p. 2)

Exposing the extent of deception, fraud, and utter injustice that she unearthed in her investigations, Roy says, "I feel like someone who has stumbled on a mass grave" (p. 4). And like her earlier reference to "Fascist Maths," the strategy of juxtaposing horrors of genocide with development imagery is to, as Mueck (1969) notes, "lead one's readers to see that things are not so simple or so certain as they seem" (p. 233). Roy's (1999a) rather long essay is also interspersed with lyrical and deeply moving expressions of loss and suffering, such as this description of a tribal family resettled by the state:

The man who was talking to me rocked his sick baby in his arms. . . . Children collected around us, taking care not to burn their skins on the scorching walls of the shed they

call a home. The man's mind was far way from the troubles of his sick baby. He was making a list of the fruit he used to pick in the forest. He counted 48 kinds. He told me that he didn't think he or his children would ever be able to afford to eat any fruit again. (p. 15)

Roy has used the persuasive and powerful trope of irony to reach the heart of darkness and to bring it into relentless focus. Her searing satire and playful irony may appear to ascribe to Burke's (1955) description of irony as an exercise in symbol making for its own sake. But Roy's intensity and the exhortations for justice redefine irony's reputation in Western scholarship as an ambiguous and polysemic trope, often the last resort of naysayers (see Burke, 1955; Glasser & Ettema, 1993; Kaufer & Neuwirth, 1982). Her impassioned argument for equitable development stands out in clear relief, and its intent is hard to ignore. In fact, her forceful prose created a debate about big dams in "urban drawing rooms where it might not have been raised" otherwise (Sumer Lal, as quoted in Marquand, 1999, para. 9). The question then is: On what grounds are the arguments rejected? And why is Roy's cry to stem the dam's attendant tragedy not taken seriously by Verghese and rejected as antidevelopment diatribe? To seek answers to these questions, this article now analyzes Verghese's dismissal of Roy's contentions.

### Reception of Argument

In a formal response framed by B. G. Verghese (1999), civil society activist and veteran journalist, the pro-Narmada Dam lobby dismissed Roy's contentions, upheld the construction of the dam, and strongly approved government's plans for rehabilitation of displaced tribal citizens. Verghese's essay, *A Poetic License*, from the outset implied that as a writer of poetic prose and fiction, Roy has neither the capability nor the authority to participate in the highly complex technical debate on the dam. Reiterating the specialist nature of the topic and espousing the same exclusionary politics that Roy had denounced in her essay, Verghese negates not only Roy's argument but also her ability to make the argument. He states that "the poetry was charming; the facts wrong; more rhyme than reason" (p. 1). Expressing his acute displeasure, he refers to what he thought was high decibel emotional rhetoric and sarcasm as "strong stuff this" (p. 1). Constructing Roy's contentions as a harangue, with subliminal allusions to hysteria, irrationality, and inaccuracy, Verghese delivers a severe blow to Roy's arguments and at the same time adroitly deflects criticisms of Indian democracy as unjust and exploitative.

But Verghese's (1999) even more pernicious strategy for dismantling Roy's critique is to frame the struggle for protection of tribal citizens rights as "the glorification of the noble savage." Verghese further claims, "Arundhati ordains for 80 million tribal Indians the joy of grubbing for roots, deprived, malnourished, 'protected' by NBA (*Narmad Bachao Andolan*) from a 'world' which 'they' must not enter so that we can continue to champion them" (p. 2). According to Verghese, it is a "neoLuddite" and "arcadian, pre-industrial, anti-development dream" that guides Roy's activism. And the romantic vision of life in evergreen forests would condemn the entire nation, especially the tribals, to the boondocks of prehistory (p. 1). However, Verghese doesn't address this question: Why must poor tribal citizens be asked to sacrifice their homes when the same cannot be expected of middle-class Indians? Roy (1999a) wonders if

one can go so far as to ask urban metropolitan Indians to trade their "beach house in Goa for a hovel in Paharganj" (p. 15).

Finding fault with Roy's reasoning and logic, Verghese (1999) proceeds with great alacrity to dismiss Roy's technical review of the project—the analysis of World Bank's reports, the Tribunals, and other agricultural and irrigation committees' decisions—as inaccurate and unsubstantiated. But even as he discards Roy's readings, he does not draw upon incontrovertible proof to support his counterassertions. He is vague about questions of resettlement and rehabilitation, and his only retort to the abject condition of those displaced by the dam is an inconclusive "Why not await these findings?"—a reference to the Supreme Court-appointed committee's report on relief and rehabilitation (p. 1). In a manner of speaking, Verghese suggests, without any qualms, that the destruction of a people and a habitat may continue unabated as we await a report. He also derides Roy's severe criticism of the inadequate research on the exact flow of the river and says that "we have it on Arundhati's supreme authority that only half the ssp [*sic*] (Sardar Sarover Project) command can be irrigated for lack of water. . . . Really! Why not wait and see?" (p. 2). Once again, instead of presenting conclusive counterevidence in support of his claims, Verghese suggests that the entire infrastructure costing millions of dollars and destroying primordial evergreen forests, along with its inhabitants, be erected before its benefits can be adequately assessed.

