



ARUNDHATI ROY

ESSAYS

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THE LADIES HAVE FEELINGS, SO...SHALL WE LEAVE IT TO THE EXPERTS?

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India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow we manage to progress and regress simultaneously. As a nation we age by pushing outwards from the middle—adding a few centuries on to either end of our extraordinary CV. We greaten like the maturing head of a hammer-headed shark with eyes looking in diametrically opposite directions. On the one hand, we hear that European countries are considering changing their immigration laws in order to import Indian software engineers. On the other, that a Naga sadhu at the Kumbh Mela towed the district collector's

car with his penis while the officer sat in it solemnly with his wife and children.

As Indian citizens, we subsist on a regular diet of caste massacres and nuclear tests, mosque breaking and fashion shows, church burning and expanding cellphone networks, bonded labour and the digital revolution, female infanticide and the Nasdaq crash, husbands who continue to burn their wives for dowry,

and our delectable stockpile of Miss Worlds. I don't mean to put a simplistic value judgement on this peculiar form of 'progress' by suggesting that Modern is Good and Traditional is Bad—or vice versa. What's hard to reconcile oneself to, both personally and politically, is the schizophrenic nature of it. That applies not just to the ancient/modern conundrum, but to the utter illogic of what appears to be the current national enterprise. In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road-gangs of emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles.

It's as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded on to two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears.

A cursory survey that tallies the caste, class and religion of who gets to be in which convoy would make a good Lazy Person's Concise Guide to the History of India. For some of us, life in India is like being suspended between two of the trucks, one in each convoy, and being neatly dismembered as they move apart, not bodily, but emotionally and intellectually.

Of *course*, India is a microcosm of the world. Of course, versions of what happens here happen everywhere. Of course, if you're willing to look, the parallels are easy to find. The difference in India is only in the scale, the magnitude, and the sheer proximity of the disparity. In India, your face is slammed right up against it. To address it, to deal with it, to not deal with it, to try and understand it, to insist on not understanding it, to simply survive it—on a daily, hourly basis—is a fine art. Either an art or a form of insular, inward-looking insanity. Or both.

To be a writer—a supposedly 'famous' writer—in a country where millions of people are illiterate is a dubious honour. To be a writer in a country that gave the world Mahatma Gandhi, that invented the concept of non-violent resistance, and then, half-a-century later, followed that up with nuclear tests is a ferocious burden. (Though no more ferocious a burden, it has to be said, than being a writer in the United States, a country that has amassed enough nuclear weapons to destroy the earth several times over.) To be a writer in a country where something akin to an undeclared civil war is being waged on its citizens in the name of 'development' is an onerous responsibility. When it comes to writers and writing, I use words like 'onerous' and 'responsibility' with a heavy heart and not a small degree of sadness.

What is the role of writers and artists in society? Do they have a definable role? Can it be fixed, described, characterised in any definite way? Should it be?

Personally, I can think of few things more terrifying than if writers and artists were charged with an immutable charter of duties and responsibilities that they had to live and work by. Imagine, if there was this little black book—a sort of Approved Guide to Good Writing—that said: 'All writers

shall be politically conscious and sexually moral', or, 'All writers should believe in god, globalisation, and the joys of family life...

Rule One for a writer, as far as I'm concerned, is that There Are No Rules. And Rule Two (since Rule One was made to be broken) is that There Are No Excuses for Bad Art. Painters, writers, singers, actors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians—they are meant to fly, to push at the frontiers, to worry the edges of the human imagination, to conjure beauty from the most unexpected things, to find magic in places where others never thought to look. If you limit the trajectory of their flight, if you weight their wings with society's existing notions of morality and responsibility, if you truss them up with preconceived values, you subvert their endeavour.

A good or great writer may refuse to accept any responsibility or morality that society wishes to impose on her. Yet, the best and greatest of them know that if they abuse this hard-won freedom, it can only lead to bad art. There is an intricate web of morality, rigour and responsibility that art, that writing itself, imposes on a writer. It is singular, individual, but nevertheless, it's there. At its best, it's an exquisite bond between the artist and the medium. At its acceptable end, a sort of sensible cooperation. At its worst, it's a relationship of disrespect and exploitation.

The absence of external rules complicates things. There's a very thin line that separates the strong, true, bright bird of the imagination from the synthetic, noisy bauble. Where is that line? How do you recognise it? How do you know you've crossed it? At the risk of sounding esoteric and arcane, I'm tempted to say that you just know. The fact is that nobody—no reader, no reviewer, agent, publisher, colleague, friend or enemy—can tell for sure. A writer just has to ask herself that question and answer it as honestly as possible. The thing about this 'line' is that once you learn to recognise it,

once you see it, it's impossible to ignore. You have no choice but to live with it, to follow it through. You have to bear with all its complexities, contradictions and demands. And that's not always easy. It doesn't always lead to compliments and standing ovations. It can lead you to the strangest, wildest places. In the midst of war, for instance, you could find yourself fascinated by the mating rituals of a purple sunbird, or the secret life of captive goldfish, or an old aunt's descent into madness. And nobody can say that there isn't truth and art and beauty in that. Or, on the contrary, in the midst of putative peace, you could, like me, be unfortunate enough to stumble on a silent war. The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable.

Today, perhaps more so than in any other era in history, the writer's right to free speech is guarded and defended by the civil societies and state establishments of the most powerful countries in the world. Any overt attempt to silence or muffle a voice is met with furious opposition. The writer is embraced and protected. This is a wonderful thing. The writer, the actor, the musician, the filmmaker—they have become radiant jewels in the crown of modern civilisation. The artist, I imagine, is finally as free as he or she will ever be. Never before have so many writers had their books published. (And now, of course, we have the Internet.) Never before have we been more commercially viable. We live and prosper in the heart of the marketplace. True, for every so-called success there are hundreds who 'fail'. True, there are a myriad art forms, both folk and classical, myriad languages, myriad cultural and artistic traditions that are being crushed and cast aside in the stampede to the big bumper sale in Wonderland. Still, there have never been

more writers, singers, actors, painters who have become influential, wealthy superstars. And they, the successful ones, spawn a million imitators, they become the torch-bearers, their work becomes the benchmark for what art is, or ought to be.

Nowadays in India, the scene is almost farcical. Following the recent commercial success of some Indian authors, western publishers are desperately prospecting for the next big Indo-Anglian work of fiction. They're doing everything short of interviewing English-speaking Indians for the post of 'writer'. Ambitious middle-class parents who, a few years ago, would only settle for a future in engineering, medicine or management for their children, now hopefully send them to creative-writing schools. People like myself are constantly petitioned by computer companies, watch manufacturers, even media magnates, to endorse their products. A boutique owner in Bombay once asked me if he could 'display' my book (as though it was an accessory, a bracelet or a pair of earrings) while he filmed me shopping for clothes! Jhumpa Lahiri, the American writer of Indian origin who won the Pulitzer Prize, came to India recently to have a traditional Bengali wedding. The wedding was reported on the front page of national newspapers.

Now where does all this lead us? Is it just harmless nonsense, best ignored? How does all this ardent wooing affect our art? What kind of lenses does it put in our spectacles? How far does it remove us from the world around us?

There is very real danger that this neoteric seduction can shut us up far more effectively than violence and repression ever could. We have free speech. Maybe. But do we have Really Free Speech? If what we have to say doesn't 'sell', will we still say it? Can we? Or is everybody looking for Things That Sell to say? Could writers end up playing the role of palace

entertainers? Or the subtle twenty-first-century version of court eunuchs attending to the pleasures of our incumbent CEOs? You know—naughty, but nice. Risque perhaps, but not risky.

It has been some years now since my first, and so far only, novel, *The God of Small Things*, was published. In the early days, I used to be described—introduced—as the author of an almost freakishly 'successful' (if I may use so vulgar a term) first book. Nowadays I'm introduced as something of a freak myself. I am, apparently, what is known in twenty-first century vernacular as a 'writer-activist'. (Like a sofa-bed.)

Why am I called a 'writer-activist' and why—even when it's used approvingly, admiringly—does that term make me flinch? I'm called a writer-activist because after writing *The God of Small Things* I wrote three political essays: 'The End of Imagination', about India's nuclear tests, 'The Greater Common Good', about big dams and the 'development' debate, and 'Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin' about the privatisation and corporatisation of essential infrastructure like water and electricity. Apart from the building of the temple in Ayodhya, these also currently happen to be the major preoccupations of the Indian government.

Now, I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays. True, the essays are works of non-fiction, but since when did writers forgo the right to write non-fiction?

My thesis is that I've been saddled with this double-barrelled appellation, this awful professional label, not because my work is political, but because in my essays, I take sides. I take a position. I have a point of view. What's

worse, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position and what's even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position. For a writer of the 21st century, that's considered a pretty uncool, unsophisticated thing to do. It skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues—a breed of people that the world has learned (quite rightly) to mistrust. I'm aware of this. I'm all for being circumspect. I'm all for discretion, prudence, tentativeness, subtlety, ambiguity, complexity. I love the unanswered question, the unresolved story, the unclimbed mountain, the tender shard of an incomplete dream. Most of the time.

But is it mandatory for a writer to be ambiguous about everything? Isn't it true that there have been fearful episodes in human history when prudence and discretion would have just been euphemisms for pusillanimity? When caution was actually cowardice? When sophistication was disguised decadence? When circumspection was really a kind of espousal?

Isn't it true, or at least theoretically possible, that there are times in the life of a people or a nation when the political climate demands that we—even the most sophisticated of us—overtly take sides? I believe that such times are upon us. And I believe that in the coming years, intellectuals and artists will be called upon to take sides.

And this time, unlike the struggle for Independence, we won't have the luxury of fighting a 'colonising enemy'. We'll be fighting ourselves.

We will be forced to ask ourselves some very uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our 'democratic institutions', the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community.

Fifty years after Independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the 'cultural insult'. As citizens, we're still caught up in the business of 'disproving' the white world's definition of us. Intellectually and emotionally, we have just begun to grapple with communal and caste politics that threaten to tear our society apart. But in the meanwhile something new looms on our horizon.

It's not war, it's not genocide, it's not ethnic cleansing, it's not a famine or an epidemic. On the face of it, it's just ordinary, day-to-day business. It lacks the drama, the large format, epic magnificence of war or genocide. It's dull in comparison. It makes bad TV. It has to do with boring things like water supply, electricity, irrigation. But it also has to do with a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has few parallels in history. You may have guessed by now that I'm talking about the modern version of corporate globalisation.

What is globalisation? Who is it for? What is it going to do to a country like India in which social inequality has been institutionalised in the caste system for centuries? A country in which hundreds of millions of people live in rural areas. In which 80 per cent of the landholdings are small farms. In which almost half the population cannot read or write.

Is the corporatisation and globalisation of agriculture, water supply, electricity and essential commodities going to pull India out of the stagnant morass of poverty, illiteracy and religious bigotry? Is the dismantling and auctioning off of elaborate public sector infrastructure, developed with public money over the last 50 years, really the way forward? Is corporate globalisation going to close the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged, between the upper castes and the lower castes, between the

educated and the illiterate? Or is it going to give those who already have a centuries-old head start a friendly helping hand?

Is corporate globalisation about 'the eradication of world poverty' or is it a mutant variety of colonialism, remote controlled and digitally operated? These are huge, contentious questions. The answers vary depending on whether they come from the villages and fields of rural India, from the slums and shantytowns of urban India, from the living rooms of the burgeoning middle class or from the boardrooms of big business houses.

Today, India produces more milk, more sugar, more food grain than ever before. Government warehouses are overflowing with 42 million tonnes of food grain. That's almost a quarter of the total annual food grain produce. Farmers with too much grain on their hands were driven to despair. In regions that wielded enough political clout, the government went on a buying spree, purchasing more grain than it could possibly store or use. And yet, under the terms of its agreement with the World Trade Organisation, the Indian government had to lift import restrictions on 1,400 commodities, including milk, grain, sugar, cotton, tea, coffee, rubber and palm oil. This, despite the fact that there was a glut of these products in the market. While grain rots in government warehouses, hundreds of millions of Indian citizens live below the poverty line and do not have the means to eat a square meal a day. Starvation deaths (dressed up as measles and food-poisoning) are being reported from several parts of the country.

From 1 April, 2001—April Fools Day—once again according to the terms of its agreement with the WTO, the Indian government is contracted to drop its quantitative import restrictions. The Indian market is already flooded with cheaper imports. Though India is technically free to export its

agricultural produce, in practice most of it cannot be exported because it doesn't meet the first world's 'environmental standards'. (Western consumers don't eat bruised mangoes, or bananas with mosquito bites, or rice with a few weevils in it. In India, we don't mind the odd mosquito-bite or the occasional weevil.)

Developed countries like the US, whose hugely subsidised farm industry engages only 2 to 3 per cent of its total population, are using the WTO to pressurise countries like India to drop agricultural subsidies in order to make the market 'competitive'. Huge, mechanised corporate enterprises working thousands of acres of farmland want to compete with impoverished subsistence farmers who own only a couple of acres.

In effect, India's rural economy is being garrotted. Farmers who produce too much are in distress, farmers who produce too little are in distress and landless agricultural labour is out of work as big estates and farms lay off their workers. They're all flocking to the cities in search of employment.

'Trade not Aid' is the rallying cry of the headmen of the new Global Village, headquartered in the shining offices of the WTO. Our British colonisers stepped on to our shores a few centuries ago disguised as traders. We all remember the East India Company. This time around, the coloniser doesn't even need a token white presence in the colonies. The CEOs and their men don't need to go to the trouble of tramping through the tropics risking malaria, diarrhoea, sunstroke and an early death. They don't have to maintain an army or a police force, or worry about insurrections and mutinies. They can have their colonies and an easy conscience. 'Creating a good investment climate' is the new euphemism for third world repression. Besides, the responsibility for implementation rests with the local administration.

In India, in order to clear the way for 'development projects', the government is in the process of amending the present Land Acquisition Act (which, ironically, was drafted by the British in the nineteenth century) and making it more draconian than it already is. State governments are preparing to ratify 'anti-terrorist' laws so that those who oppose development projects will be counted as terrorists. They can be held without trial for three years. They can have their lands and cattle seized.

Recently, corporate globalisation has come in for some criticism. What happened in Seattle and Prague will go down in history. Each time the WTO or the World Economic Forum wants to have a meeting, they have to barricade themselves with thousands of heavily armed police. Still, all its admirers, from Bill Clinton, Kofi Annan and A.B. Vajpayee to the cheering brokers in the stalls, continue to say the same lofty things. If we have the right institutions of governance in place—effective courts, good laws, honest politicians, participatory democracy, a transparent administration that respects human rights and gives people a say in decisions that affect their lives—then the globalisation project will work for the poor, as well. They call this 'globalisation with a human face'.

The point is, if all this was in place, almost anything would succeed: socialism, capitalism, you name it. Everything works in Paradise, a communist State as well as a military dictatorship! But in an imperfect world, is it corporate globalisation that's going to bring us all this bounty? Is that what's happening in India now that it's on the fast track to the free market? Does anyone thing on that lofty list apply to life in India today?

Are state institutions transparent? Have people had a say? Have they even been informed—let alone consulted—about decisions that vitally affect their lives? And are Mr Clinton (or now Mr Bush) and Mr Vajpayee doing

everything in their power to see that the 'right institutions of governance' are in place? Or are they involved in exactly the opposite enterprise? Do they mean something else altogether when they talk of the 'right institutions of governance'?

On October 18, 2000, in one of the most extraordinary legal decisions in post-independence India, the Supreme Court [of India] permitted the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River to proceed. The court did this despite indisputable evidence placed before it that the Sardar Sarovar Project did not have the mandatory environmental clearance from the central government. Despite the fact that no comprehensive studies have ever been done on the social and ecological impact of the dam. Despite the fact that in the last 15 years not one single village has been resettled according to the project's own guidelines, and that there was no possibility of rehabilitating the four hundred thousand people who would be displaced by the project. In effect, the Supreme Court has virtually endorsed the violation of human rights to life and livelihood.

Big Dams in India have displaced not hundreds, not thousands, but millions—more than 30 million people in the last fifty years. Almost half of them are Dalit and Adivasi, the poorest of the poor. Yet India is the only country in the world that refused permission to the World Commission on Dams to hold a public hearing. The government in Gujarat, the state in which the Sardar Sarovar dam is being built, threatened members of the commission with arrest.¹⁴ The World Commission on Dams report was released by Nelson Mandela in November 2000. In February 2001, the Indian government formally rejected the World Commission on Dams report. Does this sound like a transparent, accountable, participatory democracy?

Recently, the Supreme Court ordered the closure of 77,000 'polluting and non-conforming' industrial units in Delhi. The order will put 500,000 people out of work. What are these 'industrial units'? Who are these people? They're the millions who have migrated from their villages, some voluntarily, others involuntarily, in search of work. They're the people who aren't supposed to exist, the 'non-citizens' who survive in the folds and wrinkles, the cracks and fissures of the 'official' city. They exist just outside the net of the 'official' urban infrastructure.

Close to 40 per cent of Delhi's population of 12 million—about 5 million people—live in slums and unauthorised colonies. Most of them are not serviced by municipal facilities—no electricity, no water, no sewage systems. About 50,000 people are homeless and sleep on the streets. These 'non-citizens' are employed in what economists rather stuffily call the 'informal sector', the fragile but vibrant parallel economy that both shocks and delights the imagination. They work as hawkers, rickshaw-pullers, garbage recyclers, car-battery rechargers, street tailors, transistor-knob makers, buttonhole stitchers, paper-bag makers, dyers, printers, barbers. These are the 'industrial units' that have been targeted by the Supreme Court. (Fortunately, I haven't had that knock on my door yet, though I'm as non-conforming a unit as the rest of them.)

The trains that leave Delhi these days carry thousands of people who simply cannot survive in the city. They're returning to the villages they fled in the first place. Millions of others, because they're 'illegal', have become easy meat for the rapacious, bribe-seeking police and predatory government officials. They haven't yet been driven out of the city but now must live in perpetual fear and dread of that happening.

In India, the times are full of talk of the 'free market', reforms, deregulation and the dismantling of the 'licence-raj'—all in the name of encouraging entrepreneurship and discouraging corruption. Yet, when the state obliterates a flourishing market, when it breaks the backs of half-a-million imaginative, resourceful, small-scale entrepreneurs, and delivers millions of others as fodder to the doorstep of the corruption industry, few comment on the irony.

No doubt it's true that the informal sector is polluting and, according to a colonial understanding of urban land use, 'non-conforming'. But then we don't live in a clean, perfect world. What about the fact that 67 per cent of Delhi's pollution comes from motor vehicles? Is it conceivable that the Supreme Court will come up with an act that bans private cars, or limits the number of cars a household can own?

If pollution is indeed the main concern of our courts and government, why is it that they have shown no great enthusiasm for regulating big factories run by major industrialists that have polluted rivers, denuded forests, depleted and poisoned groundwater, and destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of people who depend on these resources for a living? The Grasim factory in Kerala, the Orient Paper Mill in Madhya Pradesh, the noxious 'sunrise belt' industries in Gujarat. The uranium mines in Jaduguda, the aluminum plants in Orissa. And hundreds of others.

This is our in-house version of first world bullying in the global warming debate, i. e., we pollute, you pay.

In circumstances like these, the term 'writer-activist' as a professional description of what I do makes me flinch doubly. First, because it is strategically positioned to diminish both writers and activists. It seeks to

reduce the scope, the range, the sweep, of what a writer is and can be. It suggests, somehow, that writers by definition are too effete to come up with the clarity, the explicitness, the reasoning, the passion, the grit, the audacity and, if necessary, the vulgarity, to publicly take a political position. And conversely, it suggests that activists occupy the coarser, cruder end of the intellectual spectrum. That activists are by profession 'position-takers' and therefore lack complexity and intellectual sophistication, and are instead fuelled by a crude, simple-minded, one-sided understanding of things. But the more fundamental problem I have with the term is that this attempt to 'professionalise' protest has the effect of containing the problem and suggesting that it's up to the professionals—activists and writer-activists—to deal with it.

