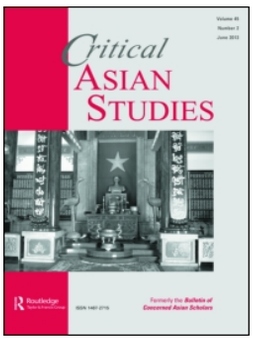

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Big Dams in India: Necessities or Threats?

Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*) has become a vocal critic of the construction of big dams in India, particularly the Sardar Sarovar dam presently under construction on the Narmada river. (For a recent summary of her position see *The Cost of Living* [HarperCollins, 1999].) In July 1999 Gail Omvedt published an open letter to Arundhati Roy in which she claims that Roy is "missing many things" in her efforts defeat the dams. "Are you so convinced," she asks Roy, "that the thousands of dams built since independence have been an unmitigated evil? Or that the goal should not be to restructure and improve them rather than abandon them? Or that the struggle should not be to unite all the rural people aspiring to a life of prosperity and achievement in the modern world—drought-afflicted and dam-afflicted—rather than to just take up the cause of the opposition to change?" Roy has not replied in public to Omvedt's open letter but other activists have responded in various forums. In this "critique and rejoinder" we publish one such response: by Ashish Kothari, an anti-dam activist who drafted the first detailed critique of the Narmada projects back in 1983 (as a member of Kalpavriksh, an environmental group). Omvedt replies to Kothari's criticisms of her position and Kothari responds in his own defense.

An Open Letter to Arundhati Roy

from Gail Omvedt

Dear Arundhati,

I'm sorry to have to write a critical letter to you. I very much liked *The God of Small Things*. I also appreciated your intervention on the nuclear issue. I was impressed on reading in *Indian Express* that you had decided to donate some royalties to the Dalit Sahitya Academy....

However, when it comes to the issue of "big dams," I can understand the urgency you feel for the people of the valley and the victims of misguided development projects everywhere, but I feel that you're missing many things. There are important questions not only regarding the dam-afflicted but also the drought-afflicted, issues of water for agriculture, and of democracy in peoples' movements. I would like to share with you some of my experiences, mainly in Maharashtra, with drought and water issues, and with movements opposing eviction and in favor of building small dams, among farmers and agricultural laborers of various castes and among adivasis in northern Maharashtra, near the Narmada.

The first time I even heard of the Narmada dams was around 1984. The CPI(M), the Shramik Mukti Dal (SMD), and the Shramik Sanghatana, an organization of adivasis in Dhule district, had organized a demonstration in Akkalkuva, where they presented a petition to the government demanding mainly that Maharashtrian evictees be given alternative land in Maharashtra itself and calling for alternatives to the Sardar Sarovar. I remember that it was during the monsoon season; we walked miles afterwards through drizzling rain to enjoy discussions, intellectual puzzles with matchboxes, and a simple meal in one of the many remote villages of the area.

A little after that, in 1986, many of the same activists of the Shramik Sanghatana and SMD organized an "Adivasi-Forest Conference" in Shahada. I had come to Dhule to help in rallying support among the social and political activists of the district. This was just after Medha Patkar [a leader in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and an opponent of India's present line of development] had made her first visit to the district. She had crossed the Narmada with Achyut Yagnik of Ahmedabad; their boat had capsized but somehow they had made their way down through the district, stopping off at Shahada to meet Shramik Sanghatana people—the main organization of adivasi toilers in the region—and then coming to Dhule, where she formed a support organization. All this was fine. There were only two critical questions raised. One was mine: Medha at that time was following the guidelines of the World Bank in demanding justice for evictees, and these guidelines identified only male heads of families as eligible for alternative land. We were at the time already starting to raise the question of land for women, and I felt it was too bad that the landlessness of women was being neglected in the process of rehabilitation and building anew.

Sardar Sarovar Project

Co-sponsored by the Indian states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, the Sardar Sarovar Project is designed to dam and utilize the waters of the Narmada—the largest West-flowing river in the country—for the benefit of the population of the sponsoring states. Prime Minister Nehru laid the foundation stone for the massive dam on 5 April 1961, but work on the project began only in 1987. As of March 1998, excavation for the main dam was all but complete and 82 percent of the concrete works had been finished.
The Indian Government's position on the controversial project is available online at http://www.sardarsarovardam.com/index.htm.

But that was minor. Looking back, probably a more important negative reaction came from Waharu Sonavane, at that time the leading young adivasi activist of Shramik Sanghatana. Waharu had been in the movement since 1971-72, working with Ambarsingh Maharaj, a truly unique indigenous leader, and with the Shramik Sanghatana and SMD, a Maharashtra-wide organization of Marxist activists. Waharu is a poet and an intellectual—though he has never had the opportunity to learn English—and I will quote for you a few lines of one of his poems that came out of his years of experience with movements. It is given as a title the English word (a word that also has come in Marathi) —"Stage":

> We did not go on to the stage,
> Neither were we called.
> We were shown our places,
> told to sit.
> But they, sitting on the stage,
> went on telling us of our sorrows,
> our sorrows remained ours, they never became theirs.

There is more, but that is the main point. Waharu's main objection was that in all her discussions on the anti-dam movement, Medha never gave credit to those who had organized on the issue before her. More recently also it was Waharu who raised the question to Sanjay Sanghvi of the NBA [Narmada Bachao Andolan], "Why is it that there is no top-ranking adivasi leadership in the NBA?" This was at a seminar organized by the Pune University Women's Studies Centre. Sanjay could not answer except to say: "But all our village leaders are adivasis." This is no answer, I hope you understand, when you are dealing with villages that are nearly 100 percent adivasi. Why are all the leaders from the urban elite, and how democratic exactly is their relationship with the rural poor they are organizing?

There were and are real questions about the way in which the leadership of the NBA relates to—"represents" and uses, its adivasi and nonadivasi farmer following. One of these has to do with an area you should be an expert in: words. Why the term "tribal"? I know, nearly every English-speaker in India, apparently including supporters and activists of the NBA, uses "tribal" for adivasis when speaking in English. (In Indian languages all now use "adivasi" or some equivalent.) But, although established now, the term "tribal" is an insulting and demeaning word, inaccurate even from a social-scientific point of view; I don't know of any group of indigenous people the world over who would accept it for themselves. (I won't here go into the debate about whether or not "adivasis" should be called "indigenous people.") The only reason it survives in India is that because of the abysmal state of education in general among adivasis and even worse state of English education, there is no one really in a position to protest. Otherwise there would be massive objections, just as Dalits have thrown out the term "harijan." Those classified as a "scheduled tribe" in northeast India—people like Mr. Sangma—made clear long ago their feelings about being called "hill tribes." The fact that "tribal" is still a widely used word in English, I think, has something to do with the way people are a little careless about the identities and real feelings of those they represent. And if this includes you and the NBA, then you should think about it.

In any case, Waharu's earliest objection was in terms of non-recognition of what they had done before; and this was very early on in the anti-Narmada movement, when there was no NBA as such and Medha and others were still talking mainly of rehabilitation and not of total opposition to big dams as such. But the tendency of not recognizing the work of others, or really being willing to admit that there has been a history of struggles, has remained. You write very easily of "people's organizations" in different states coming together to form the NBA. These were organizations set up by Medha and her associates. In Maharashtra the largest "peoples' organization" or alliance working on rehabilitation issues is the Maharashtra Rajya Dharangrast va Prakalgrast Shetkari Parishad (Maharashtra State Conference of Dam- and Project-Affected Farmers), which has been working since the 1970s. It has offered a broad platform in which various local struggles have united. Its leaders from the beginning were people like Baba Adhav, a socialist and also a man very much involved in anti-caste campaigns; Datta Deshmukh, a communist of the Lal Nishan Party (now deceased); Naganath Naikaudi, an independent Marxist and freedom fighter from southern Maharashtra; Bharat Patankar of the Shramik Mukti Dal, among many others. These have nearly all been involved on issues of irrigation and water, as well as problems of dam evictees.

The Meaning of Water

People in these organizations were concerned about the social justice of dams and the sustainable use of water from very early on. But they never opposed dams as such. The main slogan of the people involved in their struggles was "first rehabilitation, then the dam." Later this was linked to "equal water distribution"—the demand that irrigation projects should be restructured to provide water to every family in every village in a watershed area. Movements are going on for this, for example in regard to the Krishna Valley dams.

Bharat Patankar (my husband, to keep things in perspective) and others were involved in a fight for one rather well-known peasant-built small dam in Sangli district in Maharashtra, the Bali Rajya Memorial Dam, irrigating two villages. This was even taken as a kind of model of the type of dams the NBA would approve of. But they, we, have never opposed "big dams" as such. Bharat, at the time when Medha turned from simply agitation-for-rehabilitation to opposing big dams as such, was also active in a movement of Koyna dam evictees—working with farmers who had lost their land decades back at the time of construction of the Koyna dam. He very simply felt that there were at least some big dams—Koyna was one—that were not by any means inherently destructive and that did not submerge significant areas of forest.