Moreover, while Roy worked hard to lift the debate from the core of secrecy and complicity and presented the gist of highly complex and convoluted documents in clear, comprehensive language, Verghese perpetuates the confusion. For example, he writes that "quite apart from the controversy over the Narmada Dam hydrology, additional sources of water will be available in the medium term" (p. 3), but gives no information as to where the water will come from, unless he counts on the highly unreliable monsoons to be the project's guarantors. Denying the project's core responsibility to drought-affected regions, he claims that, "the ssp [*sic*] was never intended to build and operate a water supply scheme" (p. 3), thereby validating urban India and big contractors' claims on the project's benefits. Hence, Verghese not only sidesteps the core issue of inequities—why the poor must pay the price for progress which benefits the rich—but he also blithely advocates that the tribal population must agree to the vision of development being imposed on them. According to him, the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* must play the role of a watchdog and ensure that the affected populations "are given their due" (p. 4). In other words, the tribal populations, instead of protesting, are advised to clutch at the scraps being thrown at them.

Verghese rejects Roy's argument by rhetorically undermining her ability and legitimacy. Framing Roy's denouncement of Indian democracy and its iniquitous treatment of its poorest citizens as a diatribe, he casts aspersions on Roy's emotional balance. But he does not present countervailing technical facts in support of the dam's alleged benefits. Yet his inconclusive arguments invalidate Roy's claims. I argue that to understand why it was relatively easy to discredit Roy, we must not limit the analysis to the text of Verghese's woefully inadequate assertions but also examine the assumptions that underline the rebuttal. Verghese's argument circulates within a concatenation of interests and discourses that he draws upon to augment his position—both implicitly and explicitly. For example, Verghese never establishes his

authority; he simply assumes it. He presents no evidence as to why he is more competent than is Roy to assess the project's viability. Instead, he supposes it to be a function of his reputation, among Indian intelligentsia, as a man of integrity—one, who as an editor of a national daily, courageously protested the suspension of civil liberties during the imposition of a state of emergency in India in 1975. Given his stalwart position, he presupposes that he will not be perceived as speaking on behalf of any group, but only as a private citizen and a responsible member of civil society expressing his deeply held views.

The tacit foregrounding of Verghese's integrity and thereby his authority exemplifies how texts are embedded in societal relationships and are expressive of power equations. In the next section, this article elaborates on the contexts, contingent realities, and ideologies of the rapidly globalizing Indian society that are expressly woven into Verghese's arguments, strengthening his stand and dismantling the case for alternative and just development.

### **Context of Reception of the Text Hegemony and Myth of the Middle Class**

The debate between Roy and Verghese is contextualized within the transformative phase of Indian society from a socialist state-controlled, protected economy to that of a market-driven and globally integrated one. This transformation, at the International Monetary Fund's behest, is described as a revolution, but it has been ushered in without the explicit mandate of the people, and yet there is no going back on the reforms (Das, 2001). An important rallying point of this rapid evolution—one deeply integrated in Verghese's refutations—is the rising preeminence of the consuming middle classes, which cements their historical dominance, as according to Khilnani (1998), even the idea of India as "a single political community was the wager of India's modern, educated, urban elite, whose intellectual horizons were extended by these modern ideas and . . . modern agencies" (p. 5). The centrality of the "myth of the middle class" to the structuring of neoliberal market economy is clearly evinced in the world press's euphoric reactions to India's emergence as the new consumer market (see Friedman, 2006; Luce, 2007; Zakaria, 2006). This myth augments the stranglehold by the middle classes over development objectives because the consumptive potential of this 300-million-strong population now becomes the force driving India's destiny (see Das, 2001; Nilekani, 2009; Varma, 1998). The focus on the consumer-driven growth model engenders among the middle class elites a belief that India's prosperity is now dependent on their inventiveness and enterprise, as well as their newly "unbound" energies (see Das, 2001; Mishra, 2006; Nilekani, 2009), helping them emerge as a distinct political constituency within India, as exemplified by the Bharatiya Janata Party's "Indian Shining" campaign for 2004 parliamentary elections wherein consumptive narratives permeated political slogans (Fernandes, 2006).