The fact is that what's happening today is not a *problem*, and the issues that some of us are raising are not *causes*. They are huge political and social upheavals that are convulsing the world. One is not involved by virtue of being a writer or activist. One is involved because one is a human being. Writing about it just happens to be the most effective thing a writer can do. It is vital to de-professionalise the public debate on matters that vitally affect the lives of ordinary people. It's time to snatch our futures back from the 'experts'. Time to ask, in ordinary language, the public question and to demand in ordinary language, the public answer.

Frankly, however trenchantly, angrily, persuasively or poetically the case is made out, at the end of the day, a writer is a citizen, only one of many, who is demanding public information, asking for a public explanation. I have no personal or ideological axe to grind. I have no professional stakes to protect. I'm prepared to be persuaded. I'm prepared to change my mind. But instead of an argument, or an explanation, or a disputing of facts, one

gets insults, invective and the Experts' Anthem: You don't understand and it's too complicated to explain. The subtext, of course, is: don't worry your little head about it. Go and play with your toys. Leave the real world to us.

It's the old Brahminical instinct. Colonise knowledge, build four walls around it, and use it to your advantage. The Manusmriti, the Vedic Hindu code of conduct, says that if a Dalit overhears a shloka or any part of a sacred text, he must have molten lead poured into his ear. It isn't a coincidence that while India is poised to take her place at the forefront of the Information Revolution, millions of her citizens are illiterate. (It would be interesting, as an exercise, to find out how many 'experts'—scholars, professionals, consultants—in India are actually Brahmins or from the upper castes.)

If you're one of the lucky people with a berth booked on the small convoy, then Leaving it to the Experts is, or can be, a mutually beneficial proposition both for the expert and yourself. It's a convenient way of easing your conscience, shrugging off your own role in the circuitry. And it creates a huge professional market for all kinds of 'expertise'. There's a whole ugly universe waiting to be explored there. This is not at all to suggest that all consultants are racketeers or that expertise is unnecessary, but you've heard the saying—There's a lot of money in poverty. There are plenty of ethical questions to be asked of those who make a professional living off their expertise in poverty and despair.

For instance, at what point does a scholar stop being a scholar and become a parasite who feeds off despair and dispossession? Does the source of a scholar's funding compromise his or her scholarship? We know, after all, that World Bank studies are the most quoted studies in the world. Is the World Bank a dispassionate observer of the global situation? Are the studies it funds entirely devoid of self-interest?

Take, for example, the international dam industry. It's worth tens of billions of dollars a year. It's bursting with experts and consultants. Given the number of studies, reports, books, PhDs, grants, loans, consultancies, eas—*it's odd, wouldn't you say, that there is no really reliable estimate of how many people have been displaced by big dams in India? That there is no estimate for exactly what the contribution of big dams has been to overall food production? That there hasn't been an official audit, a comprehensive, honest, thoughtful, post-project evaluation of a single big dam to see whether or not it has achieved what it set out to achieve? Whether or not the costs were justified, or even what the costs actually were?*

What *are* the experts up to?

If you manage to ignore the invective, shut out the din of the Expert's Anthem, and keep your eye on the ball, you'll find that a lot of dubious politics lurks inside the stables of "expertise." Probe further, and it all precipitates in a bilious rush of abuse, intimidation, and blind anger. The intellectual equivalent of a police baton charge. The advantage of provoking this kind of unconstrained, spontaneous rage is that it allows you to get a good look at the instincts of some of these normally cautious, supposedly "neutral" people, the pillars of democracy—judges, planners, academics. It becomes very clear that it's not really a question of experts versus laypersons or of knowledge versus ignorance. It's the pitting of one value system against another, one kind of political instinct against another. It's interesting to watch so many supposedly "rational" people turn into irrational, instinctive political beings. To see how they find reasons to support their views, and how, if those reasons are argued away, they continue to cling to their views anyway. Perhaps for this alone, provocation is important. In a crisis, it helps to clarify who's on which side.

A wonderful illustration of this is the Supreme Court’s reaction to my essay “The Greater Common Good,” which was published in May 1999. In July and August of that year, the monsoon waters rose in the Narmada and submerged villages. While villagers stood in their homes for days together in chest-deep water to protest against the dam, while their crops were submerged, and while the NBA—Narmada Bachao Andolan, the people’s movement in the Narmada valley—pointed out (citing specific instances) that government officials had committed perjury by signing false affidavits claiming that resettlement had been carried out when it hadn’t, the three-judge bench in the Supreme Court met over three sessions. The only subject they discussed was whether or not the dignity of the court had been undermined. To assist them in their deliberations, they appointed what is called an amicus curiae (friend of the court) to advise them about whether or not they should initiate criminal proceedings against the NBA and me for contempt of court. The thing to keep in mind is that, while the NBA was the petitioner, I was (and hopefully still am) an independent citizen. I wasn’t present in court, but I was told that the three-judge bench ranted and raved and referred to me as “that woman.” (I began to think of myself as the hooker who won the Booker.)

On October 15, 1999, they issued an elaborate order. Here’s an extract:

... Judicial process and institution cannot be permitted to be scandalised or subjected to contumacious violation in such a blatant manner in which it has been done by her [Arundhati Roy] . . . vicious stultification and vulgar debunking cannot be permitted to pollute the stream of justice . . . we are unhappy at the way in which the leaders of NBA and Ms. Arundhati Roy have attempted to undermine the dignity of the Court. We expected better behavior from them. . . . After giving this matter thoughtful consideration... we are not inclined to initiate contempt proceedings against the petitioners, its leaders or Arundhati

Roy . . . after the 22nd of July 1999 . . . nothing has come to our notice which may show that Ms. Arundhati Roy has continued with the objectionable writings insofar as the judiciary is concerned. She may have by now realised her mistake . . .

What's dissent without a few good insults?

Anyway, eventually, as you can see, they let me off. And I continued with my Objectionable Writings. I hope I've managed to inspire at least some in this audience to embark on careers as Vicious Stultificators and Vulgar Debunkers. We could do with a few more of those.

On the whole, in India, the prognosis is—to put it mildly—Not Good. And yet, one cannot help but marvel at the fantastic range and depth and wisdom of the hundreds of people's resistance movements all over the country. They're being beaten down, but they simply refuse to lie down and die.

Their political ideologies and battle strategies span the range. We have the maverick Malayali professor who petitions the President every day against the communalisation of history texts; Sunderlal Bahuguna, who risks his life on indefinite hunger strikes protesting the Tehri dam; the Adivasis in Jaduguda protesting uranium mining on their lands; the Koel Karo Sangathan resisting a mega-dam project in Jharkhand; the awe-inspiring Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha; the relentlessly dogged Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan; the Beej Bachao Andolan in Tehri-Garhwal fighting to save the biodiversity of seeds; and of course, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the people's movement in the Narmada Valley.

India's redemption lies in the inherent anarchy and fractiousness of its people and its political formations. Even our heel-clicking, boot-stamping Hindu fascists are undisciplined to the point of being chaotic. They can't

bring themselves to agree with each other for more than five minutes at a time. Corporatising India is like trying to impose an iron grid on a heaving ocean, forcing it to behave.

My guess is that India will not behave. It cannot. It's too old and too clever to be made to jump through the hoops all over again. It's too diverse, too grand, too feral, and—eventually, I hope—too democratic to be lobotomised into believing in one single idea, which is, eventually, what corporate globalisation really is: Life is Profit.

What is happening to the world lies, at the moment, just outside the realm of common human understanding. It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers, the filmmakers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding. Who can translate cash-flow charts and scintillating boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives. Stories about what it's like to lose your home, your land, your job, your dignity, your past, and your future to an invisible force. To someone or something you can't see. You can't hate. You can't even imagine.

It's a new space that's been offered to us today. A new kind of challenge. It offers opportunities for a new kind of art. An art which can make the impalpable palpable, the intangible tangible, the invisible visible and the inevitable evitable. An art which can draw out the incorporeal adversary and make it real. Bring it to book.

Cynics say that real life is a choice between the failed revolution and the shabby deal. I don't know...maybe they're right. But even they should know that there's no limit to just how shabby that shabby deal can be. What we need to search for and find, what we need to hone and perfect into a

magnificent, shining thing, is a new kind of politics. Not the politics of governance, but the politics of resistance. The politics of opposition. The politics of forcing accountability. The politics of joining hands across the world and preventing certain destruction. In the present circumstances, I'd say that the only thing worth globalising is dissent. It's India's best export.

THE END OF IMAGINATION

August 1998

"The desert shook," the Government of India informed us (its people).

"The whole mountain turned white," the Government of Pakistan replied.

"By afternoon the wind had fallen silent over Pokhran. At 3.45 p.m., the timer detonated the three devices. Around 200 to 300 m deep in the earth, the heat generated was equivalent to a million degrees centigrade - as hot as temperatures on the sun. Instantly, rocks weighing around a thousand tons,

a mini mountain underground, vapourised... shockwaves from the blast began to lift a mound of earth the size of a football field by several metres. One scientist on seeing it said, "I can now believe stories of Lord Krishna lifting a hill." - India Today.

May 1998. It'll go down in history books, provided, of course, we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future. There's nothing new or original left to be said about nuclear weapons. There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably.

I am prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because, in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible. So those of you who are willing: let's pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes and speak our second-hand lines in this sad second-hand play. But let's not forget that the stakes we're playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. The end of our children and our children's children. Of everything we love. We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight.

Once again we are pitifully behind the times - not just scientifically and technologically (ignore the hollow claims), but more pertinently in our ability to grasp the true nature of nuclear weapons. Our Comprehension of the Horror Department is hopelessly obsolete. Here we are, all of us in India and in Pakistan, discussing the finer points of politics, and foreign policy, behaving for all the world as though our governments have just devised a newer, bigger bomb, a sort of immense hand grenade with which they will annihilate the enemy (each other) and protect us from all harm. How

desperately we want to believe that. What wonderful, willing, well-behaved, gullible subjects we have turned out to be. The rest of humanity (Yes, yes, I know, I know, but let's ignore Them for the moment. They forfeited their votes a long time ago), the rest of the rest of humanity may not forgive us, but then the rest of the rest of humanity, depending on who fashions its views, may not know what a tired, dejected heart-broken people we are. Perhaps it doesn't realize how urgently we need a miracle. How deeply we yearn for magic.

If only, if *only*, nuclear war was just another kind of war. If only it was about the usual things - nations and territories, gods and histories. If only those of us who dread it are just worthless moral cowards who are not prepared to die in defence of our beliefs. If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements - the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water - will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible.

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animal and vegetable, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is.

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?

The way it has worked—both in the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the making of the bomb—is that the Congress sowed the seeds, tended the crop, then the BJP stepped in and reaped the hideous harvest.

The Head of the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Bombay has a plan. He declared in an interview (*The Pioneer*, April 24, 1998) that India could survive nuclear war. His advice is that if there is a nuclear war, we take the same safety measures as the ones that scientists have recommended in the event of accidents at nuclear plants.

Take iodine pills, he suggests. And other steps such as remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. Infants should be given powdered milk. "People in the danger zone should immediately go to the ground floor and if possible to the basement."

What do you do with these levels of lunacy? What do you do if you're trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged?

Ignore it, it's just a novelist's naivete, they'll tell you, Doomsday Prophet hyperbole. It'll never come to that. There will be no war. Nuclear weapons are about peace, not war. 'Deterrence' is the buzzword of the people who like to think of themselves as hawks. (Nice birds, those. Cool. Stylish. Predatory. Pity there won't be many of them around after the war. Extinction is a word we must try and get used to.) Deterrence is an old thesis that has been resurrected and is being recycled with added local flavour.

The Theory of Deterrence cornered the credit for having prevented the Cold War from turning into a Third World War. The only immutable fact about The Third World War is that if there's going to be one, it will be fought after the Second World War. In other words, there's no fixed schedule. In other words, we still have time. And perhaps the pun (The Third World War) is prescient. True, the Cold War is over, but let's not be hoodwinked by the ten-year lull in nuclear posturing. It was just a cruel joke. It was only in remission. It wasn't cured. It proves no theories. After all, what is ten years in the history of the world? Here it is again, the disease. More widespread and less amenable to any sort of treatment than ever. No, the Theory of Deterrence has some fundamental flaws.

Flaw Number One is that it presumes a complete, sophisticated understanding of the psychology of your enemy. It assumes that what deters you (the fear of annihilation) will deter them. What about those who are not deterred by that? The suicide bomber psyche - the 'We'll take you with us' school - is that an outlandish thought? How did Rajiv Gandhi die?

In any case who's the 'you' and who's the 'enemy'? Both are only governments. Governments change. They wear masks within masks. They moult and re-invent themselves all the time. The one we have at the moment, for instance, does not even have enough seats to last a full term in office, but demands that we trust it to do pirouettes and party tricks with nuclear bombs even as it scrabbles around for a foothold to maintain a simple majority in Parliament.

Flaw Number Two is that deterrence is premised on fear. But fear is premised on knowledge. On an understanding of the true extent and scale of the devastation that nuclear war will wreak. It is not some inherent, mystical attribute of nuclear bombs that they automatically inspire thoughts

of peace. On the contrary, it is the endless, tireless, confrontational work of people who have had the courage to openly denounce them, the marches, the demonstrations, the films, the outrage - that is what has averted, or perhaps only postponed, nuclear war. Deterrence will not and cannot work given the levels of ignorance and illiteracy that hang over our two countries like dense, impenetrable veils. (Witness the VHP wanting to distribute radioactive sand from the Pokhran desert as prasad all across India. A cancer yatra?) The Theory of Deterrence is nothing but a perilous joke in a world where iodine pills are prescribed as a prophylactic for nuclear irradiation.

India and Pakistan have nuclear bombs now and feel entirely justified in having them. Soon others will too. Israel, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Nepal (I'm trying to be eclectic here), Denmark, Germany, Bhutan, Mexico, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Burma, Bosnia, Singapore, North Korea, Sweden, South Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan... and why not? Every country in the world has a special case to make. Everybody has borders and beliefs. And when all our larders are bursting with shiny bombs and our bellies are empty (Deterrence is an exorbitant beast), we can trade bombs for food. And when nuclear technology goes on the market, when it gets truly competitive and prices fall, not just governments, but anybody who can afford it can have their own private arsenal - businessmen, terrorists, perhaps even the occasional rich writer (like myself). Our planet will bristle with beautiful missiles. There will be a new world order. The dictatorship of the pro-nuke elite. We can get our kicks by threatening each other. It'll be like bungee-jumping when you can't rely on the bungee cord, or playing Russian roulette all day long. An additional perk will be the thrill of Not Knowing What To Believe. We can be victims of the predatory

imagination of every green card-seeking charlatan who surfaces in the West with concocted stories of imminent missile attacks. We can delight at the prospect of being held to ransom by every petty trouble-maker and rumour-monger, the more the merrier if truth be told, anything for an excuse to make more bombs. So you see, even without a war, we have a lot to look forward to.

But let us pause to give credit where it's due. Whom must we thank for all this?

The Men who made it happen. The Masters of the Universe. Ladies and gentlemen, The United States of America! Come on up here folks, stand up and take a bow. Thank you for doing this to the world. Thank you for making a difference. Thank you for showing us the way. Thank you for altering the very meaning of life.

From now on it is not dying we must fear, but living.

It is such supreme folly to believe that nuclear weapons are deadly only if they're used. The fact that they exist at all, their very presence in our lives, will wreak more havoc than we can begin to fathom. Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. They bury themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our brains. They are purveyors of madness. They are the ultimate coloniser. Whiter than any white man that ever lived. The very heart of whiteness.

All I can say to every man, woman and sentient child here in India, and over there, just a little way away in Pakistan, is: Take it personally. Whoever you are - Hindu, Muslim, urban, agrarian - it doesn't matter. The only good thing about nuclear war is that it is the single most egalitarian idea that man has ever had. On the day of reckoning, you will not be asked to present your

credentials. The devastation will be indiscriminate. The bomb isn't in your backyard. It's in your body. And mine. Nobody, no nation, no government, no man, no god, has the right to put it there. We're radioactive already, and the war hasn't even begun. So stand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally.

THE BOMB AND I

In early May (before the bomb), I left home for three weeks. I thought I would return. I had every intention of returning. Of course, things haven't worked out quite the way I had planned.

While I was away, I met a friend of mine whom I have always loved for, among other things, her ability to combine deep affection with a frankness that borders on savagery.

"I've been thinking about you," she said, "about *The God of Small Things* - what's in it, what's over it, under it, around it, above it..."

She fell silent for a while. I was uneasy and not at all sure that I wanted to hear the rest of what she had to say. She, however, was sure that she was going to say it. "In this last year - less than a year actually - you've had too much of everything - fame, money, prizes, adulation, criticism, condemnation, ridicule, love, hate, anger, envy, generosity - everything. In some ways it's a perfect story. Perfectly baroque in its excess. The trouble is that it has, or can have, only one perfect ending." Her eyes were on me, bright with a slanting, probing brilliance. She knew that I knew what she was going to say. She was insane.

She was going to say that nothing that happened to me in the future could ever match the buzz of this. That the whole of the rest of my life was going

to be vaguely unsatisfying. And, therefore, the only perfect ending to the story would be death. *My* death.

The thought had occurred to me too. Of course it had. The fact that all this, this global dazzle - these lights in my eyes, the applause, the flowers, the photographers, the journalists feigning a deep interest in my life (yet struggling to get a single fact straight), the men in suits fawning over me, the shiny hotel bathrooms with endless towels - none of it was likely to happen again. Would I miss it? Had I grown to need it? Was I a fame-junkie? Would I have withdrawal symptoms?

The more I thought about it, the clearer it became to me that if fame was going to be my permanent condition it would kill me. Club me to death with its good manners and hygiene. I'll admit that I've enjoyed my own five minutes of it immensely, but primarily because it was just five minutes. Because I knew (or thought I knew) that I could go home when I was bored and giggle about it. Grow old and irresponsible. Eat mangoes in the moonlight. Maybe write a couple of failed books - worstsellers - to see what it felt like. For a whole year I've cartwheeled across the world, anchored always to thoughts of home and the life I would go back to. Contrary to all the enquiries and predictions about my impending emigration, that was the well I dipped into. That was my sustenance. My strength.

I told my friend there was no such thing as a perfect story. I said in any case hers was an external view of things, this assumption that the trajectory of a person's happiness, or let's say fulfilment, had peaked (and now must trough) because she had accidentally stumbled upon 'success'. It was premised on the unimaginative belief that wealth and fame were the mandatory stuff of everybody's dreams.

You've lived too long in New York, I told her. There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible. Honourable. Sometimes even worth striving for. Worlds in which recognition is not the only barometer of brilliance or human worth. There are plenty of warriors that I know and love, people far more valuable than myself, who go to war each day, knowing in advance that they will fail. True, they are less 'successful' in the most vulgar sense of the word, but by no means less fulfilled.

The only dream worth having, I told her, is to dream that you will live while you're alive and die only when you're dead. (Prescience? Perhaps.)

"Which means exactly what?" (Arched eyebrows, a little annoyed.)

I tried to explain, but didn't do a very good job of it. Sometimes I need to write to think. So I wrote it down for her on a paper napkin. This is what I wrote: *To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.*

I've known her for many years, this friend of mine. She's an architect too.

She looked dubious, somewhat unconvinced by my paper napkin speech. I could tell that structurally, just in terms of the sleek, narrative symmetry of things, and because she loves me, her thrill at my 'success' was so keen, so generous, that it weighed in evenly with her (anticipated) horror at the idea of my death. I understood that it was nothing personal. Just a design thing.