Why does anybody need "big dams" or "big irrigation projects"? Arundhati, there is a very simple issue here, one that urban people—I hope this doesn't sound too sarcastic—find hard to understand. Water is needed, not only for drinking, but for agriculture. NBA documents have talked a lot about drinking water, but they have not had much to say about water for agriculture. You cannot grow crops without water, and when there is only 500mm of rainwater per year—this is true of three-fourths of the Krishna valley area in Maharashtra and of much of Gujarat including Saurashtra and Kutch—then some external water, provided by canals, is necessary to supplement rainfall. "Rainwater harvesting" is not enough in such areas of low rainfall. The millions of people living in such areas are the drought-afflicted, suffering from years of parched earth and damaged crops; they are driven off their lands to the cities to live, or migrate to work as laborers, for instance sugar cane cutters, in areas of irrigation. But

they would prefer to be able to prosper in their homes just as much as those threatened by dam and project eviction want the alternative of not moving. You say that the thousands of dams built in India since independence have simply led to eviction on one hand and waterlogging on the other, but this is not true. So many farmers have benefited from irrigation water, and millions who have not can see this, and want such benefits also. Our arguments are not against big irrigation projects as such, but against badly conceived ones; big projects can be sustainable and work in a decentralized manner.

It may well be that, hundreds of years ago when the low rainfall regions were mainly occupied by pastoralists, people could carry on traditional livelihoods. That is no longer true. Population has multiplied, and the ways of using natural resources, converting them into food and materials for living, have to be developed. Productivity has to be increased, and this means that some form of irrigation projects as well as other kinds of technological development are necessary. In areas of very low rainfall, even villages that have become famous for "watershed development" and using rainwater—such as Ralegan Siddhi in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra—are supplementing this with canal water.

In any case, most of those who stand to lose their lands for dam projects are farmers, whether adivasis or non-adivasis, who understand the need for water for agriculture. Their refusal to be victims of development does not mean an opposition to development; they would like a share in it; they would like it to be just and sustainable. (Indeed, one of the achievements of the Maharashtra Rajya Dharangrast va Prakalgrast Shetkari Parishad was to win acceptance of the principle that those losing their land in the catchment area of dams should get alternative land in the command area—a share of the water of the dam.)

"...'people of both sides should sit down and talk it over.' 'People'—not the government, not just the organization leaders. People like themselves, from both sides." (Anti-dam activist. *Credit:* Venu Govindu.)

I visited Ferkuva in early 1991. I had come from the Gujarat side, from Surat—along with a representative of a farmers' organization that would be considerd a "rich peasant" organization by most NBA supporters. Ferkuva was staunchly for the dam, and when I brought up the usual objections, the farmers' representative simply responded, "There's a cup of water which is half full. You say it's half empty, I say it's half full." Gujarat so badly needed the water, he felt, that it could deal with flaws. He, like most Gujaratis I know, was adamantly against any compromise, and could not be argued with. However, he was an old Gandhian and wanted to visit Baba Amte and Medha, both of whom he knew. We approached from the Gujarat side—where the government had organized large rallies made up of both of adivasi and non-adivasi farmers. Well, they were "brought there," I suppose. On the Maharashtra side, where the NBA was camped out, were a band of adivasis and also some farmers from the Niphad area. Medha's fast had started. I talked a bit to the Niphad farmers—I suppose they are the ones who call themselves "Rajputs," though this honorary title is mainly a claim to status and they may not be much different from the mainly Kunbi-Maratha families in the Maharashtrian village where I live. They said, "people of both sides should sit down and talk it over." "People"—not the government, not just the organization leaders. People like themselves, from both sides.

This never happened.

Arundhati, you see the NBA as a "small ragtag army" confronting the mighty forces of government and the World Bank. I see it as a worldwide alliance with considerable amounts of money and backing from upper-middle-class people in North America and Europe, not to mention Delhi and Mumbai, along with a rather small local base in the Narmada valley. Medha Patkar stands in between, at the intersection between the two. You are calling for the people of the world, doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, whatever, to join the NBA—you don't need to call them, they have been there almost from the beginning.

So what is the NBA? An adivasi organization? Ask Waharu. A movement of those threatened by eviction due to the dam? Ask some of the evictees, many of whom have gotten land through other organizations working for rehabilitation, both in Gujarat and Maharashtra.

There is nothing wrong with going out to organize people, with throwing oneself into a cause or supporting a cause, with rallying world opinion. NBA has succeeded in giving great power to a "no big dam" position and in calling into question the whole issue of "development." You have every right to support them. But in doing so, please think about one thing: when you go as leaders to people in the valley, or when you represent people in the valley to the world outside, what are the consequences for them of the arguments you make? What does it mean when you put your own arguments, either explicitly or implicitly, in their mouths? Are you so sure your sweeping opposition to big dams is in their best interest, or that you are democratically representing their real feelings on the matter?

Talking about Alternatives

The NBA has begun to talk of "alternative development." But they have not been much interested in alternatives that depart from their particular line.

There are people working on alternatives—some in southern Maharashtra struggles and campaigns, based in struggles, drawing on popular initiatives and on technological innovations proposed by radical engineers and others in Mumbai and Pune—of various kinds. They use some very simple principles in suggesting alternatives.

The principles are: minimizing the height of dams and the areas to be submerged; ensuring that all of those who will lose lands or livelihood to the projects get compensation, land-for-land wherever possible; and ensuring that all the drought-afflicted who look hopefully for benefits will get access to water. The slogan of "equal water distribution" calls for the widest possible availability of water—and for concrete, technologically viable methods of doing this.

You see, to have a really powerful people's struggle against unjust dams and the horrors of losing one's home, you have to build such a wide unity—of the drought-afflicted along with the dam-afflicted, of those in the command area of dams as well as those in the catchment area. Otherwise, the state will simply use the longings of those millions of drought-afflicted against dam evictees; this is their game of divide and rule, and it cannot be defeated simply by the support of middle-class urbanites outside the area of the project, however fervent and idealistic they may be.

An alternative along these lines had been proposed for the Sardar Sarovar Dam. It has been published by Suhas Paranjape and K. J. Joy, in a book entitled *Sustainable Technology: Making the Sardar Sarovar Project Viable.*[1]

The Paranjape and Joy proposal is based to a large extent on work done by the groups of engineers working with K. R. Datye of Mumbai and on struggles and experiments in Maharashtra. The themes of this are simple: lower the height of the dam drastically; construct a barrage below the present Sardar Sarovar dam to take water to Saurashtra and Katch. Instead of storing water year-round in a huge reservoir, most of the water would be distributed to farmers and stored in farmers' fields—there to be converted into biomass. The biomass can provide not only food, fiber, fodder, etc., but even electricity: instead of a centralized electricity-generating dam, electricity can be generated on a decentralized base using gasifiers and other modern technological devices *by the farmers* themselves, and sold by the farmers to the central grid.

Such an alternative would not do away with the dam, but it would lower its height and drastically reduce the number of people who would lose their land. It would also unite people, the drought-afflicted, especially in areas such as Saurashtra and Kutch, and the dam-afflicted.

But the alternative was never seriously considered. The government of Gujarat of course was opposed; by now most opinion has hardened and positions have hardened. No change in the dam. Well, we might expect that from the repressive State. But the alternative was also never considered, never taken up, never publicized by NBA either. They may have been upset by the idea of "making the Sardar Sarovar Project viable"—giving a new lease on life, even though in a radically altered form, to something they were trying to totally destroy.

Could we conclude that they are not really interested in alternatives?

Was the NBA not playing into the hands of the State that has systematically and continually tried to divide people, that has built for itself a support base against the farmers of the valley among the millions in Gujarat hoping for water to maintain their livelihood? Isn't talk of only using rainwater-harvesting a cruel joke on the people in the areas of Saurashtra and Kutch?

Krishna Valley Alternatives

Similar issues have come ip regarding the dams in the Krishna valley region of Maharashtra. Take Koyna dam. There is one activist, Avinash B. J., a longtime NGO [nongovernmental organization] worker, who is considered part of the NBA group, working in the area. I believe he even attended a world conference in Rio and talked about the Koyna and Krishna valley dams. He has little local base. But his position in regard to the farmers of the region who still have some lands around the reservoir itself was that they should not move. The main committee of Koyna evictees has had employment provision as one of its demands. But Avinash B. J.'s position was that the farmers should stay and carry on with their lives near the reservoir. Whether or not it sounds good to say that people should not join the flood going to live in questionable conditions in the big cities, the fact remains that in this particular case the result would be that the landless and land-poor farmers would have no other option but to provide agricultural labor to the bigger landowners.

In the Krishna valley as a whole, the NBA has no support; there is a large people's movement under the leadership of Naganath Naikaudi and Bharat Patankar and others, mainly organized through the Shetmajur Kashtakari Shetkari Sanghatana—sorry to bother you with a lot of long names, my publishers always say its bad for readers from abroad, they get confused, and this is quite understandable. Talking only of the NBA and of "no big dams" is much simpler; unfortunately, however, people organize themselves in a multitude of organizations and with a multitude of ideas and aims. Anyway, some of the movements have been of villagers standing to have their lands flooded by construction of dams. In Urmodi (in Satara district) people have held a *dharna* [sit-in] for over two months, stopping construction of the dam because their rehabilitation is not assured; in Azra Taluka of Kolhapur district the construction of the Uchangi dam was halted to give the villagers a chance to present an alternative proposal.

Overall, the movements have taken up the demand to complete the dams in the Krishna valley so that the water allotted to Maharashtra can be used before the deadline set by the Bachawat Award, in May 2000. But, the people are insisting that the government's method of building dams—top-down, bureaucratic, capitalistic—should be changed to provide a distribution system that would give water to every village and every family in the Krishna valley, not just to create green islands of development in a sea of drought. And they have amassed experiments and data to show that this can be done. A Marathi booklet on this by Bharat Patankar sold 10,000 copies on the day of the conference when it was brought out. (An English translation has not yet been published.) Within this framework of demanding sustainable dam construction, full rehabilitation, and equal water distribution, people of thirteen drought-prone *talukas* [subdistrict] in five districts of southern Maharashtra have organized themselves. But they are better at communicating in Marathi than in English, and the urban-middle-class component of this particular movement is very weak. The local papers (that is, the local editions of papers) publish news, the government pays attention, but the Bombay and Pune editions do not publish their news. Even when five days of demonstrations by nearly 100,000 people in the area, simultaneous demonstrations by both the dam-afflicted and the

drought- afflicted, were held in late October 1998, there were no reports in the big metropolitan press.