The decided foregrounding of middle-class priorities not only marginalizes the needs of the vast majority of Indians, who do not qualify as consumers but it also effectively silences them as citizens and participants in discussions about their own future. This is evident, even in the debate between Roy and Verghese, which takes place within middle-class spheres and assays legitimacy over and above the valiant struggle of the tribal populations. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, led by its feisty leader Medha Patkar, had been spearheading the struggle for over a decade against the massive dam project, consisting of over 30 big and thousands of small-sized dams that had been conceived and planned without any

involvement of the populations affected by drastic restructuring of the ecological space and livelihoods. In their protest against this arbitrary imposition of the development project, Medha Patkar and the villagers had gone on numerous hunger strikes and even threatened to embrace *Jal Samadhi* (watery graves) by sitting in and facing the rising waters of the reservoirs rather than be evicted. But this fight raged in the remote corner of India far away from the epicenters of India's metropolises, where peremptory decisions are taken, and was therefore barely covered by the media. It was only pushed into the living rooms and consciousness of urban middle-class India when Arundhati Roy intervened in the debate (see Marquand, 1999). This, because Roy's authenticity is itself tied to a concatenation of voices and interests, supportive of unequal, urban-centered, consumption-oriented economic development models that constitute and construct dominant power equations and discourses.

Roy rose to prominence after she won the prestigious Booker Prize for her debut novel and became for middle class Indians the symbol of the new age India that stands tall and unflinching in the global arenas. She was much feted in the press for the honor that she brought to the country and as an inspiration to millions of other educated, urban Indians to seek similar laurels. Though Roy's stringent criticism of India's democracy has relegated her to what Madhu Kishwar (in an interview to CNN-IBN) refers to as the lunatic fringe of Indian politics, Roy's voice still has greater salience in commercial profit-driven media than do those of the tribal populations because her celebrity status supports media sales and revenues. She has been embraced within the complex of rapidly globalizing and profited-orientated media that have performed the important ideological function in establishing middle-class primacy and reiterating structured unity of the myth of the middle class, thereby sustaining the essential logic of neoliberal market economy.

Chakravartty and Schiller (2010) argue that when socialist economies transform into market economies, media perform a key transformative function. In India, as a plethora of private entertainment channels concertedly address the consuming classes and unabashedly peddle products and lifestyles, an overwhelming focus has come to bear on the middle classes, while the poor and the hungry struggling for the basic necessities of life have been symbolically annihilated (McChesney, 2001). When the existence of 600 million and more Indian citizens recedes from human consciousness, it becomes impossible to speak of their sufferings or of inclusive development in any meaningful way. Therefore, without demurring, Verghese (1999) proceeds to reject criticisms of big development projects as fallacious and derides Roy's efforts to curtail the human cost as hysterical outpourings. Though scholars may argue that the preoccupation of the middle classes and their ability to consume is greatly exaggerated, and a cohesiveness is being imposed on a highly diverse and variegated political/social entity (see Fernandes, 2006; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2009), the middle class preeminence makes a strong case for a developmental model in which urban India's power requirements are prioritized while the drinking water needs of hundreds of Indian villages are negated—a fact unflinchingly asserted by Verghese, who says that the dams were never meant to supply drinking water to drought affected regions of Kutch and Saurashtra.

The hegemony of the middle classes in discursive and mediated spheres has constricted the spaces for alternative development paradigms. There is an overwhelming consensus among policy makers and elites to dismiss emphasis on rural growth as misguided romanticism and to certify the soundness of

rapid urbanization as the only way out of poverty, despite conflicting evidence from the ground (see Das, 2001; Luce, 2007; Nilekani, 2009). For example, Nilekani, former cochairman of the software giant Infosys, accepts that the task of creating jobs for growing youth population poses a challenge, as many blue chip sectors of the industry (informatics, service, pharmaceutical, and manufacturing) may not be able to deliver on their promise. This does not deter him from promoting urbanization and industrialization as the only way forward for India. Others like Luce (2007), though cognizant of India's largely jobless growth, are still supportive of industrialization and disdainful of rural regeneration projects. Luce rejects income generation projects of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (translated as Organization for Empowerment of Workers and Peasants) in rural areas of arid Rajasthan that will help stem the migration in search of low paying and hazardous jobs in urban centers. He considers them as misguided and wasteful efforts, even when he is unable to provide unequivocal support for urban, industrial, growth potential.

The conflict over development priorities and models can be viewed as a replay of the historical disagreements between Gandhian and Nehruvian approaches to modernity: Gandhi presented the path forward by resuscitating and reviving village India (where over 75% of India's population still resides), and Nehru advocated the building of modern India through behemoths of heavy industries, power-generation, and large irrigation projects (Khilnani, 1998; Prakash, 1999). The defenders of the Narmada Dam project can be seen as votaries of Nehruvian policies that have prevailed over Gandhian visions. But Roy (1999a & 1999b) argues that this is but an ostensible struggle that hides the elitist nature of all developmental planning in India. Today, in neoliberal India, urban-centered growth models continues to gain ascendancy, despite inefficacies and internal inconsistencies, because consumerism, which shapes the discourse of rights and citizenship, disenfranchises most Indian citizens whose poverty precludes them from pleasures of consumption (see Fernandes, 2006).