Anyhow, two weeks after that conversation, I returned to India. To what I think/thought of as home. Something had died but it wasn't me. It was

infinitely more precious. It was a world that has been ailing for a while and has finally breathed its last. It's been cremated now. The air is thick with ugliness and there's the unmistakable stench of fascism on the breeze.

Day after day, in newspaper editorials, on the radio, on TV chat shows, on MTV for heaven's sake, people whose instincts one thought one could trust – writers, painters, journalists – make the crossing. The chill seeps into my bones as it becomes painfully apparent from the lessons of everyday life that what you read in history books is true. That fascism is indeed as much about people as about governments. That it begins at home. In drawing rooms. In bedrooms. In beds. 'Explosion of self-esteem', 'Road to Resurgence', 'A Moment of Pride', these were headlines in the papers in the days following the nuclear tests. 'We have proved that we are not eunuchs any more,' said Mr Thackeray of the Shiv Sena (whoever said we were? True, a good number of us are women, but that, as far as I know, isn't the same thing.) Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb: 'We have superior strength and potency.' (This was our Minister for Defence after Pakistan completed its tests.)

'These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests,' we were repeatedly told.

This has been hammered home, over and over again. The bomb is India. India is the bomb. Not just India, Hindu India. Therefore, be warned, any criticism of it is not just anti-national but anti-Hindu. (Of course in Pakistan the bomb is Islamic. Other than that, politically, the same physics applies.) This is one of the unexpected perks of having a nuclear bomb. Not only can

the government use it to threaten the Enemy, they can use it to declare war on their own people. Us.

In 1975, one year after India first dipped her toe into the nuclear sea, Mrs Gandhi declared the Emergency. What will 1999 bring? There's talk of cells being set up to monitor anti-national activity. Talk of amending cable laws to ban networks 'harming national culture' (The Indian Express, July 3). Of churches being struck off the list of religious places because 'wine is served' (announced and retracted, The Indian Express, July 3, The Times of India, July 4). Artists, writers, actors, and singers are being harassed, threatened (and succumbing to the threats). Not just by goon squads, but by instruments of the government. And in courts of law. There are letters and articles circulating on the Net - creative interpretations of Nostradamus' predictions claiming that a mighty, all-conquering Hindu nation is about to emerge - a resurgent India that will "burst forth upon its former oppressors and destroy them completely." That "the beginning of the terrible revenge (that will wipe out all Moslems) will be in the seventh month of 1999." This may well be the work of some lone nut, or a bunch of arcane god-squadders. The trouble is that having a nuclear bomb makes thoughts like these seem feasible. It creates thoughts like these. It bestows on people these utterly misplaced, utterly deadly notions of their own power. It's happening. It's all happening. I wish I could say 'slowly but surely' - but I can't. Things are moving at a pretty fair clip.

Why does it all seem so familiar? Is it because, even as you watch, reality dissolves and seamlessly rushes forward into the silent, black and white images from old films - scenes of people being hounded out of their lives, rounded up and herded into camps. Of massacre, of mayhem, of endless columns of broken people making their way to nowhere? Why is there no

sound-track? Why is the hall so quiet? Have I been seeing too many films? Am I mad? Or am I right? Could those images be the inevitable culmination of what we have set into motion? Could our future be rushing forward into our past? I think so. Unless, of course, nuclear war settles it once and for all.

When I told my friends that I was writing this piece, they cautioned me. ‘Go ahead,’ they said, ‘but first make sure you’re not vulnerable. Make sure your papers are in order. Make sure your taxes are paid.’

My papers are in order. My taxes are paid. But how can one not be vulnerable in a climate like this? Everyone is vulnerable. Accidents happen. There’s safety only in acquiescence. As I write, I am filled with foreboding. In this country, I have truly known what it means for a writer to feel loved (and, to some degree, hated too). Last year I was one of the items being paraded in the media’s end-of-the-year National Pride Parade. Among the others, much to my mortification, were a bomb-maker and an international beauty queen. Each time a beaming person stopped me on the street and said ‘You have made India proud’ (referring to the prize I won, not the book I wrote), I felt a little uneasy. It frightened me then and it terrifies me now, because I know how easily that swell, that tide of emotion, can turn against me. Perhaps the time for that has come. I’m going to step out from under the fairy lights and say what’s on my mind.

It’s this:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I’m female, but have nothing against eunuchs. My policies are simple. I’m willing to sign any nuclear non-proliferation treaty or

nuclear test ban treaty that's going. Immigrants are welcome. You can help me design our flag.

My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing.

Admittedly it was a flawed world. An unviable world. A scarred and wounded world. It was a world that I myself have criticised unsparingly, but only because I loved it. It didn't deserve to die. It didn't deserve to be dismembered. Forgive me, I realise that sentimentality is uncool - but what shall I do with my desolation?

I loved it simply because it offered humanity a choice. It was a rock out at sea. It was a stubborn chink of light that insisted that there was a different way of living. It was a functioning possibility. A real option. All that's gone now. India's nuclear tests, the manner in which they were conducted, the euphoria with which they have been greeted (by us) is indefensible. To me, it signifies dreadful things. The end of imagination. The end of freedom actually, because, after all, that's what freedom is. Choice.

On the 15th of August last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of India's independence. Next May we can mark our first anniversary in nuclear bondage.

Why did they do it?

Political expediency is the obvious, cynical answer, except that it only raises another, more basic question: Why should it have been politically expedient?

The three Official Reasons given are: China, Pakistan and Exposing Western Hypocrisy.

Taken at face value, and examined individually, they're somewhat baffling. I'm not for a moment suggesting that these are not real issues. Merely that they aren't new. The only new thing on the old horizon is the

Indian government. In his appallingly cavalier letter to the US president our prime minister says India's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests was due to a 'deteriorating security environment'. He goes on to mention the war with China in 1962 and the 'three aggressions we have suffered in the last 50 years [from Pakistan]. And for the last 10 years we have been the victim of unremitting tension and militancy sponsored by it . . . especially in Jammu and Kashmir'.

The war with China is 35 years old. Unless there's some vital state secret that we don't know about, it certainly seemed as though matters have improved slightly between us. The most recent war with Pakistan was fought 27 years ago. Admittedly Kashmir continues to be a deeply troubled region and no doubt Pakistan is gleefully fanning the flames. But surely there must be flames to fan in the first place? Surely the kindling is crackling and ready to burn? Can the Indian State with even a modicum of honesty absolve itself completely of having a hand in Kashmir's troubles? Kashmir, and for that matter, Assam, Tripura, Nagaland - virtually the whole of the Northeast - Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and all the trouble that's still to come - these are symptoms of a deeper malaise. It cannot and will not be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan.

Even Pakistan can't be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan. Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi - then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves.

As for the third Official Reason: Exposing Western Hypocrisy – how much more exposed can they be? Which decent human being on earth harbours any illusions about it? These are people whose histories are spongy with the blood of others. Colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, chemical weapons, they virtually invented it all. They have plundered nations, snuffed out civilizations, exterminated entire populations. They stand on the world’s stage stark naked but entirely unembarrassed, because they know that they have more money, more food, and bigger bombs than anybody else. They know they can wipe us out in the course of an ordinary working day. Personally, I’d say it is arrogance more than hypocrisy.

We have less money, less food, and smaller bombs. However, we have, or had, all kinds of other wealth. Delightful, unquantifiable. What we’ve done with it is the opposite of what we think we’ve done. We’ve pawned it all. We’ve traded it in. For what? In order to enter into a contract with the very people we claim to despise.

All in all, I think it is fair to say that *we’re* the hypocrites. We’re the ones who’ve abandoned what was arguably a moral position – i.e., *we have the technology, we can make bombs if we want to, but we won’t. We don’t believe in them.*

We’re the ones who have now set up this craven clamouring to be admitted into the club of superpowers. For India to demand the status of a superpower is as ridiculous as demanding to play in the World Cup finals simply because we have a ball. Never mind that we haven’t qualified, or that we don’t play much soccer and haven’t got a team.

Rule number two is Locate Yourself in Relation to Them, i.e.: Make an honest assessment of your position and abilities. The honest assessment of ourselves (in quantifiable terms) reads as follows:

We are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms we rank number 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP's Human Development Index (even Ghana and Sri Lanka rank above us). More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, more than 600 million lack even basic sanitation, and more than 200 million have no safe drinking water.

So the three Official Reasons, taken individually, don't hold much water. However, if you link them, a kind of twisted logic reveals itself. It has more to do with us than them.

The key words in our Prime Minister's letter to the U.S. President were 'suffered' and 'victim'. That's the substance of it. That's our meat and drink. We need to feel like victims. We need to feel beleaguered. We need enemies. We have so little sense of ourselves as a nation and therefore constantly cast about for targets to define ourselves against. Prevalent political wisdom suggests that to prevent the State from crumbling, we need a national cause, and other than our currency (and, of course, poverty, illiteracy and elections), we have none. This is the heart of the matter. This is the road that has led us to the bomb. This search for selfhood. If we are looking for a way out, we need some honest answers to some uncomfortable questions. Once again, it isn't as though these questions haven't been asked before. It's just that we prefer to mumble the answers and hope that no one's heard.

Is there such a thing as an Indian identity?

Do we really need one?

Who is an authentic Indian and who isn't?

Is India Indian?

Does it matter?

Whether or not there has ever been a single civilization that could call itself 'Indian Civilization', whether or not India was, is, or ever will become a cohesive cultural entity, depends on whether you dwell on the differences or the similarities in the cultures of the people who have inhabited the subcontinent for centuries. India, as a modern nation state, was marked out with precise geographical boundaries, in their precise geographical way, by a British Act of Parliament in 1899. Our country, as we know it, was forged on the anvil of the British Empire for the entirely unsentimental reasons of commerce and administration. But even as she was born, she began her struggle against her creators. So is India Indian? It's a tough question. Let's just say that we're an ancient people learning to live in a recent nation.

What is true is that India is an artificial State - a State that was created by a government, not a people. A State created from the top down, not the bottom up. The majority of India's citizens will not (to this day) be able to identify her boundaries on a map, or say which language is spoken where or which god is worshipped in what region. Most are too poor and too uneducated to have even an elementary idea of the extent and complexity of their own country. The impoverished, illiterate agrarian majority have no stake in the State. And indeed, why should they, how can they, when they don't even know what the State is? To them, India is, at best, a noisy slogan that comes around during the elections. Or a montage of people on Government TV programmes wearing regional costumes and saying *Mera Bharat Mahan* (My India is Great).

The people who have a vital stake (or, more to the point, a business interest) in India having a single, lucid, cohesive national identity are the politicians who constitute our national political parties. The reason isn't far to seek, it's simply because their struggle, their career goal, is - and must

necessarily be - to become that identity. To be identified with that identity. If there isn't one, they have to manufacture one and persuade people to vote for it. It isn't their fault. It comes with the territory. It is inherent in the nature of our system of centralized government. A congenital defect in our particular brand of democracy. The greater the numbers of illiterate people, the poorer the country and the more morally bankrupt the politicians, the cruder the ideas of what that identity should be. In a situation like this, illiteracy is not just sad, it's downright dangerous. However, to be fair, cobbling together a viable pre-digested 'National Identity' for India would be a formidable challenge even for the wise and the visionary. Every single Indian citizen could, if he or she wants to, claim to belong to some minority or the other. The fissures, if you look for them, run vertically, horizontally, layered, whorled, circular, spiral, inside out and outside in. Fires when they're lit race along any one of these schisms, and in the process, release tremendous bursts of political energy. Not unlike what happens when you split an atom.

It is this energy that Gandhi sought to harness when he rubbed the magic lamp and invited Ram and Rahim to partake of human politics and India's war of independence against the British. It was a sophisticated, magnificent, imaginative struggle, but its objective was simple and lucid, the target highly visible, easy to identify and succulent with political sin. In the circumstances, the energy found an easy focus. The trouble is that the circumstances are entirely changed now, but the genie is out of its lamp, and won't go back in. (It could be sent back, but nobody wants it to go, it's proved itself too useful.) Yes, it won us freedom. But it also won us the carnage of Partition. And now, in the hands of lesser statesmen, it has won us the Hindu Nuclear Bomb.

To be fair to Gandhi and to other leaders of the National Movement, they did not have the benefit of hindsight, and could not possibly have known what the eventual, long-term consequences of their strategy would be. They could not have predicted how quickly the situation would careen out of control. They could not have foreseen what would happen when they passed their flaming torches into the hands of their successors, or how venal those hands could be.

It was Indira Gandhi who started the real slide. It is she who made the genie a permanent State Guest. She injected the venom into our political veins. She invented our particularly vile local brand of political expediency. She showed us how to conjure enemies out of thin air, to fire at phantoms that she had carefully fashioned for that very purpose. It was she who discovered the benefits of never burying the dead, but preserving their putrid carcasses and trundling them out to worry old wounds when it suited her. Between herself and her sons she managed to bring the country to its knees. Our new Government has just kicked us over and arranged our heads on the chopping block.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is, in some senses, a spectre that Indira Gandhi and the Congress created. Or, if you want to be less harsh, a spectre that fed and reared itself in the political spaces and communal suspicion that the Congress nourished and cultivated. It has put a new complexion on the politics of governance. While Mrs Gandhi played hidden games with politicians and their parties, she reserved a shrill convent school rhetoric, replete with tired platitudes, to address the general public. The BJP, on the other hand, has chosen to light its fires directly on the streets and in the homes and hearts of people. It is prepared to do by day what the Congress would do only by night. To legitimize what was previously considered

unacceptable (but done anyway). There is perhaps a fragile case to be made here in favour of hypocrisy. Could the hypocrisy of the Congress Party, the fact that they conduct their wretched affairs surreptitiously instead of openly, could that possibly mean there is a tiny glimmer of guilt somewhere? Some small fragment of remembered decency?

Actually, no.

No.

What am I doing? Why am I foraging for scraps of hope?

The way it has worked - in the case of the demolition of the Babri Masjid as well as in the making of the nuclear bomb - is that the Congress sowed the seeds, tended the crop, then the BJP stepped in and reaped the hideous harvest. They waltz together, locked in each other's arms. They're inseparable, despite their professed differences. Between them they have brought us here, to this dreadful, dreadful place.

The jeering, hooting young men who battered down the Babri Masjid are the same ones whose pictures appeared in the papers in the days that followed the nuclear tests. They were on the streets, celebrating India's nuclear bomb and simultaneously 'condemning Western Culture' by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into public drains. I'm a little baffled by their logic: Coke is Western Culture, but the nuclear bomb is an old Indian tradition?

Yes, I've heard – the bomb is in the Vedas. It might be, but if you look hard enough you'll find Coke in the Vedas too. That's the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them – as long as you know what you're looking for.

But returning to the subject of the non-vedic 1990s: we storm the heart of whiteness, we embrace the most diabolical creation of western science and

call it our own. But we protest against their music, their food, their clothes, their cinema and their literature. That's not hypocrisy. That's humour.

It's funny enough to make a skull smile.

We're back on the old ship. The SS *Authenticity & Indianness*.

If there is going to be a pro-authenticity/anti-national drive, perhaps the government ought to get its history straight and its facts right. If they're going to do it, they may as well do it properly.

First of all, the original inhabitants of this land were not Hindu. Ancient though it is, there were human beings on earth before there was Hinduism. India's tribal people have a greater claim to being indigenous to this land than anybody else, and how are they treated by the state and its minions? Oppressed, cheated, robbed of their lands, shunted around like surplus goods. Perhaps a good place to start would be to restore to them the dignity that was once theirs. Perhaps the government could make a public undertaking that more dams of this kind will not be built, that more people will not be displaced.

But, of course that would be inconceivable, wouldn't it? Why? Because it's impractical. Because tribal people don't really matter. Their histories, their customs, their deities are dispensable. They must learn to sacrifice these things for the greater good of the Nation (that has snatched from them everything they ever had).

Okay, so that's out.

For the rest, I could compile a practical list of things to ban and buildings to break. It'll need some research, but off the top of my head here are a few suggestions.

They could begin by banning a number of ingredients from our cuisine: chilies (Mexico), tomatoes (Peru), potatoes (Bolivia), coffee (Morocco), tea,

white sugar, cinnamon (China) . . . they could then move into recipes. Tea with milk and sugar, for instance (Britain).

Smoking will be out of the question. Tobacco came from North America.

Cricket, English and Democracy should be forbidden. Either kabaddi or kho-kho could replace cricket. I don't want to start a riot, so I hesitate to suggest a replacement for English. (Italian? It has found its way to us via a kinder route: marriage, not imperialism.)

All hospitals in which western medicine is practised or prescribed should be shut down. All national newspapers discontinued. The railways dismantled. Airports closed. And what about our newest toy – the mobile phone? Can we live without it, or shall I suggest that they make an exception there? They could put it down in the column marked 'Universal?' (Only essential commodities will be included here. No music, art or literature.)

Needless to say, sending your children to university in the US, and rushing there yourself to have your prostate operated upon will be a cognizable offence.

The building demolition drive could begin with the Rashtrapati Bhavan and gradually spread from cities to the countryside, culminating in the destruction of all monuments (mosques, churches, temples) that were built on what was once tribal or forest land.

It will be a long, long list. It would take years of work. I could not use a computer because that wouldn't be very authentic of me, would it?

I don't mean to be facetious, merely to point out that this is surely the shortcut to hell. There's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorized version of what India is or should be. There is no one religion or language or caste or region or person or story or book that can

claim to be its sole representative. There are, and can only be, visions of India, various ways of seeing it - honest, dishonest, wonderful, absurd, modern, traditional, male, female. They can be argued over, criticized, praised, scorned, but not banned or broken. Not hunted down.

Railing against the past will not heal us. History has happened. It's over and done with. All we can do is to change its course by encouraging what we love instead of destroying what we don't. There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, re-invented and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it. Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn't matter whether we use them or not. They will destroy us either way.

India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people.

However many garlands we heap on our scientists, however many medals we pin to their chests, the truth is that it's far easier to make a bomb than to educate 400 million people.

According to opinion polls, we're expected to believe that there's a national consensus on the issue. It's official now. Everybody loves the bomb. (Therefore the bomb is good.)

Is it possible for a man who cannot write his own name to understand even the basic, elementary facts about the nature of nuclear weapons? Has anybody told him that nuclear war has nothing at all to do with his received notions of war? Nothing to do with honour, nothing to do with pride. Has anybody bothered to explain to him about thermal blasts, radioactive fallout and the nuclear winter? Are there even words in his language to describe the concepts of enriched uranium, fissile material and critical mass? Or has

his language itself become obsolete? Is he trapped in a time capsule, watching the world pass him by, unable to understand or communicate with it because his language never took into account the horrors that the human race would dream up? Does he not matter at all, this man?

I'm not talking about one man, of course, I'm talking about millions and millions of people who live in this country. This is their land too, you know. They have the right to make an informed decision about its fate and, as far as I can tell, nobody has informed them about anything. The tragedy is that nobody could, even if they wanted to. Truly, literally, there's no language to do it in. This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. Not even a country.

Who the hell conducted those opinion polls? Who the hell is the prime minister to decide whose finger will be on the nuclear button that could turn everything we love – our earth, our skies, our mountains, our plains, our rivers, our cities and villages – to ash in an instant? Who the hell is he to reassure us that there will be no accidents? How does he know? Why should we trust him? What has he ever done to make us trust him? What have any of them ever done to make us trust them?

The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made.

If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God.

It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that You have created.

If you're not religious, then look at it this way. This world of ours is four billion, six hundred million years old.

It could end in an afternoon.

THE GREATER COMMON GOOD

June 1999

"If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country."

--Jawaharlal Nehru, speaking to villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud dam, 1948

I stood on a hill and laughed out loud.

I had crossed the Narmada by boat from Jalsindhi and climbed the headland on the opposite bank from where I could see, ranged across the crowns of low, bald hills, the tribal hamlets of Sikka, Surung, Neemgavan and Domkhedi. I could see their airy, fragile, homes. I could see their fields

and the forests behind them. I could see little children with littler goats scuttling across the landscape like motorised peanuts. I knew I was looking at a civilisation older than Hinduism, slated—sanctioned (by the highest court in the land)—to be drowned this monsoon when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir will rise to submerge it.