On Bags of Grain and the Meaning of Development

So I ask myself, what kind of movement is this, what kind of movement is the NBA? Whose movement is it anyway?

Answering these questions requires a few comments about the question of development. You are, like many urbanites and many people in Europe and North America who buy food from the market every day, very pessimistic about and even antagonistic toward the idea of Indian farmers getting into "commercialized agriculture." (Oh yes, starvation in the midst of plenty: I was in Kalahandi, also, in 1996, when I spent a few months at an institute in Bhubaneswar; its problem is not commercialized agriculture, but the total and abysmal lack of any industrial development in the district, along with the fact that 40 percent of forest land is owned by the state.) It somehow seems a destruction of a beautiful, perhaps poor but nevertheless rich in variety and emotion, traditional way of life. You wrote of the "bags of grain" in the farmers' household, and how they bragged about them.

I would like to say a little bit about bags of grain. I've married into a farming family, perhaps not too different from these. We have fifteen acres on the banks of the Krishna, and we have lots of bags of grain, which have sometimes filled even the "living room" of our house after harvest.

But, bags of grain are not worth all that much. Maybe 1,000 rupees a bag, depending on the crop. Farmers don't make much of a living off of agriculture. They do not do so now, they did not do so either in traditional times. That is, in times before "modern" commercialized agriculture and before all the paraphernalia of contemporary society entered their lives. We can say both good and bad things about the agriculture and industry and society of today—but let's examine the traditional one a bit.

There is a Marathi saying: "Knowledge in the house of the Brahmans; grain in the house of the Kunbis; songs in the house of the Mahars" (dalits). One meaning of course is that the Mahars, the dalits, are the worst off, they hardly have food to eat. But the other is that both the Mahars and the Kunbi peasants, along with all the vast middle castes who were identified as "shudras," traditionally were deprived of knowledge and education. Traditionally, they were subsistence producers, growing their own food —except for the surplus eaten up by the Brahmans and the feudalists and merchants. So they had grain. But little else. It was a caste-stratified society. Then, as today, "knowledge" was the most valuable; knowledge could command grain and songs. Kunbis were looked down upon as shudras and servants, dalits were even worse off. Economists have even argued that the average wage for agricultural and basic manual laborers at the time of the Arthashastra represented the same in money terms as the average wage during colonial times; and it has not changed very much in the fifty years of independence.

That is your traditional, non-commercialized society. Do you really think the adivasis, dalits, and shudra, or Rajput farmers of the Narmada valley want to keep that? Are you so convinced that the thousands of dams built since independence have been an unmitigated evil? Or that the goal should not be to restructure and improve them rather than abandon them? Or that the struggle should not be to unite all the rural people aspiring to a life of prosperity and achievement in the modern world, drought-afflicted and dam-afflicted—rather than to just take up the cause of the opposition to change?

Development to so many people in India means getting out of the traditional traps of caste hierarchy and of being held in a birth-determined play. It is not simply economic progress, but the capacity to participate in a society in which knowledge, grain, and songs will be available in full measure to everyone. When you so romantically imply that such development is not possible, when you give all publicity and support to anti-development organizations, are you not yourself helping to close such doors?

Hoping to hear from you,

Gail Omvedt
Kasegaon District Sangli India 415404
Email: <gailomvedt@usa.net>

Notes

1. See Suhas Paranjape and K. J. Joy, *Sustainable Technology: Making the Sardar Sarovar Project Viable* (Thalteg Tekra, Ahmedabad: Centre for Environment Education, Nehru Foundation for Development, 1994), Rs 175/$24.

An Open Response to Gail Omvedt's "Open Letter to Arundhati Roy"

by Ashish Kothari

Gail Omvedt's open letter to Arundhati Roy raises a number of issues, some of which need a detailed response, which I attempt below. To put things in perspective, I should state that I was involved with the first detailed critique of the Narmada projects (back in 1983, as part of the environmental group Kalpavriksh), and have since then opposed these dams as being inherently destructive. I have also been involved for some time with environmental assessments of large projects, and would therefore like to bring a third perspective into the debate, which has so far largely focused only on displacement and the benefits of large dams. This third perspective is the environmental one.

Gail Omvedt's arguments are essentially along two planes: one, that the NBA sustains itself more on middle-class Indian and foreign support rather than a mass local base, and two, that its oppostion to large dams as such is ill-founded. Along the way she brings in some other arguments, and fires broadsides at some other people. I will try to respond.

A "Small Local Base"?

The assertion that the NBA [Narmada Bachao Andolan] has a "small local base" is, to say the least, rather strange and ill-informed. Some of us have just returned from the Rally for the Valley. We would had to have been absolutely blind if we were to accept Gail Omvedt's charge. At Pathrad, one of the villages threatened with submergence by the Maheshwar project, between 8,000 and 10,000 villagers greeted the Rally. At every village and town along the Rally's route, there were tumultous welcomes, such that many reporters with us remarked that only in election campaigns had they seen such turnouts in the past. Yet these were not "hired" crowds, as may well happen at election rallies. Gail Omvedt would have done well to come for the Rally, perhaps as an observer, and seen the so-called "small local base" (and its alleged middle-class character) for herself.

This is not a new phenomenon. Anyone who has attended rallies of the NBA in the last fourteen years, would have been impressed at the spontaneously massive response they receive. In

drought- afflicted, were held in late October 1998, there were no reports in the big metropolitan press.

On Bags of Grain and the Meaning of Development

So I ask myself, what kind of movement is this, what kind of movement is the NBA? Whose movement is it anyway?

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But, bags of grain are not worth all that much. Maybe 1,000 rupees a bag, depending on the crop. Farmers don't make much of a living off of agriculture. They do not do so now, they did not do so either in traditional times. That is, in times before "modern" commercialized agriculture and before all the paraphernalia of contemporary society entered their lives. We can say both good and bad things about the agriculture and industry and society of today—but let's examine the traditional one a bit.

There is a Marathi saying: "Knowledge in the house of the Brahmans; grain in the house of the Kunbis; songs in the house of the Mahars" (dalits). One meaning of course is that the Mahars, the dalits, are the worst off, they hardly have food to eat. But the other is that both the Mahars and the Kunbi peasants, along with all the vast middle castes who were identified as "shudras," traditionally were deprived of knowledge and education. Traditionally, they were subsistence producers, growing their own food —except for the surplus eaten up by the Brahmans and the feudalists and merchants. So they had grain. But little else. It was a caste-stratified society. Then, as today, "knowledge" was the most valuable; knowledge could command grain and songs. Kunbis were looked down upon as shudras and servants, dalits were even worse off. Economists have even argued that the average wage for agricultural and basic manual laborers at the time of the Arthashastra represented the same in money terms as the average wage during colonial times; and it has not changed very much in the fifty years of independence.

That is your traditional, non-commercialized society. Do you really think the adivasis, dalits, and shudra, or Rajput farmers of the Narmada valley want to keep that? Are you so convinced that the thousands of dams built since independence have been an unmitigated evil? Or that the goal should not be to restructure and improve them rather than abandon them? Or that the struggle should not be to unite all the rural people aspiring to a life of prosperity and achievement in the modern world, drought-afflicted and dam-afflicted—rather than to just take up the cause of the opposition to change?

Development to so many people in India means getting out of the traditional traps of caste hierarchy and of being held in a birth-determined play. It is not simply economic progress, but the capacity to participate in a society in which knowledge, grain, and songs will be available in full measure to everyone. When you so romantically imply that such development is not possible, when you give all publicity and support to anti-development organizations, are you not yourself helping to close such doors?

Hoping to hear from you,

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Notes

1. See Suhas Paranjape and K. J. Joy, *Sustainable Technology: Making the Sardar Sarovar Project Viable* (Thalteg Tekra, Ahmedabad: Centre for Environment Education, Nehru Foundation for Development, 1994), Rs 175/$24.

An Open Response to Gail Omvedt's "Open Letter to Arundhati Roy"

by Ashish Kothari

Gail Omvedt's open letter to Arundhati Roy raises a number of issues, some of which need a detailed response, which I attempt below. To put things in perspective, I should state that I was involved with the first detailed critique of the Narmada projects (back in 1983, as part of the environmental group Kalpavriksh), and have since then opposed these dams as being inherently destructive. I have also been involved for some time with environmental assessments of large projects, and would therefore like to bring a third perspective into the debate, which has so far largely focused only on displacement and the benefits of large dams. This third perspective is the environmental one.

Gail Omvedt's arguments are essentially along two planes: one, that the NBA sustains itself more on middle-class Indian and foreign support rather than a mass local base, and two, that its oppostion to large dams as such is ill-founded. Along the way she brings in some other arguments, and fires broadsides at some other people. I will try to respond.

A "Small Local Base"?

The assertion that the NBA [Narmada Bachao Andolan] has a "small local base" is, to say the least, rather strange and ill-informed. Some of us have just returned from the Rally for the Valley. We would had to have been absolutely blind if we were to accept Gail Omvedt's charge. At Pathrad, one of the villages threatened with submergence by the Maheshwar project, between 8,000 and 10,000 villagers greeted the Rally. At every village and town along the Rally's route, there were tumultous welcomes, such that many reporters with us remarked that only in election campaigns had they seen such turnouts in the past. Yet these were not "hired" crowds, as may well happen at election rallies. Gail Omvedt would have done well to come for the Rally, perhaps as an observer, and seen the so-called "small local base" (and its alleged middle-class character) for herself.