The denial of the legal rights of a large section of the poor and thus the powerless goes unnoticed and unacknowledged, drowned as they are under the laudatory drum beats about India as the world's largest democracy. This powerful discourse, which resonates in international press (see Freidman, 2006; Waldan, 2003; Zakaria, 2006) and among policy analysts (see Carter, 2006; Das, 2006; Raja, 2006) is regurgitated in the Indian press as proof of the coming of age of India—much to the chagrin of sensitive critics who cannot but point that India lags behind many of the world's poorest nations, including Sudan and Bangladesh, on several counts of the Human Development Index (see Mishra, 2006; Prakash, 1999). Nonetheless, the self-congratulatory atmosphere is maintained by selectively highlighting certain facts while obliterating others. For example, Amartya Sen's (1999) complex argument that there are no famines in a democracy has been simplified to vindicate India's track record by its poorest citizenry and to propose that all is well, despite the presence of endemic hunger and malnourishment (see Massing, 2003). The upholding of India's democratic credential renders invisible the violence perpetuated on the poor in the name of progress. It closes off critical dialogues while establishing Indian government's moral unassailability. For example, Verghese (1999) unequivocally supports government's developmental claims and severely chastises those who point out its dismal track record. But Roy (1999a) draws attention to the very failure of democratic vision that has accompanied the state's commitment to progress, turning it against the very people who are most in need of assistance and protection (see Khilnani, 1998). Roy cries for restoration of the egalitarian perspective in development. And though Roy is accused of being

antediluvian, she is neither against technology nor engineering, but denounces social engineering, which promotes a centralized antipeople model of growth, benefiting a few and bringing destitution to the doorsteps of many. In the final count, the disagreement between Roy and Verghese is not over estimates of how much water the river will hold, or how much of the area will be irrigated; or how many new trees will be planted to compensate for the destruction of the evergreen forests. Instead, it is an irreconcilable and "fundamental difference in worldview" regarding entitlements, priorities, and the fate of our planet, which Roy (1999) derisively dismisses as amounting to an dispute about replacing "a wildlife reserve with a poultry farm" (p. 2).

However, such is the salience of the hegemonic machinations, appropriating resources, and smothering discontent that Roy's efforts to expose these structures and discourses are effortlessly isolated as irrational invectives. The struggle over the meaning of development and its proposed beneficiaries, which underlie the Narmada Dam debate, resonates in environment struggles across the world. In the current phase of neoliberal capitalism, the powerless confront the powerful in an increasingly hostile environment wherein it is easier to imagine "the end of the world" or "the stoppage of all life on earth" and a total destruction of nature than it is to accommodate even the most modest change in the capitalistic world order (Zizek, 1994, p. 1). As India joins the world economic order, the intolerance toward alternative perspectives that has "served to delegitimize, marginalize and demonize anti-WTO protestors" (McFarlane & Hay, 2003, p. 211); and that has criminalized the powerful argument for creative commons in hackers' ethics (Halbert, 1997, p. 361) has come to prevail. Powerful interests aligned with big business and government bureaucracy have succeeded in sidelining people's just demands by confounding their most basic needs as transgressions against progress.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that Verghese derailed a righteous protest, not on the strength of his argument, but rather due to the force of the complementary discourses made more powerful in the context of liberalized, globalized Indian society. Roy's highly charged prose and emotional tenor bears direct relationship to the level of prejudice that she had to encounter in speaking truth to power while sifting the facts from the fiction of progress. Equally, Verghese's lackadaisical presentation of facts dismissing Roy's critique as fallacious and misguided could sustain itself only because it shared homologous spaces with imperatives of a neoliberal economy, which privilege ideas of consumer citizenship in the face of gross inequalities and injustices. We have been able to discern this by reading this debate against the backdrop of important economic, political, and social changes, as well as by seeking out the interconnectedness between the text and its surrounding contexts. The critical cultural analysis of the Narmada Dam debate, while foregrounding the methodological argument of extending the ambit of analysis to include the text's surrounding contexts, ideologies and power equations, highlights the need for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interrelatedness among communication studies, media studies, democracy, and capitalism. As McChesney (2000) argues, such an interdisciplinary approach is of critical importance to the future of democratic societies and would put an end to academia's insulation from "the drift and thrust of social life" (Gitlin, 1990, p. 188).

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