Why did I laugh?

Because I suddenly remembered the tender concern with which the Supreme Court judges in Delhi (before vacating the legal stay on further construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam) had enquired whether tribal children in the resettlement colonies would have children's parks to play in. The lawyers representing the government had hastened to assure them that indeed they would, and, what's more, that there were seesaws and slides and swings in every park. I looked up at the endless sky and down at the river rushing past and for a brief, brief moment the absurdity of it all reversed my rage and I laughed. I meant no disrespect.

Let me say at the outset that I'm not a city-basher. I've done my time in a village. I've had first-hand experience of the isolation, the inequity and the potential savagery of it. I'm not an anti- development junkie, nor a proselytiser for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition. What I am, however, is curious. Curiosity took me to the Narmada valley. Instinct told me that this was the big one. The one in which the battle-lines were clearly drawn, the warring armies massed along them. The one in which it would be possible to wade through the congealed morass of hope, anger, information, disinformation, political artifice, engineering ambition, disingenuous socialism, radical activism, bureaucratic subterfuge, misinformed emotionalism and of course the pervasive, invariably dubious, politics of International Aid.

Instinct led me to set aside Joyce and Nabokov, to postpone reading Don DeLillo's big book and substitute it with reports on drainage and irrigation, with journals and books and documentary films about dams and why they're built and what they do.

My first tentative questions revealed that few people know what is really going on in the Narmada valley. Those who know, know a lot. Most know nothing at all. And yet, almost everyone has a passionate opinion. Nobody's neutral. I realised very quickly that I was straying into mined territory.

In India over the last 10 years the fight against the Sardar Sarovar Dam has come to represent far more than the fight for one river. This has been its strength as well as its weakness. Some years ago, it became a debate that captured the popular imagination. That's what raised the stakes and changed the complexion of the battle. From being a fight over the fate of a river valley it began to raise doubts about an entire political system. What is at issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. They are being taken hugely seriously by the State. They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command—the army, the police, the bureaucracy, the courts. And not just answered, but answered unambiguously, in bitter, brutal ways.

For the people of the valley, the fact that the stakes were raised to this degree has meant that their most effective weapon—specific facts about specific issues in this specific valley—has been blunted by the debate on the big issues. The basic premise of the argument has been inflated until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away. Occasionally a disconnected piece of the puzzle floats by—an emotionally charged account

of the government's callous treatment of displaced people; an outburst at how the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), 'a handful of activists', is holding the nation to ransom; a legal correspondent reporting on the progress of the NBA's writ petition in the Supreme Court.

Though there's been a fair amount of writing on the subject, most of it is for a 'special interest' readership. News reports tend to be about isolated aspects of the project. Government documents are classified as 'Secret'. I think it's fair to say that public perception of the issue is pretty crude and is divided, crudely, into two categories:

On the one hand, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of 'Development' versus a sort of neo-Luddite impulse—an irrational, emotional 'Anti-Development' resistance, fuelled by an arcadian, pre-industrial dream. On the other, as a Nehru vs Gandhi contest. This lifts the whole sorry business out of the bog of deceit, lies, false promises and increasingly successful propaganda (which is what it's really about) and confers on it a false legitimacy. It makes out that both sides have the Greater Good of the Nation in mind—but merely disagree about the means to achieve it.

Both interpretations put a tired spin on the dispute. Both stir up emotions that cloud the particular facts of this particular story. Both are indications of how urgently we need new heroes, new kinds of heroes, and how we've overused our old ones (like we overbowl our bowlers).

The Nehru vs Gandhi argument pushes this very contemporary issue back into an old bottle. Nehru and Gandhi were generous men. Their paradigms for development are based on assumptions of inherent morality. Nehru's on the paternal, protective morality of the Soviet-style Centralised State. Gandhi's on the nurturing, maternal morality of romanticised Village

Republics. Both would work perfectly, if only we were better human beings. If only we all wore khadi and suppressed our base urges—sex, shopping, dodging spinning lessons and being unkind to the less fortunate. Fifty years down the line, it's safe to say that we haven't made the grade. We haven't even come close. We need an updated insurance plan against our own basic natures.

It's possible that as a nation we've exhausted our quota of heroes for this century, but while we wait for shiny new ones to come along, we have to limit the damage. We have to support our small heroes. (Of these we have many. Many.) We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that's what the 21st century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it possibly be? It sounds finger-licking good to me.

I was drawn to the valley because I sensed that the fight for the Narmada had entered a newer, sadder phase. I went because writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to kills. My motive was not compassion. It was sheer greed. I was right. I found a story there.

And what a story it is.

"People say that the Sardar Sarovar Dam is an expensive project. But it's bringing drinking water to millions. This is our life-line. Can you put a price on this? Does the air we breathe have a price? We will live. We will drink. We will bring glory to the state of Gujarat."

—Urmilaben Patel, wife of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, speaking at a public rally in Delhi in 1993.

"We will request you to move from your houses after the dam comes up. If you move it will be good. Otherwise we shall release the waters and drown you all."

—Morarji Desai, speaking at a public meeting in the submergence zone of the Pong dam in 1961.

"Why didn't they just poison us? Then we wouldn't have to live in this shit-hole and the government could have survived alone with its precious dam all to itself."

—Ram Bai, whose village was submerged when the Bargi dam was built on the Narmada. She now lives in a slum in Jabalpur.

In the 50 years since Independence, after Nehru's famous "Dams are the Temples of Modern India" speech (one he grew to regret in his own lifetime), his footsoldiers threw themselves into the business of building dams with unnatural fervour. Dam-building grew to be equated with Nation-building. Their enthusiasm alone should have been reason enough to make one suspicious. Not only did they build new dams and new irrigation systems, they took control of small, traditional systems that village communities had managed for thousands of years, and allowed them to atrophy. To compensate the loss, the government built more and more dams. Big ones, little ones, tall ones, short ones. The result of its exertions is that India now boasts of being the world's third largest dam-builder. According to the Central Water Commission, we have 3,600 dams that qualify as Big Dams, 3,300 of them built after Independence. Some 1,000 more are under construction. Yet one-fifth of our population—200 million people—doesn't

have safe drinking water and two-thirds—600 million—lack basic sanitation.

Big Dams started well but have ended badly. There was a time when everybody loved them, everybody had them—the Communists, Capitalists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. There was a time when Big Dams moved men to poetry. Not any longer. All over the world there is a movement growing against Big Dams. In the First World they're being decommissioned, blown up. The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big Dams are obsolete. They're uncool. They're undemocratic. They're a government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They're a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom away from him. They're a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich. Their reservoirs displace huge populations of people leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water-logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes.

Big Dams haven't really lived up to their role as the monuments of Modern Civilisation, emblems of Man's ascendancy over Nature. Monuments are supposed to be timeless, but dams have an all too finite lifetime. They last only as long as it takes Nature to fill them with silt. It's common knowledge now that Big Dams do the opposite of what their Publicity People say they do—the Local Pain for National Gain myth has been blown wide open.

For all these reasons, the dam-building industry in the First World is in trouble and out of work. So it's exported to the Third World in the name of

Development Aid, along with their other waste like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers and banned pesticides.

On the one hand the Indian Government, every Indian Government, rails self-righteously against the First World, and on the other, actually pays to receive their gift-wrapped garbage. Aid is just another praetorian business enterprise. Like Colonialism was. It has destroyed most of Africa. Bangladesh is reeling from its ministrations. We know all this, in numbing detail. Yet in India our leaders welcome it with slavish smiles (and make nuclear bombs to shore up their flagging self-esteem).

Over the last 50 years India has spent Rs 80,000 crore on the irrigation sector alone. Yet there are more drought-prone areas and more flood-prone areas today than there were in 1947. Despite the disturbing evidence of irrigation disasters, dam-induced floods and rapid disenchantment with the Green Revolution (declining yields, degraded land), the government has not commissioned a post- project evaluation of a single one of its 3,600 dams to gauge whether or not it has achieved what it set out to achieve, whether or not the (always phenomenal) costs were justified, or even what the costs actually were.

The Government of India has detailed figures for how many million tonnes of foodgrain or edible oils the country produces and how much more we produce now than we did in 1947. It can tell you how much bauxite is mined in a year or what the total surface area of the National Highways adds up to. It's possible to access minute-to-minute information about the stock exchange or the value of the rupee in the world market. We know how many cricket matches we've lost on a Friday in Sharjah. It's not hard to find out how many graduates India produced, or how many men had vasectomies in any given year. But the Government of India does not have

a figure for the number of people that have been displaced by dams or sacrificed in other ways at the altars of 'National Progress.' Isn't this astounding? How can you measure Progress if you don't know what it costs and who paid for it? How can the 'market' put a price on things—food, clothes, electricity, running water—when it doesn't take into account the real cost of production?

According to a detailed study of 54 Large Dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the average number of people displaced by a Large Dam is 44,182. Admittedly, 54 dams out of 3,300 is not a big enough sample. But since it's all we have, let's try and do some rough arithmetic. A first draft. To err on the side of caution, let's halve the number of people. Or, let's err on the side of abundant caution and take an average of just 10,000 people per Large Dam. It's an improbably low figure, I know, but... never mind. Whip out your calculators. $3,300 \times 10,000 = 33$ million. That's what it works out to. 33 million people. Displaced by big dams alone in the last 50 years. What about those that have been displaced by the thousands of other Development Projects? At a private lecture, N.C. Saxena, Secretary to the Planning Commission, said he thought the number was in the region of 50 million (of which 40 million were displaced by dams). We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It can't be, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. It can't be true. I barely have the courage to say it aloud. To run the risk of sounding like a '60s hippie dropping acid ("It's the System, man!"), or a paranoid schizophrenic with a persecution complex. But it is the System, man. What else can it be?

50 million people.

Go on, Government, quibble. Bargain. Beat it down. Say something. I feel like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave.

Fifty million is more than the population of Gujarat. Almost three times the population of Australia. More than three times the number of refugees that Partition created in India. Ten times the number of Palestinian refugees. The Western world today is convulsed over the future of one million people who have fled from Kosovo.

A huge percentage of the displaced are tribal people (57.6 per cent in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Dam). Include Dalits and the figure becomes obscene. According to the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes it's about 60 per cent. If you consider that tribal people account for only eight per cent, and Dalits 15 per cent, of India's population, it opens up a whole other dimension to the story. The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation Builders. It's like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills. People from another country. Another world. India's poorest people are subsidising the life-styles of her richest.

Did I hear someone say something about the world's biggest democracy?

What has happened to all these millions of people? Where are they now? How do they earn a living? Nobody really knows. (Last month's papers had an account of how tribal people displaced from the Nagarjunasagar Dam Project are selling their babies to foreign adoption agencies. The government intervened and put the babies in two public hospitals where six babies died of neglect.) When it comes to Rehabilitation, the government's priorities are clear. India does not have a National Rehabilitation Policy. According to the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (amended in 1984), the government is not legally bound to provide a displaced person anything but

a cash compensation. Imagine that. A cash compensation, to be paid by an Indian government official to an illiterate tribal man (the women get nothing) in a land where even the postman demands a tip for a delivery! Most tribal people have no formal title to their land and therefore cannot claim compensation anyway. Most tribal people, or let's say most small farmers, have as much use for money as a Supreme Court judge has for a bag of fertiliser.

The millions of displaced people don't exist anymore. When history is written they won't be in it. Not even as statistics. Some of them have subsequently been displaced three and four times—a dam, an artillery proof range, another dam, a uranium mine, a power project. Once they start rolling there's no resting place. The great majority is eventually absorbed into slums on the periphery of our great cities, where it coalesces into an immense pool of cheap construction labour (that builds more projects that displace more people). True, they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they redefine the meaning of liberty.

And still the nightmare doesn't end. They continue to be uprooted even from their hellish hovels by government bulldozers that fan out on clean-up missions whenever elections are comfortably far away and the urban rich get twitchy about hygiene. In cities like Delhi, they run the risk of being shot by the police for shitting in public places—like three slum-dwellers were, not more than two years ago.

In the French Canadian wars of the 1770s, Lord Amherst exterminated most of Canada's Native Indians by offering them blankets infested with the

small-pox virus. Two centuries on, we of the Real India have found less obvious ways of achieving similar ends.

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war. And we, like the citizens of White America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condoning it by looking away. Why? Because we're told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it's being done in the name of Progress, in the name of National Interest (which, of course, is paramount). Therefore gladly, unquestioningly, almost gratefully, we believe what we're told. We believe that it benefits us to believe.

Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze. Do this, because it's important that you understand. If you find reason to disagree, by all means take the other side. But please don't ignore it, don't look away.

It isn't an easy tale to tell. It's full of numbers and explanations. Numbers used to make my eyes glaze over. Not any more. Not since I began to follow the direction in which they point.

Trust me. There's a story here.

It's true that India has progressed. It's true that in 1947, when Colonialism formally ended, India was food deficit. In 1950 we produced 51 million tonnes of food grain. Today we produce close to 200 million tonnes.

It's true that in 1995 the state granaries were overflowing with 30 million tonnes of unsold grain. It's also true that at the same time, 40 per cent of India's population—more than 350 million people—were living below the poverty line. That's more than the country's population in 1947.

Indians are too poor to buy the food their country produces. Indians are being forced to grow the kinds of food they can't afford to eat themselves.

Look at what happened in Kalahandi district in western Orissa, best known for its starvation deaths. In the drought of 1996, people died of starvation (16 according to the state, over a 100 according to the press). Yet that same year rice production in Kalahandi was higher than the national average! Rice was exported from Kalahandi to the Centre.

Certainly India has progressed but most of its people haven't.

Our leaders say that we must have nuclear missiles to protect us from the threat of China and Pakistan. But who will protect us from ourselves?

What kind of country is this? Who owns it? Who runs it? What's going on?

It's time to spill a few State Secrets. To puncture the myth about the inefficient, bumbling, corrupt, but ultimately genial, essentially democratic, Indian State. Carelessness cannot account for 50 million disappeared people. Nor can Karma. Let's not delude ourselves. There is method here, precise, relentless and one hundred per cent man-made.

The Indian State is not a State that has failed. It is a State that has succeeded impressively in what it set out to do. It has been ruthlessly efficient in the way it has appropriated India's resources—its land, its water, its forests, its fish, its meat, its eggs, its air—and redistributed it to a favoured few (in return, no doubt, for a few favours). It is superbly accomplished in the art of protecting its cadres of paid-up elite. Consummate in its methods of pulverising those who inconvenience its intentions. But its finest feat of all is the way it achieves all this and emerges smelling nice. The way it manages to keep its secrets, to contain information that vitally concerns the daily lives of one billion people, in government files, accessible only to the keepers of the flame—ministers, bureaucrats, state engineers, defence strategists. Of

course we make it easy for them, we, its beneficiaries. We take care not to dig too deep. We don't really want to know the grisly details.

Thanks to us, Independence came (and went), elections come and go, but there has been no shuffling of the deck. On the contrary, the old order has been consecrated, the rift fortified. We, the Rulers, won't pause to look up from our heaving table. We don't seem to know that the resources we're feasting on are finite and rapidly depleting. There's cash in the bank, but soon there'll be nothing left to buy with it. The food's running out in the kitchen. And the servants haven't eaten yet. Actually, the servants stopped eating a long time ago.

India lives in her villages, we're told, in every other sanctimonious public speech. That's bullshit. It's just another fig leaf from the government's bulging wardrobe. India doesn't live in her villages. India dies in her villages. India gets kicked around in her villages. India lives in her cities. India's villages live only to serve her cities. Her villagers are her citizens' vassals and for that reason must be controlled and kept alive, but only just.

This impression we have of an overstretched State, struggling to cope with the sheer weight and scale of its problems, is a dangerous one. The fact is that it's creating the problem. It's a giant poverty-producing machine, masterful in its methods of pitting the poor against the very poor, of flinging crumbs to the wretched, so that they dissipate their energies fighting each other, while peace (and advertising) reigns in the Master's Lodgings.

Until this process is recognised for what it is, until it is addressed and attacked, elections—however fiercely they're contested—will continue to be mock battles that serve only to further entrench unspeakable inequity. Democracy (our version of it) will continue to be the benevolent mask behind which a pestilence flourishes unchallenged. On a scale that will make

old wars and past misfortunes look like controlled laboratory experiments. Already 50 million people have been fed into the Development Mill and have emerged as air-conditioners and popcorn and rayon suits—subsidised airconditioners and popcorn and rayon suits (if we must have these nice things, and they are nice, at least we should be made to pay for them).

There's a hole in the flag that needs mending.

It's a sad thing to have to say, but as long as we have faith—we have no hope. To hope, we have to break the faith. We have to fight specific wars in specific ways and we have to fight to win.

Listen then, to the story of the Narmada Valley. Understand it. And, if you wish, enlist. Who knows, it may lead to magic.

The Narmada wells up on the plateau of Amarkantak in the Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh, then winds its way through 1,300 kilometres of beautiful broad-leaved forest and perhaps the most fertile agricultural land in India. Twenty five million people live in the river valley, linked to the ecosystem and to each other by an ancient, intricate web of interdependence (and, no doubt, exploitation). Though the Narmada has been targeted for "water resource development" for more than 50 years now, the reason it has, until recently, evaded being captured and dismembered is because it flows through three states—Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. (Ninety per cent of the river flows through Madhya Pradesh; it merely skirts the northern border of Maharashtra, then flows through Gujarat for about 180 km before emptying into the Arabian sea at Bharuch).

As early as 1946, plans had been afoot to dam the river at Gora in Gujarat. In 1961, Nehru laid the foundation stone for a 49.8 metre high dam—the midget progenitor of the Sardar Sarovar. Around the same time, the Survey of India drew up new, modernised topographical maps of the

river basin. The dam planners in Gujarat studied the new maps and decided that it would be more profitable to build a much bigger dam. But this meant hammering out an agreement first with neighbouring states.

The three states bickered and balked but failed to agree on a water-sharing formula. Eventually, in 1969, the Central Government set up the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal. It took the Tribunal 10 years to announce its Award. The people whose lives were going to be devastated were neither informed nor consulted nor heard.

To apportion shares in the waters, the first, most basic thing the Tribunal had to do, was to find out how much water there was in the river. Usually this can only be estimated accurately if there is at least 40 years of recorded data on the volume of actual flow in the river. Since this was not available, they decided to extrapolate from rainfall data. They arrived at a figure of 27.22 maf (million acre feet). This figure is the statistical bedrock of the Narmada Valley Projects. We are still living with its legacy. It more or less determines the overall design of the Projects—the height, location and number of dams. By inference, it determines the cost of the Projects, how much area will be submerged, how many people will be displaced and what the benefits will be. In 1992 actual observed flow data for the Narmada which was now available for 44 years (1948-1992) showed that the yield from the river was only 22.69 maf—18 per cent less! The Central Water Commission admits that there is less water in the Narmada than had previously been assumed. The Government of India says: It may be noted that clause II (of the Decision of the Tribunal) relating to determination of dependable flow as 28 maf is non-reviewable.(!)

In other words, the Narmada is legally bound by human decree to produce as much water as the Government of India commands it to produce.

It's proponents boast that the Narmada Valley Project is the most ambitious river valley project ever conceived in human history. They plan to build 3,200 dams that will reconstitute the Narmada and her 41 tributaries into a series of step reservoirs—an immense staircase of amenable water. Of these, 30 will be major dams, 135 medium and the rest small. Two of the major dams will be multi-purpose mega dams. The Sardar Sarovar in Gujarat and the Narmada Sagar in Madhya Pradesh will, between them, hold more water than any other reservoir on the Indian subcontinent.