This is not a new phenomenon. Anyone who has attended rallies of the NBA in the last fourteen years, would have been impressed at the spontaneously massive response they receive. In

1991, we walked over 200 kilometers through Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, and across the Gujarat border (where a naked display of state power stopped us). There were 3,000 of us, 95 percent local villagers, on this Sangharsh Yatra. Two four- to five-day long *dharnas* in Delhi, one of them I remember in the scorching heat of summer on the streets in front of the prime minister's residence, were attended by several thousand villagers. Several hundred of these were adivasis, many of whom had walked three to four days to get to the spot from where transportation was available to bring them to Delhi. Unless Gail Omvedt is alleging that these are all hired hands, or that they are all afflicted by a mass "false consciousness," I cannot see how she can call this kind of participation "small."

Using the name of Waharu Sonavane to raise questions about the nature of the NBA, is illogical and rather strange coming from an academic who should know better than to use single examples to generalize. This kind of logic can easily be countered by naming a dozen tribals who remain steadfast in their opposition to the dam, and are willing to go along with the NBA all the way. I was just last week talking to Lohariyabhai of Jalsindhi, whose hut will be the first to go under the waters if they rise another few feet this monsoon (even as I finish this essay, this submergence may be taking place). Lohariyabhai is resolute in his determination to commit "jal samarpan" [a term meaning to "give ones life to the waters as they rise around you"], and with him are thousands of other adivasis and non-adivasis. Gail Omvedt's charges against the NBA, at a time when these villagers are struggling to save their lives and livelihoods, their lands and cattle, are not just incorrect, they are rather insensitively and tragically timed.

Gail Omvedt, I would request that you go to Jalsindhi or Dhomkhedi and ask them the questions you have asked Arundhati. You'll get your response in those adivasi villages. And while you are at it, go also to Pathrad, Anjad, Nisarpur...and go also to the upper pada of Manibeli, already submerged by the Sardar Sarovar dam. Adivasis who resisted the submergence are living there, refusing to vacate their village even now. Ask the adivasis of Manibeli, whose huts were among the first to permanently go under water, who lost their cattle and goats, and yet who stand resolutely with the NBA. It is a mockery of these incredibly brave people to call them a "small local base."

This is not to assert, in any way, that the NBA's base in the valley covers the entire affected population. Undoubtedly there are dissenters; there are those who have lost courage and accepted whatever doles the state governments have handed out; there are perhaps even some who would be happy to move out (due to locally exploitative situations, a topic to which I return below). There would also perhaps be those, like Waharu, who have been disillusioned or ignored by NBA. No mass movement is perfect, and no mass movement can claim 100 percent support. But to point to these examples, and negate the clearly evident mass base of the movement, in which I would estimate that at least 30,000 to 40,000 people in the valley alone are involved, is to display a bias and lack of respect for the facts on the ground.

The question of why there is no "top-ranking adivasi leadership in the NBA" is important, and needs to be squarely addressed by the NBA itself. But it is not a question restricted to the NBA, it can be asked of most recent movements in India. Perhaps it has to do with the history of displacement of adivasi identity, perhaps something else. Perhaps it has to do with the way in which the Indian and international media singles out "heroes" they are comfortable with, or who belong to their "class." What is absolutely clear, however, is that in the decision-making process in the valley itself, both adivasis and non-adivasis are highly involved, even though Medha and other "middle-class" activists do often have a stronger say....I have in the past participated in these processes, and will vouch for this. Ask any of the reporters who were with the Rally throughout (barring one or two who were hostile right from the beginning), and they will tell you how they were amazed at the knowledge regarding the dam and its negative impacts, regarding their legal rights, and regarding larger issues of development that "ordinary" villagers (adivasi and non-adivasi) displayed. This kind of in-depth knowledge, and this kind of resolute participation in activities like jal samarpan, cannot be the outcome of a purely or even predominantly urban middle-class movement.

One may raise another issue here. While it is technically, academically correct to label Medha and some other NBA activists urban "middle-class," is this a valid real-life category for these people anymore? Some of these activists have spent the better part of the last decade and a half living with the villagers and townspeople of the Narmada valley, on monthly stipends that are so low that Gail Omvedt and I would perhaps not survive for more than a couple of days on them. Some of them have no stipends at all. They have braved everything that the villagers have braved, police brutalities, imprisonment, and now the ultimate "sacrifice" of the jal samarpan. To brand them as the "urban elite" is simply to take recourse in tired old academic categories and to avoid facing the fact that these people have given up the trappings of their own past and chosen to live much more difficult lives in order to be one with the dam-affected populations.

Incidentally, it is interesting that Gail Omvedt, after alleging that the NBA has an "urban elite" leadership, lists the following people as leaders of the Maharashtra Rajya Dharangrast va Prakalgrast Shetkari Parishad, an organization of farmers affected by dams and other projects that she has projected as being the sort of model that the NBA is not: Baba Adhav, Datta Deshmukh, Naganath Naikaudi, and Bharat Patankar. Now who among these is adivasi, or for that matter, an ordinary farmer? Can one then ask the same question of her: why is there no "top-ranking adivasi/farmer leadership" in the southern Maharashtra movement? (I am *not* alleging that there is no such leadership, merely pointing out the fallacy of Gail Omvedt's argument, based as it is on a biased view of the decision-making process in the NBA.) What gives these people, at least some of them from urban backgrounds, more of a right to "represent" local farmers than the right that NBA activists have?

In a strange interlude, Gail Omvedt also makes a passing reference to Avinash B. J. of Satya Shodh, a nongovernmental organization. Avinash B. J. works with the villagers in the Koyna area of Maharashtra, yet Gail Omvedt claims that this person, a supporter of the NBA, has a "little local base," and that he is making an unjust demand to let farmers remain around the Koyna reservoir, even though this would condemn them to a state of being only "agricultural labor to the bigger landowners." Both these claims are gross misrepresentations. In 1996, during the Jungle Jeevan Bachao Yatra, a band of twenty-five to thirty of us (activists, academics, and villagers affected by several national parks and sanctuaries) had traveled to some of the villages in the Koyna Sanctuary, on the eastern side of the reservoir. The response we got was very large, and everywhere, there was one demand: the villagers did not want to be moved. They reiterated

this demand in a recent meeting organized by the Koyna Jeevan Hakka Sanrakshana Sanghatana, a mass-based organization that by no stretch of the imagination has a "little local base." These farmers have their own lands, they are not laborers on other people's lands, they have intimate ties with the forest. Unless again this is a case of mass "false consciousness." Gail Omvedt's allegation that Avinash is falsely representing them is downright wrong. Perhaps she is confusing these with some of the villages on the western side of the reservoir, who are indeed being badly hit by the submergence and the sanctuary, and are asking to be moved out. Again, it is illogical to generalize from these few villages and cast aspersions on another whole set of villagers or an NGO that has been helping to organize them to fight for their rights.

The Question of Middle-Class and Foreign Support

Gail Omvedt states that the NBA is essentially sustaining itself with "considerable money and backing from upper-middle-class people in North America and Europe, not to mention Delhi and Mumbai." She contrasts this with the movement of the dam-affected in Maharashtra, with which she is associated, and which has not been able to get its mass rallies publicized in the national or international press. I'm sorry, but this sounds like sour grapes to me. To have a "weak middle-class component" is not a qualification to be waved around proudly. Is there something wrong with having such a component, so long as it is built on a strong local base? As I have detailed above, the local base of the NBA is amazingly strong, and the organization started by mobilizing this base.

I should know this, because I was, as stated above, involved with the first critique of the Narmada projects, before the *andolan* [movement] had started. Our detailed report was published in 1984[1] and since then, Kalpavriksh has been active in independently updating our assessment of the Narmada projects. If indeed the anti-Narmada movement had been an essentially middle-class urban phenomenon, we would have been world-famous by now! As it has turned out, we are not, *and rightly so*. The fact is, from the mid-1980s onwards, the mobilization among the people in the valley has been the central plank of the movement, and the middle-class support came later, as sensitive people in cities begin to see a resonance to their own concerns in the brave struggles of the local villagers. And also as it becomes evident that the Narmada projects are not just about some local government deciding to build some dams, but that they are connected to national and global vested interests, including the World Bank and multinational companies like ABB and Siemens. Building national and global alliances to counter this kind of an invasion of human rights and the environment is not to be sneered at...it was done brick by brick, on the foundation of a mass local base, and yes, using messages that were at once both logical/reasoned and emotive. And it was successful in kicking out the World Bank, the Japanese government, and at least some of the multinational companies who were there to support the project...no mean achievement (though Gail Omvedt, given her leanings toward globalization, may not think of these as positive achievements).

Nor has the NBA ever been flush with funds, as implied by Gail Omvedt. Again, I am a personal witness to the first few years of mobilization and the kinds of hardships that both "outside" and "local" activists went through even to make two ends meet while mobilizing affected people, the conditions in which tiny, struggling offices were set up, the way in which everyone had to desperately mobilize funds to make even one rally possible. If indeed the NBA has survived for fourteen years, it is due more to the spontaneous contributions, in kind and otherwise, of the people of the valley...and to characterize the movement as being flush with middle-class money is to once again mock this painstaking approach. Gail Omvedt, in fact, should also be made aware of the fact that the NBA's agitation has cost Baba Amte's incredible ashram in Warora—where leprosy patients are living the dignified life of any citizen of this country—to lose many of its donors and to face severe financial difficulties.

That the Narmada struggle has touched a chord among national and global citizens and media, while the Krishna valley one did not, should surely not be counted against the NBA? Indeed, it is because of this networking and alliance that many other struggles of people affected by big dams and other "development" projects in India and elsewhere, have gained inspiration and strength. The struggle has even made many of the urban supporters pause and question their own lifestyles, which are undoubtedly one of the causes of unsustainable and inequitable development processes.

Gail Omvedt's allegations would have some basis if indeed the NBA was predominantly based among middle-class urbanites and its news was *only* being published in the national and international press. Neither of these is true, and anyone with an open mind can verify this by going to the valley and by looking at the last few years of "local" newspaper reporting. Go with a closed mind, and you may only see Medha and Alok and Chittarupa among a rally of five thousand villagers and you will only see the reporting in the English-language dailies. Go with an open mind and you may see the five thousand villagers and the myriad reports in local dailies.

Finally, I wonder what Gail Omvedt would say about the middle-class (including foreign) support that the independence movement in India had, or that the National Fishworkers' Forum has (the NFF is even part of a global alliance of fisherfolk fighting against the takeover of the seas by global commercial interests), or that the Chilika fisherfolk's movement against prawn culture has? Incidentally, representatives of some of these other mass movements came to the Rally for the Valley, perhaps because they saw in it a reflection of their own struggles. Actually, it is ironic that Gail Omvedt should have reservations about foreign support, given her leanings toward globalization and liberalization...ironic indeed, because most of the mass movements in the country today (such as the ones named above) are fighting against the terrible attack on local livelihoods, natural resources, and democratic spaces by today's brand of globalization and are being helped by sensitive foreign groups in this struggle!

The Question of Big Dams and Alternatives

So now, let me tackle Gail Omvedt's arguments that big dams are necessary, that they can be built in a more equitable way, and that the NBA is not interested in genuine alternatives.

When I started working on the impacts of large dams, I had no pre-set notions of whether they were necessary or not. I wanted to arrive at a conclusion on the basis of my own assessments, or those of others that I could lay my hands on. I worked for several years on the environmental assessment of the Narmada projects, spent a year looking at the environmental impacts of other big dams and examined the machinery in place today to ensure the "sustainability and viability" of such dams. With

other colleagues I took a brief look at the post-construction performance of three projects: Ukai (Gujarat), Indira Gandhi Canal (Rajasthan), and Hirakud (Orissa). All this work was independent of the NBA. Other friends did painstaking work on Srisailam, Bargi, and Rihand, as well as studies of proposed projects like Suvarnarekha and Koel-Karo. Our conclusion, in today's context, and at least for the foreseeable future: big dams are ecologically unviable and socially unjustified. And there are real alternatives.

Big dams almost always mean either big displacement of people and/or big submergence of forests or other natural ecosystems. The Narmada projects involve both. In theory, one can resettle and rehabilitate people, and perhaps with the kind of mobilization that Gail Omvedt talks of as having happened in the Krishna valley, this theory can be translated into practice for a few thousand people. But for 200,000 or 300,000 people? Where is the land for resettlement? Gail Omvedt would say "in the command area—take it from the farmers getting irrigation"—but again, this may be politically feasible for a few hundred, perhaps a few thousand, but for a few lakhs? Does anyone really think that so much land is available, or will be possible to obtain? And in the Narmada situation, one is talking of displacing people in Maharashtra and M.P., and giving them lands in the command area in Gujarat, where there is already an incredibly high amount of hostility to "outsiders." Can anyone predict the kinds of social and political tensions that may erupt, indeed have already come up in some of the resettlement sites? Gail Omvedt may perhaps know of the horrible incident in the Taloda, Maharashtra, when an adivasi woman already resident in the area and defending her customary rights to land that was earmarked for the SSP oustees [persons displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Project] was shot dead by police? Add to this the tens of thousands of farmers affected by the SSP canals (to say nothing of the "project-affected persons"!) in Gujarat itself, and this seems an ideal recipe for social disaster. Such recipes are brewing in most areas where large-scale displacement is proposed.

Gail Omvedt herself advocates a stand of "first the rehabilitation, then the dam." As I am sure she is aware, NBA itself took this position in its early years. Only when it was convinced that the just rehabilitation of so many people was simply not possible and that there were other critical question marks on the viability of the SSP did the NBA take a "no-dam" position.

The question of viability becomes even more serious when we bring in the environmental angle. Curiously, Gail Omvedt has not dealt with this at all, except the passing remark that Koyna dam "did not submerge significant areas of forest." I have looked carefully at the environmental record of big dams, and it is not pretty. Even if a large dam can be made to work, as Gail Omvedt says, in a "decentralized" manner as far as its social and political functioning goes, there is no way it can be environmentally decentralized. It inevitably means a large-scale disruption of the river system, with inevitable large-scale impacts upstream, downstream, and at the river mouth. Experience worldwide, as in India, suggests that there is precious little humans can do to reverse the negative impacts. In India, we have already lost 1.5 million hectares of forests and countless other lands and wetlands to dams (no one can replace a natural forest once it is submerged); we have endangered several species of fish and mammals by blocking their migration or drowning their homes (no one can recreate a species once gone); and we have increased salt-water ingress along the coastline as the outflow of river-

Jal samarpan—a term meaning to "give ones life to the waters as they rise around you." (An anti-dam activist faces the waters in Domkhedi. *Credit:* Harikrishna and Deepa Jani.)

borne freshwater has decreased. Contrary to popular engineering perception, rivers do not go wastefully into the sea, they perform critical functions of keeping sea-water at bay (literally!), enriching fish spawning grounds with nutrients, and a dozen other functions that we only imperfectly understand. I have not yet come across a single convincing argument that such impacts can be effectively countered. Large dams are, in this sense, a classic reflection of humanity's hubris, one that makes us believe that we can "tame" nature. And considering that the most advanced country (as far as hubris is concerned), the United States, has recently started decommissioning dams (actually breaking them down), it may be worthwhile for us to pause and take stock.[2]

There are those who say that environmental impacts can be mitigated. Here's India's record in this respect. As part of the Government of India's Committee on Environmental Evaluation of River Valley Projects, we examined the fulfilment of environmental conditions under which 300 large dams were given clearance since 1980. In an astounding 89 percent of these dams, the conditions were being violated....and yet construction had not been halted. *In other words, the vast majority of dams in India have been built not just in ways that are not environmentally compatible, but in violation of the laws of the land!* This is a scandal of epic proportions, one that would put Bofors and the like to shame. In most cases, compensatory afforestation has not been done, R&R [resettlement and rehabilitation) is severely deficient, wildlife corridors have not been reconstituted, catchment areas have been left to erode, and so on and on. Anyone who says that big dams can be made ecologically viable (since Gail Omvedt has not dealt with this issue, I don't know if she believes this or not) is living in a fool's paradise.

Actually, Gail Omvedt has not really put forth many substantial arguments in favor of large dams, except to say that they are necessary for low-rainfall areas. This is also the main emotive argument behind Sardar Sarovar...that it will dispel the des-

perately drought-prone situation in Kutch and Saurashtra. Will SSP actually do this, and are there no alternative ways of bringing water to dry areas? The answer to the former is a firm No...SSP's own official documents reveal that only 10 percent of Kutch and Saurashtra will actually receive the canal water according to current plans, and that, too, only after another *two decades*! Getting water to additional areas by lifting it from the canals will require several thousand crores of rupees more, none of which are budgeted for in the current cost-benefit analysis of the dam. The real beneficiaries of SSP are not these areas, but rather central Gujarat, where a big farmers' lobby has been extremely influential in pushing for the early completion of the project. Why? Possibly because they want to switch to sugarcane production, extremely lucrative but requiring much more water. I won't get into whether they are justified in this demand or not, but at least let us dispel the notion that the project is going to eradicate drought from Gujarat's northern and northwestern areas. Central Gujarat's farmers will simply hijack much of the water well before it can reach Kutch and Saurashtra...and all the sophisticated computerized network of irrigation channels that the SSP authorities are promising, will come to naught.[3]

So is there an alternative? When the NBA and others argue for decentralized water-harvesting structures in Kutch and Saurashtra, are they playing a "cruel joke" on the people of these regions? I will not venture to state with any finality that such an alternative is indeed possible for these areas, as I am not very familiar with them. But I do know of another region, also desperately dry, where indeed decentralized water-harvesting has been the answer. This is in Alwar district of Rajasthan, in a region of at least 200 villages with an average rainfall of about 600 mm. Over this region, *johads* [small checkdams] and *bandhs* [small dam] built by local villagers with help from nongovernmental organizations (and some government assistance) have transformed a "dark" (severely deficient in groundwater) zone into a "white" one (surplus in groundwater). Some 3,000 small water-harvesting structures have achieved this transformation, in the space of a little over a decade. Along with this has come major mobilization of the villagers on issues of forest conservation (one of the villages, Bhaonta-Kolyala, has the country's first "public wildlife sanctuary"), sustainable agricultural development, common property management, and so forth. No external canal water is involved. If this is possible here, why not elsewhere? And indeed, what of the many similar experiments reported from Kutch and Saurashtra? I have only read passing references to them, but they appear promising...provided the government allows it. Recently there was a report that all other irrigation and drinking water projects in Gujarat, including in Kutch and Saurashtra, are stalled for lack of funds... because all the allocated money is going into the SSP!