Whichever way you look at it, the Narmada Valley Development Project is Big. It will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India's biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of 25 million people who live in the valley. Yet, even before the Ministry of Environment cleared the project, the World Bank offered to finance the lynchpin of the project—the Sardar Sarovar dam (whose reservoir displaces people in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, but whose benefits go to Gujarat). The Bank was ready with its cheque-book before any costs were computed, before any studies had been done, before anybody had any idea of what the human cost or the environmental impact of the dam would be!

The \$450-million loan for the Sardar Sarovar Projects was sanctioned and in place in 1985. The Ministry of Environment clearance for the project came only in 1987! Talk about enthusiasm. It fairly borders on evangelism.

Can anybody care so much?

Why were they so keen?

Between 1947 and 1994 the Bank received 6,000 applications for loans from around the world. They didn't turn down a single one. Not a single one. Terms like 'Moving money' and 'Meeting loan targets' suddenly begin to make sense.

Today, India is in a situation where it pays back more money to the Bank in interest and repayment instalments than it receives from it. We are forced to incur new debts in order to be able to repay our old ones. According to the World Bank Annual Report, last year (1998), after the arithmetic, India paid the Bank \$478 million more than it received. Over the last five years ('93 to '98) India paid the Bank \$1.475 billion more than it received. The relationship between us is exactly like the relationship between a landless labourer steeped in debt and the local Bania—it is an affectionate relationship, the poor man loves his Bania because he's always there when he's needed. It's not for nothing that we call the world a Global Village. The only difference between the landless labourer and the Government of India is that one uses the money to survive. The other just funnels it into the private coffers of its officers and agents, pushing the country into an economic bondage that it may never overcome.

The International Dam Industry is worth \$20 billion a year. If you follow the trails of big dams the world over, wherever you go—China, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Brazil, Guatemala—you'll rub up against the same story, encounter the same actors: the Iron Triangle (dam-jargon for the nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and dam construction companies), the racketeers who call themselves International Environmental Consultants (who are usually directly employed by or subsidiaries of dam-builders), and, more often than not, the friendly, neighbourhood World Bank. You'll grow to recognise the same inflated rhetoric, the same noble 'Peoples' Dam'

slogans, the same swift, brutal repression that follows the first sign of civil insubordination. (Of late, especially after its experience in the Narmada Valley, the Bank is more cautious about choosing the countries in which it finances projects that involve mass displacement. At present, China is their Most Favoured client. It's the great irony of our times—American citizens protest the massacre in Tiananmen square, but the Bank will use their money to fund the Three Gorges Dam in China which is going to displace 1.3 million people.)

It's a skilful circus and the acrobats know each other well. Occasionally they'll swap parts—a bureaucrat will join the Bank, a Banker will surface as a Project Consultant. At the end of play, a huge percentage of what's called 'Development Aid' is re-channelled back to the countries it came from, masquerading as equipment cost or consultants' fees or salaries to the agencies' own staff. Often 'Aid' is openly 'tied'. (As in the case of the Japanese loan for the Sardar Sarovar Dam, tied to a contract for purchasing turbines from Sumitomo Corporation.) Sometimes the connections are more sleazy. In 1993 Britain financed the Pergau Dam in Malaysia with a subsidised loan of £234 million, despite an Overseas Development Administration report that said that the dam would be a 'bad buy' for Malaysia. It later emerged that the loan was offered to 'encourage' Malaysia to sign a £1.3 billion contract to buy British Arms.

In 1994, UK consultants earned \$2.5 billion on overseas contracts. The second biggest sector of the market after Project Management was writing what are called eias (Environmental Impact Assessments). In the Development racket, the rules are pretty simple. If you get invited by a government to write an eia for a big dam project and you point out a problem (say, for instance, you quibble about the amount of water available

in a river, or, God forbid, you suggest that perhaps the human costs are too high) then you're history. You're an oowc. An Out Of Work Consultant. And

Oops! There goes your Range Rover. There goes your holiday in Tuscany. There goes your children's private boarding school. There's good money in poverty. Plus Perks.

In keeping with Big Dam tradition, concurrent with the construction of the 138.68 metre high Sardar Sarovar dam, began the elaborate government pantomime of conducting studies to estimate the actual project costs and the impact it would have on people and the environment. The World Bank participated whole-heartedly in the charade—occasionally they knitted their brows and raised feeble requests for more information on issues like the resettlement and rehabilitation of what they call paps—Project Affected Persons. (They help, these acronyms, they manage to mutate muscle and blood into cold statistics. paps soon cease to be people.)

The merest crumbs of information satisfied The Bank and they proceeded with the project.

The implicit, unwritten but fairly obvious understanding between the concerned agencies was that whatever the costs—economic, environmental or human—the project would go ahead. They would justify it as they went along. They knew full well that eventually, in a courtroom or to a committee, no argument works as well as a *Fait Accompli*. (Mi' lord, the country is losing two crores a day due to the delay). The government refers to the Sardar Sarovar Projects as the 'Most Studied Project in India', yet the game goes something like this:

When the Tribunal first announced its award, and the Gujarat government announced its plan of how it was going to use its share of water, there was no mention of drinking water for villages in Kutch and Saurashtra, the arid areas of Gujarat. When the project ran into political trouble, the government suddenly discovered the emotive power of Thirst. Suddenly, quenching the thirst of parched throats in Kutch and Saurashtra became the whole point of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (Never mind that water from two rivers—the Sabarmati and the Mahi, both of which are miles closer to Kutch and Saurashtra than the Narmada, have been dammed and diverted to Ahmedabad, Mehsana and Kheda. Neither Kutch nor Saurashtra have seen a drop of it.) Officially the number of people who will be provided drinking water by the Sardar Sarovar Canal fluctuates from 28 million (1983) to 32.5 million (1989)—nice touch, the decimal point!—to 40 million (1992) and down to 25 million (1993).

The number of villages that would receive drinking water was zero in 1979, 4,719 in the early '80s, 7,234 in 1990 and 8,215 in '91. When challenged, the government admitted that the figures for 1991 included 236 uninhabited villages!

Every aspect of the project is approached in this almost cavalier manner, as if it's a family board game. Even when it concerns the lives and futures of vast numbers of people.

In 1979 the number of families that would be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar reservoir was estimated to be a little over 6,000. In 1987 it grew to 12,000. In 1991 it surged to 27,000. In 1992 the government declared that 40,000 families would be affected. Today, it hovers between 40,000 and 41,500. (Of course even this is an absurd figure, because the reservoir isn't

the only thing that displaces people. According to the NBA the actual figure is 85,000 families—about half a million people.)

The estimated cost of the project bounced up from Rs 6,000 crore to Rs 20,000 crore (officially). The NBA says it will cost Rs 40,000 crore. (Half the entire irrigation budget of the whole country over the last fifty years.)

The government claims the Sardar Sarovar Projects will produce 1,450 Mega Watts of power. The thing about multi-purpose dams like the Sardar Sarovar is that their ‘purposes’ (irrigation, power production and flood-control) conflict with each other. Irrigation uses up the water you need to produce power. Flood control requires you to keep the reservoir empty during the monsoon months to deal with an anticipated surfeit of water. And if there’s no surfeit, you’re left with an empty dam. And this defeats the purpose of irrigation, which is to store the monsoon water. It’s like the riddle of trying to ford a river with a fox, a chicken and a bag of grain. The result of these mutually conflicting aims, studies say, is that when the Sardar Sarovar Projects are completed, and the scheme is fully functional, it will end up producing only 3 per cent of the power that its planners say it will. 50 Mega Watts.

In an old war, everybody has an axe to grind. So how do you pick your way through these claims and counter-claims? How do you decide whose estimate is more reliable? One way is to take a look at the track record of Indian dams.

The Bargi Dam near Jabalpur was the first dam on the Narmada to be completed (1990). It cost 10 times more than was budgeted and submerged three times more land than the engineers said it would. About 70,000 people from 101 villages were supposed to be displaced, but when they filled the

reservoir (without warning anybody), 162 villages were submerged. Some of the resettlement sites built by the government were submerged as well. People were flushed out like rats from the land they had lived on for centuries. They salvaged what they could, and watched their houses being washed away. 114,000 people were displaced. There was no rehabilitation policy. Some were given meagre cash compensations. Many got absolutely nothing. A few were moved to government rehabilitation sites. The site at Gorakhpur is, according to government publicity, an 'ideal village'. Between 1990 and 1992, five people died of starvation there. The rest either returned to live illegally in the forests near the reservoir, or moved to slums in Jabalpur. The Bargi Dam irrigates only as much land as it submerged in the first place—and only 5 per cent of the area that its planners claimed it would irrigate. Even that is water-logged.

Time and again, it's the same story—the Andhra Pradesh Irrigation II scheme claimed it would displace 63,000 people. When completed, it displaced 150,000 people. The Gujarat Medium Irrigation II scheme displaced 140,000 people instead of 63,600. The revised estimate of the number of people to be displaced by the Upper Krishna irrigation project in Karnataka is 240,000 against its initial claims of displacing only 20,000.

These are World Bank figures. Not the NBA's. Imagine what this does to our conservative estimate of 33 million.

Construction work on the Sardar Sarovar dam site, which had continued sporadically since 1961, began in earnest in 1988. At the time, nobody, not the government, nor the World Bank were aware that a woman called Medha Patkar had been wandering through the villages slated to be submerged, asking people whether they had any idea of the plans the government had in store for them. When she arrived in the valley all those

years ago, opposing the construction of the dam was the furthest thing from her mind. Her chief concern was that displaced villagers should be resettled in an equitable, humane way. It gradually became clear to her that the government's intentions towards them were far from honourable. By 1986 word had spread and each state had a peoples' organisation that questioned the promises about resettlement and rehabilitation that were being bandied about by government officials. It was only some years later that the full extent of the horror—the impact that the dams would have, both on the people who were to be displaced and the people who were supposed to benefit—began to surface. The Narmada Valley Development Project came to be known as India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster. The various peoples' organisations massed into a single organisation and the Narmada Bachao Andolan—the extraordinary NBA—was born.

In 1988 the NBA formally called for all work on the Narmada Valley Development Projects to be stopped. People declared that they would drown if they had to, but would not move from their homes. Within two years, the struggle had burgeoned and had support from other resistance movements. In September 1989, some 50,000 people gathered in the Valley at Harsud from all over India to pledge to fight Destructive Development. The Dam site and its adjacent areas, already under the Indian Official Secrets Act, was clamped under Section 144 which prohibits the gathering of groups of more than five people. The whole area was turned into a police camp. Despite the barricades, one year later, on September 28, 1990, thousands of villagers made their way on foot and by boat to a little town called Badwani, in Madhya Pradesh, to reiterate their pledge to drown rather than agree to move from their homes. News of the peoples' opposition to the Projects spread to other countries. The Japanese arm of Friends of the Earth

mounted a campaign in Japan that succeeded in getting the Government of Japan to withdraw its 27 billion yen loan to finance the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (The contract for the turbines still holds.) Once the Japanese withdrew, international pressure from various Environmental Activist groups who supported the struggle began to mount on the World Bank.

This of course led to an escalation of repression in the valley. Government policy, described by a particularly articulate minister, was to ‘flood the valley with khaki’.

On Christmas Day in 1990, about 6,000 men and women walked over a hundred kilometres, carrying their provisions and their bedding, accompanying a seven-member sacrificial squad who had resolved to lay down their lives for the river. They were stopped at Ferkuwa on the Gujarat border by battalions of armed police and crowds of people from the city of Baroda, many of whom were hired, some of whom perhaps genuinely believed that the Sardar Sarovar was ‘Gujarat’s life-line’. It was an interesting confrontation. Middle Class Urban India versus a Rural, predominantly Tribal Army. The marching people demanded they be allowed to cross the border and walk to the dam- site. The police refused them passage. To stress their commitment to non-violence, each villager had his or her hands bound together. One by one, they defied the battalions of police. They were beaten, arrested and dragged into waiting trucks in which they were driven off and dumped some miles away, in the wilderness. They just walked back and began all over again.

The confrontation continued for almost two weeks. Finally, on January 7, 1991, the seven members of the sacrificial squad announced they were going on an indefinite hunger strike. Tension rose to dangerous levels. The Indian and International Press, TV camera crews and documentary film- makers

were present in force. Reports appeared in the papers almost every day. Environmental Activists stepped up the pressure in Washington. Eventually, acutely embarrassed by the glare of unfavourable media coverage, the World Bank announced that it would institute an Independent Review of the Sardar Sarovar Projects—unprecedented in the history of Bank Behaviour.

When the news reached the valley, it was received with distrust and uncertainty. The people had no reason to trust the World Bank. But still, it was a victory of sorts. The villagers, understandably upset by the frightening deterioration in the condition of their comrades who had not eaten for 22 days, pleaded with them to call off the fast. On January 28, the fast at Ferkuwa was called off, and the brave, ragged army returned to their homes shouting "Hamare Gaon Mein Hamara Raj!" (Our Rule in Our Villages).

There has been no army quite like this one, anywhere else in the world. In other countries—China (Chairman Mao got a Big Dam for his 77th birthday), Brazil, Malaysia, Guatemala, Paraguay—every sign of revolt has been snuffed out almost before it began. Here in India, it goes on and on. Of course, the State would like to take credit for this too. It would like us to be grateful to it for not crushing the movement completely, for allowing it to exist. After all what is all this, if not a sign of a healthy functioning democracy in which the State has to intervene when its people have differences of opinion?

I suppose that's one way of looking at it. (Is this my cue to cringe and say 'Thankyou, thankyou, for allowing me to write the things I write?')

We don't need to be grateful to the State for permitting us to protest. We can thank ourselves for that. It is we who have insisted on these rights. It is

we who have refused to surrender them. If we have anything to be truly proud of as a people, it is this.

The struggle in the Narmada valley lives, despite the State.

The Indian State makes war in devious ways. Apart from its apparent benevolence, its other big weapon is its ability to wait. To roll with the punches. To wear out the opposition. The State never tires, never ages, never needs a rest. It runs an endless relay.

But fighting people tire. They fall ill, they grow old. Even the young age prematurely. For 20 years now, since the Tribunal's award, the ragged army in the valley has lived with the fear of eviction. For 20 years, in most areas there has been no sign of 'development'—no roads, no schools, no wells, no medical help. For 20 years, it has borne the stigma 'slated for submergence'—so it's isolated from the rest of society (no marriage proposals, no land transactions). They're a bit like the Hibakushas in Japan (the victims of the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their descendants). The 'fruits of modern development', when they finally came, brought only horror. Roads brought surveyors. Surveyors brought trucks. Trucks brought policemen. Policemen brought bullets and beatings and rape and arrest and, in one case, murder. The only genuine 'fruit' of modern development that reached them, reached them inadvertently—the right to raise their voices, the right to be heard. But they have fought for 20 years now. How much longer will they last?

The struggle in the valley is tiring. It's no longer as fashionable as it used to be. The international camera crews and the radical reporters have moved (like the World Bank) to newer pastures. The documentary films have been screened and appreciated. Everybody's sympathy is all used up. But the dam goes on. It's getting higher and higher...

Now, more than ever before, the ragged army needs reinforcements. If we let it die, if we allow the struggle to be crushed, if we allow the people to be punished, we will lose the most precious thing we have: Our spirit, or what's left of it.

"India will go on," they'll tell you, the sage philosophers who don't want to be troubled by piddling Current Affairs. As though 'India' is somehow more valuable than her people.

Old Nazis probably soothe themselves in similar ways.

The war for the Narmada valley is not just some exotic tribal war, or a remote rural war or even an exclusively Indian war. It's a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forests of the world. All sorts of warriors from all over the world, anyone who wishes to enlist, will be honoured and welcomed. Every kind of warrior will be needed. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers, lovers.... The borders are open, folks! Come on in.

Anyway, back to the story.

In June 1991, The World Bank appointed Bradford Morse, a former head of the United Nations Development Program, as Chairman of the Independent Review. His brief was to make a thorough assessment of Sardar Sarovar Projects. He was guaranteed free access to all secret Bank documents relating to the Projects.

In September 1991, Bradford Morse and his team arrived in India. The NBA, convinced that this was yet another set-up, at first refused to meet them. The Gujarat government welcomed the team with a red carpet (and a nod and a wink) as covert allies.

A year later, in June 1992, the historic Independent Review (known also as the Morse Report) was published.

It unpeels the project delicately, layer by layer, like an onion. Nothing was too big, and nothing too small for them to enquire into. They met ministers and bureaucrats, they met ngos working in the area, went from village to village, from resettlement site to resettlement site. They visited the good ones. The bad ones. The temporary ones, the permanent ones. They spoke to hundreds of people. They travelled extensively in the submergence area and the command area. They went to Kutch and other drought-hit areas in Gujarat. They commissioned their own studies. They examined every aspect of the project: hydrology and water management, the upstream environment, sedimentation, catchment area treatment, the downstream environment, the anticipation of likely problems in the command area—water-logging, salinity, drainage, health, the impact on wildlife.

What the Morse Report reveals, in temperate, measured tones (which I admire, but cannot achieve) is scandalous. It is the most balanced, unbiased, yet damning indictment of the relationship between the Indian State and the World Bank. Without appearing to, perhaps even without intending to, the report cuts through to the cosy core, to the space where they live together and love each other (somewhere between what they say and what they do).

The core recommendation of the 357-page Independent Review was unequivocal and wholly unexpected:

"We think the Sardar Sarovar Projects as they stand are flawed, that resettlement and rehabilitation of all those displaced by the Projects is not possible under prevailing circumstances, and that environmental impacts of the Projects have not been properly considered or adequately addressed. Moreover we believe that the Bank shares responsibility with the borrower for the situation that has developed.... It seems clear that engineering and economic imperatives have driven the Projects to the exclusion of human

and environmental concerns.... India and the states involved...have spent a great deal of money. No one wants to see this money wasted. But we caution that it may be more wasteful to proceed without full knowledge of the human and environmental costs. We have decided that it would be irresponsible for us to patch together a series of recommendations on implementation when the flaws in the Projects are as obvious as they seem to us. As a result, we think that the wisest course would be for the Bank to step back from the Projects and consider them afresh. The failure of the Bank's incremental strategy should be acknowledged."

Four committed, knowledgeable, truly independent men—they do a lot to make up for faith eroded by hundreds of other venal ones who are paid to do similar jobs.

The Bank, however, was still not prepared to give up. It continued to fund the project. Two months after the Independent Review, it sent out the Pamela Cox Committee which did exactly what the Morse Review had cautioned the Bank against. It suggested a sort of patchwork remedy to try and salvage the operation. In October 1992, on the recommendation of the Pamela Cox Committee, the Bank asked the Indian Government to meet some minimum, primary conditions within a period of six months. Even that much, the government couldn't do. Finally, on March 30, 1993, the World Bank pulled out of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (Actually, technically, on March 29, one day before the deadline they'd been given, the Indian Government asked the World Bank to withdraw). Details. Details.

No one has ever managed to make the World Bank step back from a project before. Least of all a rag-tag army of the poorest people in one of the world's poorest countries. A group of people whom Lewis Preston, then President of the Bank, never managed to fit into his busy schedule when he

visited India. Sacking The Bank was and is a huge moral victory for the people in the valley.

The euphoria didn't last. The government of Gujarat announced that it was going to raise the \$200 million shortfall on its own and continue with the project. During the period of the Review, and after it was published, confrontation between people and the Authorities continued unabated in the valley—humiliation, arrests, lathicharges. Indefinite fasts terminated by temporary promises and permanent betrayals. People who had agreed to leave the valley and be resettled had begun returning to their villages from their resettlement sites. In Manibeli, a village in Maharashtra and one of the nerve-centres of the resistance, hundreds of villagers participated in a Monsoon Satyagraha. In 1993, families in Manibeli remained in their homes as the waters rose. They clung to wooden posts with their children in their arms and refused to move. Eventually policemen prised them loose and dragged them away. The NBA declared that if the government did not agree to review the project, on August 6, 1993, a band of activists would drown themselves in the rising waters of the reservoir. On August 5, the Union Government constituted yet another committee called the Five Member Group (fmg) to review the Sardar Sarovar Projects.