To argue for the Alwar type of model is not to discount other possible alternatives, including the one proposed by Paranjape and Joy [see note 1 in Omvedt above]. Their suggestion certainly merits close consideration by all concerned, including by the NBA. But to assert that because the NBA is not interested in this one alternative, it is not interested in *any* alternatives at all, is again to betray an illogical bias. The NBA has consistently supports the search for alternatives, but has understandably been too engrossed in simply fighting the upcoming projects to spend much of their own time on alternatives (when you are fighting a fire in the house, you cannot be expected to start designing a fireproof house at the same time). I know that they have certainly been in favor of alternatives like the small Balli Rajya dam (mentioned by Gail Omvedt). Now that they have forced the M.P. government to consider alternatives for a couple of the big dams in the valley, NBA is gearing up to actually try some of these out...including watershed development, decentralized water-harvesting, efficient water use, and so forth.

Ironically, it is worth asking whether Paranjape and Joy's alternative would have been devised were it not for the intense opposition to the SSP launched by the NBA! This is not a rhetorical or polemical point. Movements like the NBAs force us to question many deep-set assumptions, open up questions that we thought had been answered long back, and impel us to search for more humanitarian, more ecologically friendly, ways of living our lives.

And more sustainable ways of engaging in that much-bandied about word, "development." When Gail Omvedt characterizes the NBA as being "anti-development," she is way way off the mark. Never once has the NBA, or indeed other mass movements like it, said that they are against development per se. But what definition of development? Whose definition of development? At whose cost, at whose benefit? And at what cost (or benefit) to yet unborn generations?

What Will Benefit the Disprivileged?

In characterizing the NBA as "anti-development," Gail Omvedt says that it is only development of the kind promoted by the movement supporting "equitable" big dams in the Krishna valley that will bring caste-ridden, exploited people in India's villages out of their misery. Presumably she thinks the Narmada dams can also do this, albeit if the NBA or others were to struggle for the equitable distribution of benefits from it. She ridicules Arundhati's vision of traditional India, with every house full of bags of grain, and points out the severe inequities in rural areas as the real story.

Once again, Gail Omvedt makes two basic logical mistakes, which perhaps is pardonable for an artist, but not for an academic, and not in a debate like this. The first mistake is generalizing a reality that is immensely complex and not amenable to generalizations. The second mistake is comparing a "no-dam" situation with an "after-dam" one...ignoring the third possibility of a "no-dam but alternative projects" situation.

The first mistake is made perhaps both by Gail Omvedt and by Arundhati. India's villages are indeed full of severe social and economic exploitation....but this is not so everywhere, and the degrees and kinds vary considerably. Surely Gail Omvedt knows far better than I that many parts of adivasi India do not display the kinds of caste exploitation that non-adivasi India does. And that in case after case where such adivasis have been forced off their lands and out of their villages, they have ended up as industrial or urban labor, as servants, as child labor, as sex workers, as faceless nameless workers who are exploited more brutally than any exploitation they would have traditionally seen?

I just came back from Dhomkedi and Jalsindhi, adivasi villages in the submergence zone. Life there is not easy, it is not worth romanticizing. But people have things to eat, when their crops fail, they have forests to fall back upon. They have flowing water to use. They have productive lands to cultivate. And they have their cultures, their relationships, their gods, to take shelter in. Uprooted for a dam of dubious benefit, even with the most "generous" R&R package, will they really get all this? And if indeed they are facing problems (such as health and nutritional de-

"...anyone with an open mind can verify [that the NBA is not a middle-class urbanite movement] by going to the valley and by looking at the last few years of 'local' newspaper reporting...."(Villagers and student activists confront plain-clothed police outside of the village of Domkhedi. *Credit:* International Rivers Network/August 1999.)

ficiencies) in their existing settlements, surely it is rather roundabout to suggest that their only salvation lies in being uprooted and being given solutions to these problems somewhere else? People in Manibeli had asked the right question: why was no road built to their village for decades, while it suddenly came up when the dam construction started and they had to be resettled? Why not bring appropriate (culturally and ecologically sensitive) "developmental" inputs to where people are, to Dhomkhedi and Jalsindhi? Activists are fighting for such "in-situ" facilities even in slums in cities, rather than displacing slumdwellers and dumping them on the outskirts of the city...so why not in every village of the country? Indeed, would it not be more sensible to help local people everywhere to gain the capacity to once again take control over their own lives, their own local natural resources (here I agree with Gail Omvedt that one of the problems is the takeover of forests by the state)...rather than argue that a "no-dam" scenario would condemn them to eternal exploitation and misery?

I would make the same argument for non-adivasi areas, or many adivasi areas, where indeed there is severe social exploitation. These have to be tackled at site, not by displacing the people first and then using this as a means of tackling them. In the example I gave above of Alwar district, caste heirarchies are still strong, but they are just beginning to be whittled down, especially as the whole village has to unitedly make and maintain *johads* and to conserve their forests against outside vested interests. Indeed, the NBA's own mobilization has begun to have this effect...adivasi and non-adivasi members, who would have traditionally shunned each other, are eating together, living together, *willing to die together.* Some of those sitting for jal samarpan in Lohariyabhai's hut in Jalsindhi or in Dhomkhedi, belong to the big landlord class in Nimad in M.P. By no means have inequities disappeared in the NBA-mobilized areas of the valley, but surely, what stronger force for fighting against such inequities can there be than being part of a long-term struggle together and putting into practice alternative modes of even education, such as the Jeevan Shalas initiated by the NBA in the valley? At least in these schools, and in the rallies and the *dharnas* and the myriad meetings and other activities of the NBA, "knowledge, grains, and songs" are shared equally...including the most incredibly evocative version of our national anthem that was sung by adivasis and non-adivasis and middle-class activists together on 4 August, at Dhomkhedi, a song that speaks of having control over one's destiny and one's natural and social resources, a song that accompanied the unfurling of a flag that stated simply: "hamare gaon mein hamara raj" [meaning "our rule (or our government) in our village"].

And in any case, can anyone make a convincing case that big dams in India have been a major force in reducing exploitation and poverty, more than, say, small-scale water-harvesting structures? Gail Omvedt says that "big dams can be sustainable and work in a decentralized manner." Can she give a few examples where this has indeed happened (not just on paper, but on the ground), as documented by independent observers? Perhaps it has happened, but it would be useful to get some evidence. When we did the study of Hirakud, Ukai, and IGNP, we inquired from various agencies whether there was a single case of an assessment that comprehensively looked at the environmental, social, and economic impacts of a big dam. The sad truth is...there is no such assessment.

One last word. I, like many other supporters of the NBA and critics of big dams, am not starry-eyed about the ability of movements like the NBA to solve all the ills plaguing our society. The NBA has failings, as we all do. They must be offered firm but constructive criticism, criticism that helps them to evaluate themselves...just as we must be able to evaluate ourselves based on questions they are asking. But to denigrate them with sweeping statements and biased generalizations, *and to do so when their members are in the midst of a desperate struggle against drowning,* is not only insensitive, but it plays right into the hands of the repressive state that Gail Omvedt otherwise so rightly criticizes. That is the tragedy of the content and timing of her "open letter." *(11 August 1999)*

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Notes

1. A. Kothari and R. Bhartari, "Narmada Valley Project: Development or Destruction?" *Economic and Political Weekly,* 19, nos. 22-23 (1998).
2. For a more detailed exposé of the environmental impacts of the SSP, see the Kalpavriksh booklet "Environmental Aspects of the Sardar Sarovar Project." For a detailed report of the decommissioning of dams, see *The Asian Ecologist,* special issue on large dams, September-October 1998 (Vol. 6, No. 5).
3. For a more detailed critique, see Kalpavriksh's booklet "Muddy Waters." See address above.

To Ashish:

I support keeping the height of the dam low—something like the Paranjape-Joy proposal, which would have reduced submer-

gence by 70 percent and the number of evictees by 90 percent—and some kind of arrangement that will bring water to Saurashtra, Kutch, and north Gujarat on a priority basis. I support the maximum possible decentralization, local management of water, and reliance on locally produced inputs. I support what has been called LEISA— "low external input sustainable agriculture." I support combining the best traditional knowledge and methods with modern science and technology.

This is not the position of the NBA. The NBA not only defends the right of adivasi and non-adivasi farmers of the valley to stay where they are, it goes further and says that no big dams should be built, that big dams are all destructive. It not only says that the Sardar Sarovar project as it now stands will not give water to Saurashtra and Kutch, it says that no alternative restructuring will be able to do that either, and that the people of these areas must content themselves with catching the rain that falls on their lands and storing and using it to the best of their ability. It says that there should be no external inputs at all for agriculture.

If this is a misrepresentation of the NBA's position, then why doesn't it question Arundhati when she says that the dam will lead to people growing two crops where there was one before, that this will be harmful to the ecological balance, that irrigating land in this way is like a human getting hooked on steroids?

I oppose these positions, on principle. I think it is not only romantic, but suicidal to say that Indians should carry on their agriculture just as they did a few hundred years ago, with only water-harvesting at the village level. It is suicidal because while such methods could more or less feed a population of 200 million, they are totally inadequate for one billion. It also distorts Indian tradition; even in pre-British times there were projects carried on at the above-village level, built by kings and state-sponsored engineers and artisans; there were big dams and large reservoirs.

Why Raise the Issue Now?

You do not think I should raise these issues now, "at a time of struggle." I have heard this from other friends who are supporters of the NBA, as if questioning their basic position is a kind of betrayal. This kind of position is objectionable. The idea seems to be that you should discuss differences only within the movement and keep quiet once decisions are made and a campaign has been launched. Something like democratic centralism. But the NBA is not an army; I am not giving away secrets of strategy. A democratic movement, I would think, can only benefit from the widest possible discussion. Otherwise, the only positions available for public debate will be the extremes: the die-hard supporters of the dam versus the die-hard opponents. And this has only led to disaster up to now. Real alternatives have to be brought forward, discussion and controversies have to be wide open and public. I am raising the issue now because the NBA has brought it before the people of India and the world now; because they have put foward their "no big dam" and "no Green Revolution agriculture" position now. It has to be discussed now.

Otherwise the NBA will only face defeat again. Because nobody should delude themselves that the Gujarat government will bend before a popular movement outside its borders as long as it has the support, on this issue, of the majority of people inside Gujarat; as long as it can depict the opponents as extremists. It will be a lot harder for them to argue against proposals for restructuring of the dam, particularly when they promise to bring water to the drought-prone areas of Gujarat, particularly when the government is in fact short of money. I have raised questions now because I think it is in the interests of the people of the valley as well as those of Gujarat.

"A Small Local Base"?

You are upset, Ashish, that I have said that the NBA only has a small local base. However, I hold to this. It does indeed have mass support, some enthusiastic and fervent mass support. Activists have worked hard for this. However, this mass support is not enough—not when it is from only one section and has nothing to say to the much larger section of people in Gujarat looking for water. (And I find it highly objectionable when Krishna Iyer calls them "kulaks"—a word Stalin used to justify murder—and when you see only the interests of wealthy farmers: why not fight for the poor farmers of Gujarat?) The NBA's mass support is small in relation to what it is trying to do.

For that matter, 30,000 to 40,000 is not really so large, not in India. Perhaps I have been "spoiled" by being involved in the farmers' movement, or dalit movement, whose rallies are counted as failures when they are less than a lakh. The joint campaign of drought-afflicted and dam-afflicted farmers last November in Kolhapur, Sangli, and Satara districts also involved a total of a lakh demonstrating for three days simultaneously in separate areas.

Krishna, Koyna, and Bali Raja

You argue that "almost all" big dams involve either tremendous submersion of forest or unacceptable displacement of people, or both. (In the Hindu-language version of your article you dropped the "almost.") I brought up the issue of Koyna because it is at least one case I am familiar with that involves neither.

The Koyna dam, in the Sahyadris in Satara district, on one of the major tributaries of the Krishna river, is a big dam, a "major irrigation project," in the terminology of the Indian government. Its reservoir has a storage capacity of 98 TMC of water, and the dam generates over 900 megawatts of electricity. When lift-irrigation schemes on the Krishna are completed, nearly 250,000 hectares of now drought-prone land in eastern Sangli district will be irrigated. The reservoir has submerged ninety-eight villages, affecting slightly over 9,000 people. Of these, 8,203 are officially classified as "project-affected persons." Though the dam was completed in 1956-59, only about 4,000 of those displaced had received compensation land by 1989, when the Koyna Dharangrast Sangram Sanghatana was formed. (This is a component of the Maharashtra Rajya Dharangrast va Prakalgrast Shetkari Parishad.) After that some 2,000 more received compensatory land; to date, then, 6,372 project-affected people have received 7,524 hectares of land in five districts of Maharashtra.

Many people, officially evictees, continue to live in villages in the reserved forest around the Koyna reservoir. Most of these also have and use the land given them in compensation; many spend money on bus fare to go as far as Solapur district to work on that land also. Their staying in their original home is not a matter of ideology but a practical matter, making the most of their situation, "walking on two legs." Few have enough production from their lands in the reservoir to maintain themselves; most depend also on remittances from Mumbai. The Koyna Dharangrast Sangram Sanghatana also makes demands for these villages, including roads that will make health and other services available, training in horticulture, water allocation from the reservoir to irrigate their fields, and demarcation of their agricul-

tural lands from the forest areas, and building of fences to protect them from the wild animals of the forest.

Up to now Koyna has functioned mainly to provide electricity. But two lift-irrigation schemes are being built taking water released from the Koyna reservoir to eastern Sangli district. One *tehsil* [subdistrict] to receive this water is Khanapur, where the struggle to build the Bali Raja Memorial Dam was carried out. This struggle was under the leadership of Mukti Sangarsh; farmers and their supporters fought to get rights to use sand from the dried-up riverbed of the Yerala river to build a small dam that irrigates 900 hectares of two villages and distributes the water on the basis of "equal water distribution," providing that all families, even the landless, should get water. Seeing the resistance encountered in the fight for a very small dam made it clear that it would take more than thousands of people to change a project as gigantic as the Sardar Sarovar!

However, it is also clear that the benefits of small dams like the Bali Raja cannot solve the problems of the whole tehsil since the Yerala river continues to have water for only a month every year and reaches very few of its villages. Any number of small dams on it will not help. The farmers and agricultural laborers of the tehsil, like those in most of the Krishna valley, scratch out their living on dry lands or try industries like poultry; and most families send out sons who work in the textile industry or in informal occupations in Mumbai or find niches elsewhere. All of these are ecological refugees. The total number of such is immense, more than that of dam or project evictees. For these reasons, the people in the villages supplied by the Bali Raja Memorial Dam have joined a campaign, with *morchas* [a type of demonstration] and road-blockings, to restructure the lift-irrigation scheme using Koyna water. The government proposal would have "centralized" the water, providing full water to only about eight villages and partial water to twenty-three villages of the tehsil. An alternative plan done on the basis of agricultural experiments and Bali Raja dam building, with the help of engineers like K. R. Datye and Paranjape, proposes to provide enough water on an equitable and water-saving basis to irrigate all the 106 villages of the *tehsil*.

From the same perspective, the people and activists have joined those in thirteen tehsils of the Krishna valley who are agitating, not against big dams, but for the completion of the dams so that Maharashtra can get its share of Krishna waters, according to the Bachawat Award. At the same time they are fighting the state government for the completion and restructuring of canals and other distribution schemes so that every family in the valley can get irrigation water.

Who Are the "Leaders"?

The leaders of the Krishna valley dam struggles are all local farmers. They have been involved in fights of both drought-afflicted and dam-afflicted people. I brought up the question of leadership because I think it does make a difference: experience of living on a farm myself for almost twenty years now has taught me something that would not have come from simply participating in movements, however heroic. I think Kancha Ilaiah has a point when he talks about "productive castes." Most dalits and bahujans know the meaning of water-for-land. Most of those organizing agricultural laborers also know the significance of irrigation water: the people they organize want not only higher wages but land of their own, means of production; and they want to grow not only for their own subsistence but in order to earn an income. Irrigation, credit, technical help with crops are crucial to them.

You ask who are the "leaders" of the Krishna valley struggles. The four people I mentioned are all "bahujan" (Maratha-Kunbi by caste) and all come from farming families in western Maharashtra. Most are quite familiar to Maharashtrians. Of these Baba Adhav is the only one who is not himself involved in managing a farm at present. He has been working with trade unions of hamas, rickshaw drivers, and other unorganized sector workers, and has long organized social movements in the tradition of Phule, such as the "one village-one well" movement. Datta Deshmukh (now deceased) was a leader of the Lal Nishan party; an engineer by training, a union organizer—mostly of unions of the rural poor—by vocation, but also known as a progressive farmer, a pioneer in grape growing. The fifty acres of land of his joint [extended] family that he managed would apparently put him in the big farmer category, but when he was young the family was poor enough without irrigaton that his mother had to work as an agricultural laborer. Naganath Naikaudi's twenty-five acres of land at Walwa is now divided among his three sons. Bharat Patankar's family has fifteen acres of land near the Krishna river in Walwa *taluka* (also supporting a joint family; five in his own name); of these, ten are irrigated, some five to six in sugarcane, the most secure cash crop; the rest is *jawar* and a few other things. Milk also provides both nutrition and income. We do not eat less growing sugarcane; vegetable production in the area is also growing.

What Does Research Show?

Finally, I've gone over the report of your research in *Economic and Political Weekly* (7 February 1998) and its data are scanty and ten years old. It does not provide evidence to confirm your accusations against big dams. For one thing, you do not have "before and after" data—what was the production in the command areas of the Ukai-Kakrapur project, for instance, before and after the dam. You only show "proportion of CCA [comprehensive command area] envisaged" and "annual production envisaged" and "actual production." This is rather different; it gives no idea about how much gain in production and productivity has come from the dams. Most of the data are current only up to 1989. (Incidentally most of the waterlogging and salination problems in our area in Sangli are near rivers and do not come from dams, but from unscientific and excessive use of water). And there is no data matching acreage and production for the Ukai-Khakrapur area. Showing production only, in tons, is highly misleading because crops have different weights: sugarcane production is usually measured in tons per hectare; food production in kilograms per hectare—a very different matter! If we take average productivities in 1989 (Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy [CMIE], *Basic Statistics,* Vol. I) of 60.6 tons per hectare for sugarcane and 1,688 kilograms for rice—though I'm sure the production in Surat district is higher than that—this would imply that the 7,366,000 tons of actual cane production in 1989 was produced on about 122,000 hectares, while the 258,890 tons of paddy was produced on about 160,000 hectares. But this doesn't match your "proportion of CCA developed." I'm puzzled. Further, paddy production is more than expected; wheat production is only slightly less, and vegetable production is much more. All in all, it looks as if the people of the area are eating better than before. As far as Hirakud goes, paddy production is overwhelming; hardly a non-food crop.

Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar (on the ground) and other activists are forcibly dragged away from a protest site in Domkhedi, 21 September 1999. (*Credit:* Harikrishna and Deepa Jani.)