The government of Gujarat refused them entry into Gujarat. The fmg report (a "desk report") was submitted the following year. It tacitly endorsed the grave concerns of the Independent Review. But it made no difference. Nothing changed. This is another of the State's tested strategies. It kills you with committees.

In February 1994, the government of Gujarat ordered the permanent closure of the sluice-gates of the dam.

In May 1994, the NBA filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court questioning the whole basis of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and seeking a stay on the construction.

That monsoon, when the water level in the reservoir rose and smashed down on the other side of the dam, 65,000 cubic metres of concrete and 35,000 cubic metres of rock were torn out of a stilling basin, leaving a 65-metre crater. The riverbed powerhouse was flooded. The damage was kept secret for months. Reports started appearing about it in the press only in January 1995.

In early 1995, on the grounds that the rehabilitation of displaced people had not been adequate, the Supreme Court ordered work on the dam to be suspended until further notice. The height of the dam was 80 metres above Mean Sea Level.

Meanwhile, work had begun on two more dams in Madhya Pradesh: the Narmada Sagar (without which the Sardar Sarovar loses 17 to 30 per cent of its efficiency) and the Maheshwar Dam. The Maheshwar Dam is next in line, upstream from the Sardar Sarovar. The government of Madhya Pradesh has signed a Power Purchase contract with a private company—S. Kumars, one of India's leading textile magnates.

Tension in the Sardar Sarovar area abated temporarily and the battle moved upstream to Maheshwar, in the fertile plains of Nimad.

The case pending in the Supreme Court led to a palpable easing of repression in the valley. Construction work had stopped on the dam, but the rehabilitation charade continued. Forests (slated for submergence) continued to be cut and carted away in trucks, forcing people who depended on them for a livelihood to move out.

Even though the dam is nowhere near its eventual, projected height, its impact on the environment and the people living along the river is already severe.

Around the dam site and the nearby villages, the number of cases of malaria has increased six-fold.

Several kilometres upstream from the Sardar Sarovar dam, huge deposits of silt, hip-deep and over two hundred metres wide, has cut off access to the river. Women carrying water pots, now have to walk miles, literally miles, to find a negotiable entry point. Cows and goats get stranded in it and die. The little single-log boats that tribal people use have become unsafe on the irrational circular currents caused by the barricade downstream.

Further upstream, where the silt deposits have not yet become a problem, there's another problem. Landless people, (predominantly tribals and Dalits) have traditionally cultivated rice, fruit and vegetables on the rich, shallow silt banks the river leaves when it recedes in the dry months. Every now and then, the engineers manning the Bargi Dam (way upstream, near Jabalpur) release water from the reservoir without warning. Downstream, the water level in the river suddenly rises. Hundreds of families have had their crops washed away several times, leaving them with no livelihood.

Suddenly they can't trust their river anymore. It's like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing. But I'll be rapped on the knuckles if I continue in this vein. When we're discussing the Greater Common Good there's no place for sentiment. One must stick to facts. Forgive me for letting my heart wander.

The governments of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra continue to be completely cavalier in their dealings with displaced people. The government

of Gujarat has a rehabilitation policy (on paper) that makes the other two states look medieval. It boasts of being the best rehabilitation package in the world. It offers land for land to displaced people from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and recognises the claims of ‘encroachers’ (usually tribal people with no papers). The deception, however, lies in its definition of who qualifies as ‘Project Affected’.

In point of fact, the government of Gujarat hasn’t even managed to rehabilitate people from its own 19 villages slated for submergence, let alone the rest of the 226 in the other two states. The inhabitants of these 19 villages have been scattered to 175 separate rehabilitation sites. Social links have been smashed, communities broken up.

In practice, the resettlement story (with a few ‘ideal village’ exceptions) continues to be one of callousness and broken promises. Some people have been given land, others haven’t. Some have land that is stony and uncultivable. Some have land that is irredeemably water-logged. Some have been driven out by landowners who sold land to the government but haven’t been paid yet.

Some who were resettled on the peripheries of other villages have been robbed, beaten and chased away by their host villagers. There have been occasions when displaced people from two different dam projects have been allotted contiguous lands. In one case, displaced people from three dams—the Ukai Dam, the Sardar Sarovar Dam and the Karjan Dam—were resettled in the same area. In addition to fighting amongst themselves for resources—water, grazing land, jobs—they had to fight a group of landless labourers who had been sharecropping the land for absentee landlords who had subsequently sold it to the government.

There's another category of displaced people—people whose lands have been acquired by the government for Resettlement Sites. There's a pecking order even amongst the wretched—Sardar Sarovar 'oustees' are more glamorous than other 'oustees' because they're occasionally in the news and have an ongoing case in court. (In other development projects, where there's no press, no NBA, no court case, there are no records. The displaced leave no trail at all.)

In several resettlement sites, people have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in winter. Some of them are located in dry river beds which, during the monsoon, turn into fast-flowing drifts. I've been to some of these 'sites'. I've seen film footage of others: shivering children, perched like birds on the edges of charpais, while swirling waters enter their tin homes. Frightened, fevered eyes watch pots and pans carried through the doorway by the current, floating out into the flooded fields, thin fathers swimming after them to retrieve what they can.

When the waters recede they leave ruin. Malaria, diarrhoea, sick cattle stranded in the slush. The ancient teak beams dismantled from their previous homes, carefully stacked away like postponed dreams, now spongy, rotten and unusable.

Forty households were moved from Manibeli to a resettlement site in Maharashtra. In the first year, 38 children died.

In today's papers (Indian Express, April 26, '99) there's a report about nine deaths in a single rehabilitation site in Gujarat. In the course of a week. That's 1.2875 paps a day, if you're counting.

Many of those who have been resettled are people who have lived all their lives deep in the forest with virtually no contact with money and the modern

world. Suddenly they find themselves left with the option of starving to death or walking several kilometres to the nearest town, sitting in the marketplace (both men and women), offering themselves as wage labour, like goods on sale.

Instead of a forest from which they gathered everything they needed—food, fuel, fodder, rope, gum, tobacco, tooth powder, medicinal herbs, housing material—they earn between 10 and 20 rupees a day with which to feed and keep their families. Instead of a river, they have a hand-pump. In their old villages, they had no money, but they were insured. If the rains failed, they had the forests to turn to. The river to fish in. Their livestock was their fixed deposit. Without all this, they're a heartbeat away from destitution.

In Vadaj, a resettlement site I visited near Baroda, the man who was talking to me rocked his sick baby in his arms, clumps of flies gathered on its sleeping eyelids. Children collected around us, taking care not to burn their bare skin on the scorching tin walls of the shed they call a home. The man's mind was far away from the troubles of his sick baby. He was making me a list of the fruit he used to pick in the forest. He counted 48 kinds. He told me that he didn't think he or his children would ever be able to afford to eat any fruit again. Not unless he stole it. I asked him what was wrong with his baby. He said it would be better for the baby to die than to have to live like this. I asked what the baby's mother thought about that. She didn't reply. She just stared.

For the people who've been resettled, everything as to be re-learned. Every little thing, every big thing: from shitting and pissing (where d'you do it when there's no jungle to hide you?) to buying a bus ticket, to learning a new language, to understanding money. And worst of all, learning to be

supplicants. Learning to take orders. Learning to have Masters. Learning to answer only when you're addressed.

In addition to all this, they have to learn how to make written representations (in triplicate) to the Grievance Redressal Committee or the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam for any particular problems they might have. Recently, 3,000 people came to Delhi to protest their situation—travelling overnight by train, living on the blazing streets. The President wouldn't meet them because he had an eye infection. Maneka Gandhi, the Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, wouldn't meet them but asked for a written representation (Dear Maneka, Please don't build the dam, Love, The People). When the representation was handed to her she scolded the little delegation for not having written it in English.

From being self-sufficient and free, to being impoverished and yoked to the whims of a world you know nothing, nothing about—what d'you suppose it must feel like? Would you like to trade your beach house in Goa for a hovel in Paharganj? No? Not even for the sake of the Nation?

Truly, it is just not possible for a State Administration, any State Administration, to carry out the rehabilitation of a people as fragile as this, on such an immense scale. It's like using a pair of hedge- shears to trim an infant's fingernails. You can't do it without shearing its fingers off. Land for land sounds like a reasonable swap, but how do you implement it? How do you uproot 200,000 people (the official blinkered estimate) of which 117,000 are tribal people, and relocate them in a humane fashion? How do you keep their communities intact, in a country where every inch of land is fought over, where almost all litigation pending in courts has to do with land disputes?

Where is all this fine, unoccupied but arable land that is waiting to receive these intact communities?

The simple answer is that there isn't any. Not even for the 'officially' displaced of this one dam. What about the rest of the 3,299 dams?

What about the remaining thousands of paps earmarked for annihilation? Shall we just put the Star of David on their doors and get it over with?

Jalud, in the Nimad plains of Madhya Pradesh, is the first of 60 villages that will be submerged by the reservoir of the Maheshwar dam. Jalud is not a tribal village, and is therefore riven with the shameful caste divisions that are the scourge of every ordinary Hindu village. A majority of the land-owning farmers (the ones who qualify as paps) are Rajputs. They farm some of the most fertile soil in India. Their houses are piled with sacks of wheat and daal and rice. They boast so much about the things they grow on their land that if it weren't so tragic, it could get on your nerves. Their houses have already begun to crack with the impact of the dynamiting on the dam site.

The 12 predominantly Dalit families who had small holdings in the vicinity of the dam site had their land acquired. They told me how when they objected, cement was poured into their water pipes, their standing crops were bulldozed and the police occupied the land by force. All 12 families are now landless and work as wage labour.

The area that the people of Jalud are going to be moved to is a few kilometres inland, away from the river, adjoining a predominantly Dalit and tribal village called Samraj. I saw the huge tract of land that had been marked off for them. It was a hard, stony hillock with stubbly grass and scrub, on which truckloads of silt was being unloaded and spread out in a thin layer to make it look like rich, black cotton soil. The story goes like this:

on behalf of the S. Kumars (Textile Tycoons turned Nation Builders) the District Magistrate acquired the hillock, which was actually village common grazing land that belonged to the people of Samraj. In addition to this, the land of 10 Dalit villagers was acquired. No compensation was paid.

The villagers, whose main source of income was their livestock, had to sell their goats and buffalos because they no longer had anywhere to graze them. Their only remaining source of income lies (lay) on the banks of a small lake on the edge of the village. In summer, when the water level recedes, it leaves a shallow ring of rich silt on which the villagers grow (grew) rice, melons and cucumber.

The S. Kumars have excavated this silt, to cosmetically cover the stony grazing ground (that the Rajputs of Jalud don't want). The banks of the lake are now steep and uncultivable.

The already impoverished people of Samraj have been left to starve, while this photo-opportunity is being readied for German funders and Indian courts and anybody else who cares to pass that way.

This is how India works. This is the genesis of the Maheshwar dam. The story of the first village. What will happen to the other 59? May bad luck pursue this dam. May bulldozers turn upon the Textile Tycoons.

Nothing can justify this kind of behaviour.

In circumstances like these, to even entertain a debate about Rehabilitation is to take the first step towards setting aside the Principles of Justice. Resettling 200,000 people in order to take (or pretend to take) drinking water to 40 million—there's something very wrong with the scale of operations here. This is Fascist Maths. It strangles stories. Bludgeons detail. And manages to blind perfectly reasonable people with its spurious, shining vision.

When I arrived on the banks of the Narmada in late March (1999), it was a month after the Supreme Court suddenly vacated the stay on construction work of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. I had read pretty much everything I could lay my hands on (all those ‘secret’ Government documents). I had a clear idea of the lay of the land—of what had happened where and when and to whom. The story played itself out before my eyes like a tragic film whose actors I’d already met. Had I not known its history, nothing would have made sense. Because in the valley there are stories within stories and it’s easy to lose the clarity of rage in the sludge of other peoples’ sorrow.

I ended my journey in Kevadia Colony, where it all began. Thirty-eight years ago, this is where the government of Gujarat decided to locate the infrastructure it would need for starting work on the dam: guest houses, office blocks, accommodation for engineers and their staff, roads leading to the dam site, warehouses for construction material.

It is located on the cusp of what is now the Sardar Sarovar reservoir and the Wonder Canal, Gujarat’s ‘life-line’ , which is going to quench the thirst of millions.

Nobody knows this, but Kevadia Colony is the key to the World. Go there, and secrets will be revealed to you.

In the winter of 1961, a government officer arrived in a village called Kothie and informed the villagers that some of their land would be needed to construct a helipad. In a few days a bulldozer arrived and flattened standing crops. The villagers were made to sign papers and were paid a sum of money, which they assumed was payment for their destroyed crops. When the helipad was ready, a helicopter landed on it, and out came Prime Minister Nehru. Most of the villagers couldn’t see him because he was surrounded by policemen. Nehru made a speech. Then he pressed a button

and there was an explosion on the other side of the river. After the explosion he flew away. That was the inauguration of the earliest avatar of the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Could Nehru have known when he pressed that button that he had unleashed an incubus?

After Nehru left, the government of Gujarat arrived in strength. It acquired 1,600 acres of land from 950 families from six villages. The people were Tadvī tribals, but because of their proximity to the city of Baroda, not entirely unversed in the ways of a market economy. They were sent notices and told that they would be paid cash compensations and given jobs on the dam site. Then the nightmare began. Trucks and bulldozers rolled in. Forests were felled, standing crops destroyed. Everything turned into a whirl of jeeps and engineers and cement and steel. Mohan Bhai Tadvī watched eight acres of his land with standing crops of jowar, toovar and cotton being levelled. Overnight he became a landless labourer. Three years later he received his cash compensation of Rs 250 an acre in three instalments.

Dersukh Bhai Vesa Bhai's father was given Rs 3,500 for his house and five acres of land with its standing crops and all the trees on it. He remembers walking all the way to Rajpipla (the district headquarters) as a little boy, holding his father's hand. He remembers how terrified they were when they were called into the Tehsildar's office. They were made to surrender their compensation notices and sign a receipt. They were illiterate, so they didn't know how much the receipt was made out for.

Everybody had to go to Rajpipla but they were always summoned on different days, one by one. So they couldn't exchange information or compare amounts.

Gradually, out of the dust and bulldozers, an offensive, diffuse configuration emerged. Kevadia Colony. Row upon row of ugly cement flats, offices, guest houses, roads. All the graceless infrastructure of Big Dam construction. The villagers' houses were dismantled and moved to the periphery of the colony, where they remain today, squatters on their own land. Those that created trouble were intimidated by the police and the Construction Company. The villagers told me that in the Contractor's headquarters they have a 'lock-up' like a police lock-up, where recalcitrant villagers are incarcerated and beaten.

The people who were evicted to build Kevadia Colony do not qualify as 'Project-Affected' in Gujarat's Rehabilitation package.

Some of them work as servants in the officers' bungalows and waiters in the guest house built on the land where their own houses once stood. Can anything be more poignant?

Those who had some land left, tried to cultivate it, but the Kevadia municipality introduced a scheme in which they brought in pigs to eat uncollected refuse on the streets. The pigs stray into the villagers' fields and destroy their crops.

In 1992, after 30 years, each family has been offered a sum of Rs 12,000 per hectare, upto a maximum of Rs 36,000, provided they agree to leave their homes and go away! Yet 40 per cent of the land that was acquired is lying unused. The government refuses to return it. The 11 acres acquired from Deviben, who is a widow now, have been given over to the Swami Narayan Trust (a big religious sect). On a small portion of it, the Trust runs a little school. The rest it cultivates, while Deviben watches through the barbed wire fence. On the 200 acres acquired in the village of Gora, villagers were evicted and blocks of flats were built. They lay empty for years.

Eventually the government hired it for a nominal fee to Jai Prakash Associates, the dam contractors, who, the villagers say, sub-let it privately for Rs 32,000 a month. (Jai Prakash Associates, the biggest dam contractors in the country, the real nation-builders, own the Siddharth Continental and the Vasant Continental in Delhi.)

On an area of about 30 acres there is an absurd cement pwd ‘replica’ of the ancient Shoolpaneshwar temple that was submerged in the reservoir. The same political formation that plunged a whole nation into a bloody, medieval nightmare because it insisted on destroying an old mosque to dig up a non-existent temple, thinks nothing of submerging a hallowed pilgrimage route and hundreds of temples that have been worshipped in for centuries.

It thinks nothing of destroying the sacred hills and groves, the places of worship, the ancient homes of the gods and demons of tribal people.

It thinks nothing of submerging a valley that has yielded fossils, microliths and rock paintings, the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age.

What can one say?

In Kevadia Colony, the most barbaric joke of all is the wildlife museum. The Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary Interpretation Centre gives you a quick, comprehensive picture of the government’s commitment to Conservation.

The Sardar Sarovar reservoir, when the dam is at its full height, is going to submerge about 13,000 hectares of prime forest land. (In anticipation of submergence, the forest began to be felled many greedy years ago). Environmentalists and conservationists were quite rightly alarmed at the extent of loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitat that the submergence would

cause. To mitigate this loss, the government decided to expand the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary that straddles the dam on the south side of the river. There is a hare-brained scheme that envisages drowning animals from the submerged forests swimming their way to ‘wildlife corridors’ that will be created for them, and setting up home in the New! Improved! Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary. Presumably wildlife and biodiversity can be protected and maintained only if human activity is restricted and traditional rights to use forest resources curtailed. About 40,000 tribal people from 101 villages within the boundaries of the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary depend on the forest for a livelihood. They will be ‘persuaded’ to leave. They are not included in the definition of Project Affected.

Where will they go? I imagine you know by now.

Whatever their troubles in the real world, in the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary Interpretation Centre (where an old stuffed leopard and a mouldy sloth bear have to make do with a shared corner) the tribal people have a whole room to themselves. On the walls there are clumsy wooden carvings— government approved tribal art, with signs that say ‘Tribal Art’. In the centre, there is a life-sized thatched hut with the door open. The pot’s on the fire, the dog is asleep on the floor and all’s well with the world. Outside, to welcome you, are Mr and Mrs Tribal. A lumpy, papier mache couple, smiling.

Smiling. They’re not even permitted the grace of rage. That’s what I can’t get over.

Oh, but have I got it wrong? What if they’re smiling voluntarily, bursting with National Pride? Brimming with the joy of having sacrificed their lives to bring drinking water to thirsty millions in Gujarat?

For 20 years now, the people of Gujarat have waited for the water they believe the Wonder Canal will bring them. For years the government of Gujarat has invested 85 per cent of the state's irrigation budget into the Sardar Sarovar Projects. Every smaller, quicker, local, more feasible scheme has been set aside for the sake of this. Election after election has been contested and won on the 'water ticket'. Everyone's hopes are pinned to the Wonder Canal. Will she fulfil Gujarat's dreams?

From the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the Narmada flows through 180 km of rich lowland, into the Arabian sea in Bharuch. What the Wonder Canal does, more or less, is to re-route most of the river, turning it almost 90 degrees northward. It's a pretty drastic thing to do to a river. The Narmada estuary in Bharuch is one of the last known breeding place of the Hilsa, probably the hottest contender for India's favourite fish. The Stanley Dam wiped out Hilsa from the Cauvery River in South India, and Pakistan's Ghulam Mohammed dam destroyed its spawning area on the Indus. Hilsa, like the salmon, is an anadromous fish—born in freshwater, migrating to the ocean as a smolt and returning to the river to spawn. The drastic reduction in water flow, the change in the chemistry of the water because of all the sediment trapped behind the dam, will radically alter the ecology of the estuary and modify the delicate balance of fresh water and sea water which is bound to affect the spawning. At present, the Narmada estuary produces 13,000 tonnes of Hilsa and freshwater prawn (which also breed in brackish water). About 10,000 fisher families depend on it for a living.

The Morse Committee was appalled to discover that no studies had been done of the downstream environment—no documentation of the riverine ecosystem, its seasonal changes, biological species or the pattern of how its resources are used. The dam builders had no idea what the impact of the

dam would be on the people and the environment downstream, let alone any ideas on what steps to take to mitigate it.

The government simply says that it will alleviate the loss of Hilsa fisheries by stocking the reservoir with hatchery-bred fish. (Who'll control the reservoir? Who'll grant the commercial fishing to its favourite paying customers?) The only hitch is that so far, scientists have not managed to breed Hilsa artificially. The rearing of Hilsa depends on getting spawn from wild adults, which will, in all likelihood, be eliminated by the dam. Dams have either eliminated or endangered one-fifth of the world's freshwater fish.

So! Quiz question—where will the 40,000 fisherfolk go?

E-mail your answers to the Government that Cares dot com.

At the risk of losing readers, (I've been warned several times—'How can you write about irrigation? Who the hell is interested?') let me tell you what the Wonder Canal is—and what she's meant to achieve. Be interested, if you want to snatch your future back from the sweaty palms of the Iron Triangle.

Most rivers in India are monsoon-fed. 80-85 per cent of the flow takes place during the rainy months—usually between June and September. The purpose of a dam, an irrigation dam, is to store monsoon water in its reservoir and then use it judiciously for the rest of the year, distributing it across dry land through a system of canals. The area of land irrigated by the canal network is called the command area. How will the command area, accustomed only to seasonal irrigation, its entire ecology designed for that single pulse of monsoon rain, react to being irrigated the whole year round? Perennial canal irrigation does to soil roughly what anabolic steroids do to the human body. Steroids can turn an ordinary athlete into an Olympic medal-winner, perennial irrigation can convert soil which produced only a

single crop a year into soil that yields several crops a year. Lands on which farmers traditionally grew crops that don't need a great deal of water (maize, millet, barley, a whole range of pulses) suddenly yield water-guzzling cash crops—cotton, rice, soya bean, and the biggest guzzler of all (like those finned '50s cars), sugarcane. This completely alters traditional crop-patterns in the command area. People stop growing things they can afford to eat; start growing things they can only afford to sell. By linking themselves to the 'market' they lose control over their lives.

Unfortunately, ecologically, this is a poisonous payoff. Even if the markets hold out, the soil doesn't. Over time it becomes too poor to support the extra demands made on it. Gradually, in the way the steroid-using athlete becomes an invalid, the soil becomes depleted and degraded, the agricultural yields begin to wind down. In India, land irrigated by well water is now almost twice as productive as land irrigated by canals. Certain kinds of soil are less suitable for perennial irrigation than others. Perennial canal irrigation raises the level of the water-table. As the water moves up through the soil, it absorbs salts. Saline water is drawn to the surface by capillary action, and the land becomes water-logged. The 'logged' water (to coin a phrase) is then breathed into the atmosphere by plants, causing an even greater concentration of salts in the soil. When the concentration of salts in the soil reaches one per cent, that soil becomes toxic to plant life. This is what's called salinisation.

A study by the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University says that one-fifth of the world's irrigated land is salt-affected.

By the mid-'80s, 25 million of the 37 million hectares under irrigation in Pakistan was estimated to be either salinised or water-logged or both. In

India the estimates vary between 6 and 10 million hectares. According to 'secret' government studies, more than 52 per cent of the Sardar Sarovar command area is prone to water-logging and salinisation.

And that's not the end of the bad news.

The 460-km long, concrete-lined Sardar Sarovar Wonder Canal and its 75,000 km network of branch canals and sub-branch canals is designed to irrigate a total of two million hectares of land spread over 12 districts. The districts of Kutch and Saurashtra (the billboards of Gujarat's Thirst campaign) are at the very tail end of this network.

The system of canals superimposes an arbitrary concrete grid on the existing pattern of natural drainage in the command area. It's a little like reorganising the pattern of reticulate veins on the surface of a leaf. When a canal cuts across the path of a natural drain, it blocks the natural flow of the seasonal water and leads to water-logging. The engineering solution to this is to map the pattern of natural drainage in the area and replace it with an alternate, artificial drainage system that is built in conjunction with the canals. The problem, as you can imagine, is that doing this is enormously expensive. The cost of drainage is not included as part of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. It usually isn't, in most irrigation projects. Here's why.

David Hopper, the World Bank vice-president for South Asia, has admitted that the Bank does not usually include the cost of drainage in its irrigation projects in South Asia because irrigation projects with adequate drainage are not economically viable. It costs five times as much to provide adequate drainage as it does to irrigate the same amount of land. The Bank's solution to the problem is to put in the irrigation system and wait for salinity and water-logging to set in. When all the money's spent, and the land is devastated, and the people are in despair, who should pop by? Why, the

friendly neighbourhood Banker! And what's that bulge in his pocket? Could it be a loan for a Drainage Project?

In Pakistan the World Bank financed the Tarbela (1977) and Mangla Dam (1967) Projects on the Indus. The command areas are water-logged. Now The Bank has given Pakistan a \$785 million loan for a drainage project. In India, in Punjab and Haryana it's doing the same.

Irrigation without drainage is like having a system of arteries and no veins. Pretty damn pointless.

Since the World Bank stepped back from the Sardar Sarovar Projects, it's a little unclear where the money for the drainage is going to come from. This hasn't deterred the government from going ahead with the Canal work. The result is that even before the dam is ready, before the Wonder Canal has been commissioned, before a single drop of irrigation water has been delivered, water-logging has set in. Among the worst affected areas are the resettlement colonies.

There is a difference between the planners of the Sardar Sarovar irrigation scheme and the planners of previous projects. At least they acknowledge that water-logging and salinisation are real problems, and need to be addressed.

Their solutions, however, are corny enough to send a Hoollock Gibbon to a hooting hospital.

They plan to have a series of electronic groundwater sensors placed in every 100 sq km of the command area. (That works out to about 1,800 ground sensors). These will be linked to a central computer which will analyse the data and send out commands to the canal heads to stop water flowing into areas that show signs of water-logging. A network of 'Only-irrigation', 'Only-drainage' and 'Irrigation-cum-drainage' tubewells will be

sunk, and electronically synchronised by the central computer. The saline water will be pumped out, mixed with mathematically computed quantities of freshwater and recirculated into a network of surface and sub-surface drains (for which more land will be acquired). To achieve the irrigation efficiency that they claim they'll achieve, according to a study done by Dr Rahul Ram for Kalpavriksh, 82 per cent of the water that goes into the Wonder Canal network will have to be pumped out again!

They've never implemented an electronic irrigation scheme before, not even as a pilot project. It hasn't occurred to them to experiment with some already degraded land, just to see if it works. No, they'll use our money to install it over the whole of the 2 million hectares and then see if it works. What if it doesn't? If it doesn't, it won't matter to the planners. They'll still draw the same salaries. They'll still get their pension and their gratuity and whatever else you get when you retire from a career of inflicting mayhem on a people.

How can it possibly work? It's like sending in a rocket scientist to milk a troublesome cow. How can they manage a gigantic electronic irrigation system when they can't even line the walls of the canals without having them collapse and cause untold damage to crops and people?

When they can't even prevent the Big Dam itself from breaking off in bits when it rains?

To quote from one of their own studies: "The design, the implementation and management of the integration of groundwater and surface water in the above circumstance is complex."

Agreed. To say the least. Their recommendation of how to deal with the complexity: "It will only be possible to implement such a system if all groundwater and surface water supplies are managed by a single authority."

Aha!

It's beginning to make sense now. Who'll own the water? The Single Authority. Who'll sell the water? The Single Authority. Who'll profit from the sales? The Single Authority. The Single Authority has a scheme whereby it will sell water by the litre, not to individuals but to farmers' cooperatives (which don't exist just yet, but no doubt the Single Authority can create Cooperatives and force farmers to cooperate?). Computer water, unlike ordinary river water, is expensive. Only those who can afford it will get it.

Gradually, small farmers will get edged out by big farmers, and the whole cycle of uprootment will begin all over again.

The Single Authority, because it owns the computer water, will also decide who will grow what. It says that farmers getting computer water will not be allowed to grow sugarcane because they'll use up the share of the thirsty millions at the tail end of the canal. But the Single Authority has already given licences to 10 large sugar mills right near the head of the canal. On an earlier occasion, the Single Authority said only 30 per cent of the command area of the Ukai Dam would be used for sugarcane. But sugarcane grows on 75 per cent of it (and 30 per cent is water-logged). In Maharashtra, thanks to a different branch of the Single Authority, the politically powerful sugar lobby that occupies one-tenth of the state's irrigated land uses half the state's irrigation water.

In addition to the sugar growers, the Single Authority has recently announced a scheme that envisages a series of five-star hotels, golf-courses and water parks that will come up along the Wonder Canal. What earthly reason could possibly justify this?

The Single Authority says it's the only way to raise money to complete the project!

I really worry about those millions of good people in Kutch and Saurashtra.

Will the water ever reach them?

First of all, we know that there's a lot less water in the river than the Single Authority claims there is.

Second of all, in the absence of the Narmada Sagar Dam, the irrigation benefits of the Sardar Sarovar drop by a further 17-30 per cent.

Third of all, the irrigation efficiency of the Wonder Canal (the actual amount of water delivered by the system) has been arbitrarily fixed at 60 per cent. The highest irrigation efficiency in India, taking into account system leaks and surface evaporation, is 35 per cent. This means it's likely that only half of the command area will be irrigated. Which half? The first half.

Fourth, to get to Kutch and Saurashtra, the Wonder Canal has to negotiate its way past the 10 sugar mills, the golf-courses, the five-star hotels, the water parks and the cash-crop growing, politically powerful, Patel-rich districts of Baroda, Ahmedabad, Kheda, Gandhinagar and Mehsana. (Already, in complete contravention of its own directives, the Single Authority has allotted the city of Baroda a sizeable quantity of water. When Baroda gets, can Ahmedabad be left behind? The political clout of powerful urban centres in Gujarat will ensure they get their share.)

Fifth, even in the (one hundred per cent) unlikely event that water gets there, it has to be piped and distributed to those 8,000 waiting villages.

It's worth knowing that of the one billion people in the world who have no access to safe drinking water, 855 million live in rural areas. This is because the cost of installing an energy-intensive network of thousands of kilometres of pipelines, aqueducts, pumps and treatment plants that are needed to provide drinking water to scattered rural populations is

prohibitive. Nobody builds Big Dams to provide drinking water to rural people. Nobody can afford to.

When the Morse Committee first arrived in Gujarat they were impressed by the Gujarat government's commitment to taking drinking water to such distant, rural outposts. They asked to see the detailed drinking water plans.

There weren't any. (There still aren't any.)

They asked if any costs had been worked out. "A few thousand crores," was the breezy answer. A billion dollars is an expert's calculated guess. It's not included as part of the project cost. So where is the money going to come from?

Never mind. Jus' askin'.

It's interesting that the Farakka Barrage that diverts water from the Ganga to Calcutta Port has reduced the drinking water availability for 40 million people who live downstream in Bangladesh.

At times there's something so precise and mathematically chilling about nationalism.

Build a dam to take water away from 40 million people. Build a dam to pretend to bring water to 40 million people.

Who are these gods that govern us? Is there no limit to their powers?

The last person I met in the valley was Bhaiji Bhai. He is a Tadvi tribal from Undava, one of the first villages where the government began to acquire land for the Wonder Canal and its 75,000 km network. Bhaiji Bhai lost 17 of his 19 acres to the Wonder Canal. It crashes through his land, 700 feet wide including its walkways and steep, sloping embankments, like a velodrome for giant bicyclists.

The Canal network affects more than 200,000 families. People have lost wells and trees, people have had their houses separated from their farms by

the canal, forcing them to walk two or three kms to the nearest bridge and then two or three kms back along the other side. About 23,000 families, let's

say 100,000 people, will be, like Bhaiji Bhai, seriously affected. They don't count as 'Project-affected' and are not entitled to rehabilitation.

Like his neighbours in Kevadia Colony, Bhaiji Bhai became a pauper overnight.

Bhaiji Bhai and his people, forced to smile for photographs on government calendars. Bhaiji Bhai and his people, denied the grace of rage. Bhaiji Bhai and his people, squashed like bugs by this country they're supposed to call their own.

It was late evening when I arrived at his house. We sat down on the floor and drank over-sweet tea in the dying light. As he spoke, a memory stirred in me, a sense of *deja vu*. I couldn't imagine why. I knew I hadn't met him before. Then I realised what it was. I didn't recognise him, but I remembered his story. I'd seen him in an old documentary film, shot more than 10 years ago, in the valley. He was frailer now, his beard softened with age. But his story hadn't aged. It was still young and full of passion. It broke my heart, the patience with which he told it. I could tell he had told it over and over and over again, hoping, praying, that one day, one of the strangers passing through Undava would turn out to be Good Luck. Or God.

Bhaiji Bhai, Bhaiji Bhai, when will you get angry? When will you stop waiting? When will you say 'That's enough!' and reach for your weapons, whatever they may be? When will you show us the whole of your resonant, terrifying, invincible strength? When will you break the faith? Will you break the faith? Or will you let it break you?

To slow a beast, you break its limbs. To slow a nation, you break its people. You rob them of volition. You demonstrate your absolute command over their destiny. You make it clear that ultimately it falls to you to decide who lives, who dies, who prospers, who doesn't. To exhibit your capability you show off all that you can do, and how easily you can do it. How easily you could press a button and annihilate the earth. How you can start a war or sue for peace. How you can snatch a river away from one and gift it to another. How you can green a desert or fell a forest and plant one somewhere else. You use caprice to fracture a peoples' faith in ancient things—earth, forest, water, air. Once that's done, what do they have left? Only you. They'll turn to you, because you're all they have. They'll love you even while they despise you. They'll trust you even though they know you well. They'll vote for you even as you squeeze the very breath from their bodies. They'll drink what you give them to drink. They'll breathe what you give them to breathe. They'll live where you dump their belongings. They have to. What else can they do? There's no higher court of redress. You're their mother and their father. You're the judge and the jury. You're the World. You're God.

Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also by what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives. And Powerlessness reaffirmed not just by the helplessness of those who have lost, but also by the gratitude of those who have (or think they have) gained.

This cold, contemporary cast of power is couched between the lines of noble-sounding clauses in democratic-sounding constitutions. It's wielded by the elected representatives of an ostensibly free people. Yet no monarch, no despot, no dictator in any other century in the history of human civilisation has had access to weapons like these.

Day by day, river by river, forest by forest, mountain by mountain, missile by missile, bomb by bomb—almost without our knowing it, we are being broken.

Big Dams are to a Nation's 'Development' what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They're both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of civilisation turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link—the understanding—between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence.

Can we unscramble it?

Maybe. Inch by inch. Bomb by bomb. Dam by dam. Maybe by fighting specific wars in specific ways. We could begin in the Narmada valley.

This July will bring the last monsoon of the Twentieth Century. The ragged army in the Narmada valley has declared that it will not move when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir rise to claim its lands and homes. Whether you love the dam or hate it, whether you want it or you don't, it is in the fitness of things that you understand the price that's being paid for it. That you have the courage to watch while the dues are cleared and the books are squared.

Our dues. Our books. Not theirs. Be there.

POWER POLITICS: THE REINCARNATION OF RUMPELSTILTSKIN

November 2000

Remember him? The gnome who could turn straw into gold? Well, he's back now, but you wouldn't recognize him. To begin with, he's not an individual gnome anymore. I'm not sure how best to describe him. Let's just say he's metamorphosed into an accretion, a cabal, an assemblage, a malevolent, incorporeal, transnational multi-gnome. Rumpelstiltskin is a notion (gnotion), a piece of deviant, insidious, white logic that will eventually self-annihilate. But for now he's more than okay. He's cock of the walk. King of All That Really Counts (Cash). He's decimated the competition, killed all

the other kings, the other kinds of kings. He's persuaded us that he's all we have left. Our only salvation.

What kind of potentate is Rumpelstiltskin? Powerful, pitiless and armed to the teeth. He's a kind of king the world has never known before. His realm is raw capital, his conquests emerging markets, his prayers profits, his borders limitless, his weapons nuclear. To even try and imagine him, to hold the whole of him in your field of vision, is to situate yourself at the very edge of sanity, to offer yourself up for ridicule. King Rumpel reveals only part of himself at a time. He has a bank-account heart. He has television eyes and a newspaper nose in which you see only what he wants you to see and read only what he wants you to read. (See what I mean about the edge of sanity?) There's more: a Surround Sound stereo mouth which amplifies his voice and filters out the sound of the rest of the world so that you can't hear it even when it's shouting (or starving, or dying) and King Rumpel is only whispering, rolling his r's in his North American way.

Listen carefully, this is most of the rest of his story. (It hasn't ended yet, but it will. It must.) It ranges across seas and continents, sometimes majestic and universal, sometimes confining and local. Now and then I'll peg it down with disparate bits of history and geography that could mar the gentle art of storytelling. So please bear with me.

In March this year (2000 AD), the President of the United States (His Excellency the most exalted plenipotentiary of Rumpeldom) visited India. He brought his own bed, the feather pillow he hugs at night and a merry band of businessmen. He was courted and fawned over by the genuflecting representatives of this ancient civilization with a fervor that can only be described as indecent. Whole cities were superficially spruced up. The poor were herded away, hidden from the presidential gaze. Streets were soaped

and scrubbed and festooned with balloons and welcome banners. In Delhi's dirty sky, vindicated nuclear hawks banked and whistled: Dekho ji dekho! Bill is here because we have the Bomb.

Those Indian citizens with even a modicum of self-respect were so ashamed they stayed in bed for days. Some of us had puzzled furrows on our brows. Since everybody behaved like a craven, happy slave when Master visited, we wondered why we hadn't gone the whole distance. Why hadn't we just crawled under Master's nuclear umbrella in the first place? Then we could spend our pocket money on other things (instead of bombs) and still be all safe and slavey. No?

Just before The Visit, the Government of India lifted import restrictions on 1,400 commodities including milk, grain, sugar and cotton (even though this year there was a glut of sugar and cotton in the market, even though 42.5 million tons of grain was rotting in government storehouses). During The Visit, contracts worth about US \$3 (some say 4) billion were signed.

For reasons of my own, I was particularly interested in a Memorandum of Intent signed between the Ogden Energy Group, a company that specializes in operating garbage incinerators in the US, and the S.Kumars, an Indian textile company that manufactures what it calls 'suing blends'.

Now what might garbage incineration and suing blends possibly have in common? Suit-incineration? Guess again. Garbage-blends? Nope. A big hydel dam on the river Narmada in central India. Neither Ogden nor the S.Kumars has ever built or operated a large dam before.

The 400 MW Shri Maheshwar Hydel Project being promoted by the S.Kumars is part of the Narmada Valley Development Project, which boasts of being the most ambitious river valley project in the world. It envisages building 3,200 dams (30 big dams, 135 medium dams and the rest small)

that will reconstitute the Narmada and her 41 tributaries into a series of step reservoirs -- an immense staircase of enslaved water. It will alter the ecology of an entire river basin, affect the lives of 25 million people who live in the valley, submerge 4,000 sq km of old growth, deciduous forest, hundreds of temples, as well as archaeological sites dating back to the lower Paleolithic age.

The dams that have been built on the river so far are all government projects. The Maheshwar Dam is slated to be India's first major private hydel power project.

What is interesting about it is not only that it's part of the most bitterly opposed river valley project in India, but also that it is a strand in the skein of a mammoth global enterprise. Understanding what is happening in Maheshwar, decoding the nature of the deals that are being struck between two of the world's great democracies, will go a long way towards gaining a rudimentary grasp of what is being done to us, while we, poor fools, stand by and clap and cheer and hasten things along. (When I say 'us', I mean people, human beings. Not countries, not governments.)