None of this backs up Arundhati's claim that "cash crops are replacing food" or that water for sugarcane causes waterlogging. That is simply not true. And somehow she has turned 60 percent from your (questionable figures) into 75 percent. And yet people have praised the fact that her article is full of statistics.

If you want to bring large irrigation projects to court, you'll have to provide better evidence than this.

Alternatives

Finally, you say that the Paranjape-Joy proposal merits "close consideration." Others involved with the NBA have told me that it has already been studied. Has it or hasn't it? You ask whether it would have been proposed if not for the NBA's organizing. Probably; since all those involved with this proposal, including K. R. Datye, have been involved with various types of restructuring alternatives and with agriculture and engineering experiments for a long time. Paranjape and Joy have been activists with the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti. Most important, the evictees of Narmada valley would have organized themselves in one form or another, if not under the NBA.

I would repeat, the kind of alternative that involves only village-level water-harvesting, that NGOs can carry on themselves, is insufficient. Irrigation schemes can be decentralized, can and should include innumerable small projects and local management by water-user societies. But the state has a necessary role in coordinating these, building larger dams, and funding them. A real alternative must take seriously the needs of both drought-afflicted and dam-affected—as well as the demands of equity and social justice—and the requirements of feeding the nation.

You question whether large-scale irrigation projects can ever be "environmentally decentralized." No. But innumerable small projects also have large-scale effects, and carrying on pro-

The Storm over Big Dams in India

The latest round of debate on the Sardar Sarovar project and big dams in India started with publication of Arundhati Roy's essay as cover stories in India's national magazines *Outlook* and *Frontline*. That essay gave rise to many, many responses. One of them was by Gail Omvedt, which appeared as an open letter to Arundhati Roy on the Internet and also as a number of newspaper articles. These, in turn, elicited many responses. Only a few of them are listed below. Many more responses have appeared in the media across India and elsewhere and on the Internet. The list below contains URL addresses of the responses and contact information for the various documents.

—compiled by Himanshu Thakkar

"On Gail's Closed-Headed Open Letter to Arundhati," 22 July 1999 by Dr. Jitendra Shah of the Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay), can be obtained from Dr. Shah at <jitendras@vsnl.com>.

Nalini Nayak, Internet response, August 1999, copy can be obtained from <cwaterp@del3.vsnl.net.in>.

L. C. Jain (former member of the Planning Commission, Government of India), *The Hindu,* Letters, 10 August 1999. URL: <http://www.indiaserver.com/thehindu/1999/08/10/ stories/05101305.htm>.

Brendan LaRocque, *The Hindu,* Letters, 21 August 1999. URL: <http://www.indiaserver.com/thehindu/1999/08/21/stories/05211307.htm>.

Jasween Jairath, *The Hindu,* 13 September 1999. URL: <http://www.indiaserver.com/thehindu/1999/09/13/stories/13130613.htm>.

Prof. A. K. N. Reddy (former professor and department head at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore), *The Hindu,* 20 September 1999. URL: <http://www.indiaserver.com/thehindu/1999/09/20/stories/05202524.htm>.

"Big Dams Are Harmful," by Devinder Sharma, *The Hindustan Times,* 14 October 1999. URL: <http://www2.hindustantimes.com/ht/nonfram/141099/detopi02.htm>.

Two-part article ("Sardar Sarovar and Bomb" and "Large Dams as Bombs") by Himanshu Thakkar of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (dated September 1999) can be obtained from him at <cwaterp@del3.vsnl.net.in>.

Following correspondence on this subject between Dr. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt of Burdwan University, West Bengal, Shri Ramaswamy Iyer (responses to and from Shri Iyer, former secretary of Union Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India, were through Dr. Dutt), and Gail Omvedt can be obtained from Dr. Dutt (<ovimanyu@dte.vsnl.net.in>) or from Shri Ramaswmay Iyer (<ramaswam@del3.vsnl.net.in>) or from <cwaterp@del3.vsnl.net.in>.

—Dr. Dutt to Gail Omvedt, 5 October 1999
—Omvedt to Dutt, 10 October 1999
—Shri Ramaswmay Iyer to Omvedt, 14 October 1999
—Omvedt's first response to Iyer, 22 October 1999
—Omvedt's second response to Iyer, 4 November 1999
—Iyer to Omvedt, 7 November 1999

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duction as before with a growing population on the land also has a very large-scale environmental impact. The environmental disasters of not having development can be just as destructive as misdevelopment. With billions of people living on the earth, we are responsible for these impacts and have to safeguard the environment. But the poor of the world need development, sustainable development.

For the struggle,

Gail Omvedt

2 September 1999

To Gail:

While I continue to maintain that all options (including that proposed by Paranjape-Joy) must be seriously considered, it seems to me that you have either misunderstood some of my positions, or ignored them. Very briefly:

¶ You continue to maintain that big dams are necessary to feed India's growing populations, as rainwater harvesting is not enough. Yet not once do you challenge the example I gave to the contrary, namely, that several hundred villages have become self-sufficient in irrigation and drinking water in the arid region of Alwar district, Rajasthan, based exclusively on decentralized rainwater harvesting, forest regeneration, and efficient usage. This is not an isolated example, but one of several across India.

¶ My point about the timing of your open letter has been completely misunderstood. I was not for once suggesting that open criticism is wrong, indeed I agree with you that it is essential. My point was that in attacking the NBA in the monsoons, when hundreds of tribals and non-tribals were facing the threat of submergence, when their defenses were down, you are unwittingly hitting below the belt, and naïvely playing into the hands of an ever-eager Gujarat government. It was also strange that much of your open letter to Arundhati in fact attacked not her, but the NBA. At any other point in the year, or indeed during any of the preceding fourteen years, you could have raised these issues without being accused of such bad timing.

¶ On the issue of whether the NBA has a small or large base, I am afraid that it is a rather poor defense to say that the NBA is small compared to the "much larger section of people in Gujarat," and in rather poor taste to say that 30,000 to 40,000 is small compared to the numbers you yourself are used to. This is hardly a numbers game. If it were, perhaps the NBA's support base could be counted in the millions, considering, for instance, that several mass movements such as the National Fishworkers' Forum (several million traditional fishworkers are its members), have been its supporters. But that would be getting into a rather petty line of argument.

¶ Your allegation that the NBA never tried to address the Gujarati public is untrue. I have myself witnessed attempts to organize meetings with a cross-section of Gujarat's people in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the atmosphere of hostility generated by five decades of brainwashing and one-sided media coverage (my own letters to the editors of Gujarati papers have never been published), fully backed by brute State force, did not allow them to gain much of a foothold. NBA supporters in Gujarat continue to get harassed, intimidated, and beaten. The casual nature of your criticism of the NBA on this count displays a lack of appreciation regarding the violent and deep-rooted nature of Gujarat's support for the dam, and the fact that building up a strong resistance in the valley was itself a full-time task.

¶ You support your stand on big dams by giving the example of Koyna. I have not studied this project in depth, so I will reserve my comments to only raising doubts. First, the number of affected people, according to your estimates, was 8,203. It is surprising that you use the "official" figure, knowing full well that these figures are usually underestimates. Indeed, a study commissioned by the Planning Commission soon after the dam was built, and carried out by eminent academic Dr. Irawati Karve ("A Survey of People Displaced through the Koyna Dam," Deccan College, Poona, 1969) put the figure of affected people at 30,000. It also pointed out the awful failures in the rehabilitation process, largely stemming from fundamental faults in the R&R planning itself. This is hardly a small amount of social disruption. Many villages continue to suffer thirty years later (though this is also partly because of a rather insensitively planned wildlife sanctuary). Second, while figures on forest loss are not available, it seems that at least about 8,000 hectares (approximately 21,000 acres) were under shifting cultivation, and were presumably under some kind of vegetative growth when not under the plough. Local villagers recount that some very good patches of forest were submerged. There appear to be no baseline studies on the biodiversity of the area, but what is clear from similar valleys in the region is that there is a high degree of endemicity and occurrence of localized species (a characteristic of the Western Ghats, one of the world's eighteen biodiversity "hotspots"). Can anyone say with certainty that the forest loss was insignificant, that no endemic localized species was rendered extinct? Third, many experts maintain (there are those who disagree, of course) that the heightened seismic activity in the area (including a devastating earthquake that flattened Koyna town) was reservoir-induced. I am not aware of other environmental impacts, perhaps you can point me to some studies on this. But I maintain, big dams mean either major social disruption and/or major environmental loss, and if Koyna is to be shown to contradict this assertion, someone will have to come up with more convincing arguments supported by appropriate baseline and monitoring information.

¶ The lack of such solid information, ironically, becomes a tool for you to criticize our study of Ukai, Hirakud, and Indira Gandhi projects. My colleague Pranab Mukhopadhyay and I did not pretend to put a nail in the coffin of big dams in that study at all. Rather, we simply gave information and analysis that raised serious doubts about the tall claims made by each of the project authorities regarding the benefits of the projects. For you to say that "it does not provide evidence to confirm your accusations against big dams," is to criticize what we have not claimed!

¶ Finally, your assertion that no development can be as disastrous as misdevelopment is certainly valid in several circumstances. Why you throw this (and your concluding sentence about the poor needing sustainable development) at me is not clear. Did I not give examples where decentralized water and land management have indeed helped to achieve sustainable development? Why fall into the trap, which many of SSP's supporters also fall into, of comparing only a big-dam vs. no-big-dam scenario, ignoring the tremendous success of decentralized alternatives in the most arid of conditions?

Ashish Kothari

2 December 1999

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