Personally, I took the first step towards arriving at this understanding when, over a few days in March this year (2000 AD), I lived through a writer's bad dream. I witnessed the ritualistic slaughter of Language as I know and understand it. Let me explain.

On the very days that President Clinton was in India, in far away Holland, the World Water Forum was convened. Three thousand and five hundred bankers, businessmen, government ministers, policy writers, engineers, economists (and, in order to pretend that the "other side" was also represented -- a handful of activists, indigenous dance troupes, impoverished street theater groups and half a dozen young girls dressed as inflatable silver

faucets) gathered at The Hague to discuss the future of the world's water. Every speech was generously peppered with phrases like "women's empowerment", "people's participation" and "deepening democracy". Yet it turned out that the whole purpose of the Forum was to press for the privatization of the world's water. There was pious talk of having access to drinking water declared a Basic Human Right. How would this be implemented, you might ask. Simple. By putting a market value on water. By selling it at its 'true' price. (It's common knowledge that water is becoming a scarce resource. One billion people in the world have no access to drinking water.) The "market" decrees that the scarcer something is, the more expensive it becomes. So the talk of connecting human rights to a "true price" was more than a little baffling. At first I didn't quite get their drift -- did they believe in human rights for the rich, or that only the rich are human or that all humans are rich? But I see it now. A shiny, climate-controlled human rights supermarket with a clearance sale on Christmas day. (A small but necessary clarification: there is a difference between valuing water and putting a market value on water. No one values water more than a village woman who has to walk miles to fetch it. No one values it less than urban folk who pay for it to flow endlessly at the turn of a tap.

One marrowy American panelist put it rather nicely--"God gave us the rivers," he drawled, "but he didn't put in the delivery systems. That's why we need private enterprise." No doubt with a little Structural Adjustment to the rest of the things God gave us, we could all live in a simpler world (If all the seas were one sea, what a big sea it would be...)--Evian could own the water, Rand the earth, Enron the air. Old Rumpelstiltskin could be the handsomely paid supreme CEO.

When all the rivers and valleys and forests and hills of the world have been priced, packaged, bar-coded and stacked in the local supermarket, when all the hay and coal and earth and wood and water has been turned to gold, what then shall we do with all the gold? Make nuclear bombs to obliterate what's left of the ravaged landscapes and the notional nations in our ruined world?

As a writer one spends a lifetime journeying into the heart of language, trying to minimize, if not eliminate, the distance between language and thought. "Language is the skin on my thought", I remember saying to someone who once asked what language meant to me. At The Hague I stumbled on a denomination, a sub-world, whose life's endeavor was entirely the opposite of mine. For them the whole purpose of language was to mask intent. They earn their abundant livings by converting bar graphs that plot their companies' profits into consummately written, politically exemplary, socially just policy documents that are impossible to implement and designed to remain forever on paper, secret even (especially) from the people they're written for. They breed and prosper in the space that lies between what they say and what they sell. What they're lobbying for is not simply the privatization of natural resources and essential infrastructure, but the privatization of policy-making itself. Dam-builders want to control public water policies. Power utility companies want to draft power policies and financial institutions want to supervise government disinvestment.

Let's begin at the beginning. What does privatization really mean? Essentially, it is the transfer of public productive assets from the State to private companies. Productive assets include natural resources. Earth, forest, water, air. These are assets that the State holds in trust for the people it represents. In a country like India, 70 per cent of the population lives in

rural areas. That's 700 million people. Their lives depend directly on access to natural resources. To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history.

What happens when you "privatize" something as essential to human survival as water? What happens when you commodify water and say that only those who can come up with the cash to pay the "market price" can have it?

In 1999, the government of Bolivia privatized the public water supply system in the city of Cochacomba, and signed a 40-year lease with Bechtel, a giant US engineering firm. The first thing Bechtel did was to triple the price of water. Hundreds of thousands of people simply couldn't afford it any more. Citizens came out on the streets to protest. A transport strike brought the entire city to a standstill. Hugo Banzer, the former Bolivian dictator (now the President) ordered the police to fire at the crowds. Six people were killed, 175 injured and two children blinded. The protest continued because people had no options -- what's the option to thirst? In April 2000, Banzer declared Martial Law. The protest continued. Eventually Bechtel was forced to flee its offices. Now it's trying to extort a \$12-million exit payment from the Bolivian government.

Cochacomba has a population of half a million people. Think of what would happen in an Indian city. Even a small one.

Rumpelstiltskin thinks big. Today he's stalking mega-game: dams, mines, armaments, power plants, public water supply systems, telecommunication systems, the management and dissemination of knowledge, biodiversity, seeds (he wants to own life and the very process of reproduction) and the industrial infrastructure that supports all this. His minions arrive in Third

World countries masquerading as missionaries come to redeem the wretched. They have a completely different dossier in their briefcases. To understand what they're really saying (selling), you have to teach yourself to unscramble their vernacular.

Recently, John Welch, chairman of General Electric (GE), was on TV in India. "I beg and pray to the Indian Government to improve infrastructure," he said, and added touchingly, "Don't do it for GE's sake, do it for yourselves." He went on to say that privatizing the power sector was the only way to bring India's one billion people into the digital network. "You can talk about information and intellectual capital, but without the power to drive it, you will miss the next revolution."

What he meant, of course, was: "You are a market of one billion customers. If you don't buy our equipment, we will miss the next revolution."

Will someone please tell him that of his one billion "customers", 400 million are illiterate and live without even one square meal a day, and 200 million have no access to safe drinking water? Being brought into the "digital framework" is hardly what's uppermost on their minds.

The story behind the story is as follows: there are six corporations that dominate the production of power generation equipment in the world. GE is one of them. Together, each year they manufacture (and therefore need to sell) equipment that can generate 20,000 MW of power. For a variety of reasons there is little (read almost zero) additional demand for power equipment in the First World. This leaves these mammoth multinationals with a redundant capacity that they desperately need to offload. India and China are their big target markets, because between these two countries, the demand for power-generating equipment is 10,000 MW per year.

The first world needs to sell, the Third World needs to buy -- it ought to be a reasonable business proposition. But it isn't. For many years, India has been more or less self sufficient in power equipment. The Indian public sector company, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (bhel), manufactured and even exported world-class power equipment. All that's changed now. Over the years, our own government has starved it of orders, cut off funds for research and development and more or less edged it out of a dignified existence. Today bhel is no more than a sweatshop. It is being forced into "joint ventures" (one with GE and one with Siemens) where its only role is to provide cheap, unskilled labor while they provide the equipment and the technology.

Why? Why does more expensive, imported foreign equipment suit our bureaucrats and politicians better? We all know why. Because graft is factored into the deal. Buying equipment from your local store is just not the same thing. It's not surprising that almost half the officials named in the Jain Hawala scandal were officials from the power sector involved with the selection and purchase of power equipment.

The privatization of power (felicitous phrase!) is at the top of the Indian government's agenda. The US is the single largest foreign investor in the power sector (which, to some extent, explains *The Visit*). The argument being advanced (both by the government and by the private sector) in favor of privatization is that over the last 50 years the government has bungled its brief. It has failed to deliver. The State Electricity Boards (sebs) are insolvent. Inefficiency, corruption, theft and heavy subsidies have run them into the ground.

In the push for privatization, the customary depiction of the corrupt, oily, Third World government official, selling his country's interests for personal

profit, fits perfectly into the scheme of things. The private sector bristles accusingly. The government coyly acknowledges the accusation and pleads its inability to reform itself. In fact it goes out of its way to exaggerate its own inefficiencies. This is meant to come across as refreshing candor. In a speech he made just before he died, P.R. Kumaramangalam, minister for power, said that the overall figure of loss and deficit in the power sector was Rs 37,000 crore. He went on to say that India's transmission and distribution (t&d) losses are between 35 and 40 per cent. Of the remaining 60 per cent, according to the minister, billing is restricted to only 40 per cent. His conclusion: that only about a quarter of the electricity that is produced in India is metered. Official sources say that this is a somewhat exaggerated account. The situation is bad enough, it doesn't need to be exaggerated. According to figures put out by the power ministry, the national average t&d losses are 23 per cent. (In 1947 it was 14.39 per cent). Even without the minister's hyperbole, this puts India in the same league as countries with the worst t&d losses in the world, like the Dominican Republic, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The solution to this malaise, we discover, is not to improve our housekeeping skills, not to try and minimize our losses, not to force the State to be more accountable, but to permit it to abdicate its responsibility altogether and privatize the power sector. Then magic will happen. Economic viability and Swiss-style efficiency will kick in like clockwork.

But there's a sub-plot missing in this narrative. Over the years, the sebs have been bankrupted by massive power thefts. Who's stealing the power? Some of it no doubt is stolen by the poor -- slum dwellers, people who live in unauthorized colonies on the fringes of big cities. But they don't have the electrical gadgetry to consume the quantum of electricity we're talking

about. The big stuff, the megawatt thievery, is orchestrated by the industrial sector in connivance with politicians and government officers.

Consider as an example the state of Madhya Pradesh in which the Maheshwar Dam is being built. Seven years ago it was a power surplus state. Today it finds itself in an intriguing situation. Industrial demand has declined by 30 per cent. Power production has increased from 3,813 MW to 4,025 MW. And the State Electricity Board is showing a loss of RS 1,200 crore. An inspection drive solved the puzzle. It found that 70 per cent of the industrialists in the state steal electricity! The theft adds up to a loss of nearly RS 500 crore. That's 41 per cent of the total deficit. Madhya Pradesh is by no means an unusual example. States like Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Delhi have t&d losses of between 30 and 50 per cent (way over the national average) which indicate massive power theft. No one talks very much about this. It's so much nicer to blame the poor. The average economist, planner or drawing room intellectual will tell you that the sebs have gone belly up for two reasons: (a) Because "political compulsions" ensure that domestic power tariffs are kept unviably low, and (b) Because subsidies given to the farm sector result in enormous hidden losses.

The first step that a "reformed" privatized power sector is expected to take is to cut agricultural subsidies and put a "realistic" tariff (market value) on power. What are political compulsions? Why are they considered such a bad thing? Basically, it seems to me, "political compulsions" is a phrase that describes the fancy footwork that governments have to perform in order to strike a balance between redeeming a sinking economy and serving an impoverished electorate. Striking a balance between what the "market" demands and what people can afford, is -- or certainly ought to be -- the primary, fundamental responsibility of any democratic government.

Privatization seeks to disengage politics from the "market". To do that would be to blunt the very last weapon that India's poor still have -- their vote. Once that's gone, elections will become (even more of) a charade than they already are and democracy will just become the name of a new rock band. The poor will be absent from the negotiating table. They will simply cease to matter.

But the cry has already gone up. The demand to cut subsidies has almost become a blood sport. It's a small world. Bolivia's only a short walk down the road from here.

When it recommends "privatizing the power sector", does the government mean that it is going to permit just anybody who wishes to generate power to come in and compete in a free market? Of course not. There's nothing free about the market in the power sector. Reforming the Power Sector in India means that the concerned state government underwrites preposterously one-sided Power Purchase Agreements with select companies, preferably huge multinationals. Essentially, it is the transfer of assets and infrastructure from bribe-taker to bribe-giver, which involves more bribery than ever. Once the agreements are signed, they are free to produce power at exorbitant rates that no one can afford. Not even, ironically enough, the Indian industrialists who have been rooting for them all along. They, poor chaps, end up like vultures on a carcass that get chased off by a visiting hyena.

Nothing illustrates this process better than the story of Enron of the US, the first private power project in India. The first Power Purchase Agreement between Enron and the Congress-ruled state government of Maharashtra for a 695 MW power plant was signed in 1993. The opposition parties, the bjp and the Shiv Sena, set up a howl of "swadeshi" protest, and filed legal

proceedings against Enron and the state government. They alleged malfeasance and corruption at the highest level. A year later, when state elections were announced, it was the only campaign issue of the bjp-Shiv Sena alliance.

In February 1995, this combine won the elections. True to their word, they "scrapped" the project. In a savage, fiery statement, Mr Advani attacked the phenomenon of what he called "loot-through-liberalization". He more or less directly accused the Congress government of having taken a Rs 62-crore bribe from Enron. Following the annulling of the contract, the US government began to pressurize the Maharashtra government. US Ambassador Frank Wisner made several statements deploring the cancellation. (The day he completed his term as Ambassador, he joined Enron as a director). In November 1995, the bjp-Shiv Sena government of Maharashtra announced a "re-negotiation" committee. In May 1996, a minority government headed by the bjp was sworn in at the Center. It lasted for exactly 13 days and then resigned before facing a vote of no-confidence in the Lok Sabha. On its last day in office, even as the no-confidence motion was in progress, the Cabinet met for a hurried "lunch" and re-ratified the Central Government's counter-guarantee (that had become void because of the earlier "canceled" contract with Enron). In August 1996, the government of Maharashtra signed a fresh contract with Enron on terms that would astound the most hardboiled cynic.

The impugned contract had involved annual payments to Enron of US \$430 million for phase I (695 MW) of the project, with phase II (2,015 MW) being optional. The "re-negotiated" Power Purchase Agreement makes phase II of the project mandatory and legally binds the Maharashtra State

Electricity Board (mseb) to pay Enron a sum of US \$30 billion! It constitutes the largest contract ever signed in the history of India.

In effect, for an increase in installed capacity of 18 per cent, the mseb has to set aside 70 per cent of its revenue to be able to pay Enron. There is, of course, no record of what mathematical formula was used to compute the "re-negotiated" bribe. Nor any trace of how much trickled up or down or sideways and to whom.

But there's more: in one of the most extraordinary decisions in its not entirely pristine history, in April 1997, the Supreme Court of India refused to entertain an appeal against Enron.

Today, four years later, everything that critics of the project predicted has come true with an eerie vengeance. The power that the Enron plant produces is twice as expensive as its nearest competitor and seven times as expensive as the cheapest electricity available in Maharashtra. In May 2000, the Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Committee (merc) ruled that temporarily, until as long as was absolutely necessary, no power should be bought from Enron. It was based on a calculation that it would be cheaper to just pay Enron the mandatory fixed charges for the maintenance and administration of the plant that they are contractually obliged to pay than to actually buy any of its exorbitant power. The fixed charges alone work out to RS 1,000 crore a year for phase I of the project. Phase II will be nearly twice the size.

A thousand crore a year for the next 40 years.

Meanwhile, industrialists in Maharashtra have begun to generate their own power at a much cheaper rate, with private generators. The demand for power from the industrial sector has begun to decline rapidly. The State Electricity Board, strapped for cash, with Enron hanging like an albatross

around its neck, will now have no choice but to make private gensets illegal. That's the only way that industrialists can be coerced into buying Enron's exorbitant electricity.

Now, what was that again, Mr Advani? Looting through liberalization? What a fine, upstanding leader you are.

Here's to the Hindutva brand of Swadeshi. Here's to the "free" market. Here's to forked tongues.

Having said all this, there's no doubt that there is a power-shortage crisis in India. But there's another, more serious crisis on hand.

Planners in India boast that India consumes 20 times more electricity today than it did 50 years ago. They use it as an index of progress. They omit to mention that 70 per cent of rural households still have no electricity. In the poorest states, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan, over 85 per cent of the poorest people, mostly Dalit and Adivasi households, have no electricity. What a shameful, shocking record for the world's biggest democracy.

Unless this crisis is acknowledged and honestly addressed, generating "lots and lots of power" (as Mr Welch put it) will only mean that it will be siphoned off by the rich with their endless appetites. It will require a very imaginative, very radical form of "structural adjustment" to right this.

"Privatization" is presented as being the only alternative to an inefficient, corrupt State. In fact, it's not a choice at all. It's only made to look like one. Essentially, privatization is a mutually profitable business contract between the private (preferably foreign) company/ financial institution, and the ruling elite of the Third World. (One of the fallouts is that it makes corruption an elitist affair. Your average small-fry government official is in grave danger of losing his or her bit on the side).

India's politicians have virtually mortgaged their country to the World Bank. Today India pays back more money in interest and repayment installments than it receives. It is forced to incur new debts in order to repay old ones. In other words, it's exporting capital. Of late, however, institutions like the World Bank and the IMF that have bled the Third World all these years, look like benevolent saints compared to the new mutants in the market. These are known as ECAs -- Export Credit Agencies. If the World Bank is a colonizing army hamstrung by red tape and bureaucracy, the ECAs are freewheeling, marauding mercenaries. Basically, ECAs insure private companies operating in foreign countries against commercial and political risks. The device is called an export credit guarantee. It's quite simple, really. No First World private company wants to export capital or goods or services to a politically and/or economically unstable country without insuring itself against unforeseen contingencies. So the private company covers itself with an export credit guarantee. The ECA, in turn, has an agreement with the government of its own country. The government of its own country has an agreement with the government of the importing country. The upshot of this fine imbrication is that if a situation does arise in which the ECA has to pay its client, its own government pays the ECA and recovers its money by adding it to the bilateral debt owed by the importing country. (So the real guarantors are actually, once again, the Third World poor). Complicated, but cool.

And foolproof.

The quadrangular private company-ECA-government-government formation neatly circumvents political accountability. Though they're all actually business associates, flak from noisy, tiresome NGOs and activist groups can be diverted and funneled to the ECA, where, like noxious

industrial effluent, it lies in cooling ponds before being disposed of. The attraction of the ECAs (for both governments and private companies) is that they are secretive and don't bother with tedious details like human rights violations and environmental guidelines. (The rare ones that do, like the US EX-IM Bank, are under pressure to change). It short-circuits lumbering World Bank-style bureaucracy. It makes projects like Big Dams (which involve the displacement and impoverishment of large numbers of people, which in turn is politically risky) that much easier to finance. With an ECA guarantee, "developers" can go ahead and dig and quarry and mine and dam the hell out of peoples' lives without having to even address, never mind answer, embarrassing questions.

Now, coming back to Maheshwar...

In order to place India's first private Big Dam in perspective, I need to briefly set out the short, vulgar history of Big Dams in India in general and on the Narmada in particular.

The international dam industry alone is worth US \$20 billion a year. In the First World, dams are being de-commissioned, blown up. That leaves us with another industry threatened with redundancy desperately in search of dumping grounds. Fortunately (for the industry), most Third World countries, India especially, are deeply committed to Big Dams.

India has the third-largest number of Big Dams in the world. Three thousand and six hundred Indian dams qualify as Big Dams under the ICOLD (International Committee on Large Dams) definition. Six hundred and ninety five more are under construction. This means that 40 per cent of all the Big Dams being built in the world are being built in India. For reasons more cynical than honorable, politicians and planners have successfully portrayed Big Dams to an unquestioning public as symbols of nationalism -

- huge, wet, cement flags. Nehru's speech about Big Dams being "the temples of modern India" has made its way into primary school text-books in every Indian language. Every schoolchild is taught that Big Dams will deliver the people of India from hunger and poverty.

Will they? Have they?

To merely ask these questions is to invite accusations of sedition, of being anti-national, of being a spy, and, most ludicrous of all -- of receiving "foreign funds". The distinguished Mr Advani (home minister now), while speaking at the inauguration of construction at the Sardar Sarovar Dam site on the 31st of October, said that the three greatest achievements of his government were: the nuclear tests in 1998, the Kargil war in 1999, and the Supreme Court verdict in favor of the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in 2000. He called it a victory for "development nationalism" (a twisted variation of cultural nationalism). For the home minister to call a Supreme Court verdict a victory for his government doesn't say much for the Supreme Court. I have no quarrel with his clubbing together nuclear bombs, big dams and wars. However, calling them "achievements" is sinister. Mr Advani then went on to make farcical allegations about how those of us who were against the dam were the "same people" who protested against the nuclear tests and implied that we were in league with "foreign agencies who don't want India to develop". Unfortunately, this is not imbecilic paranoia. It's a deliberate, dangerous attempt to suppress outrageous facts by whipping up mindless mob frenzy. He did it in the run up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. He's doing it again. He has given notice that he will stop at nothing. Those who come in his way will be dealt with by any methods he deems necessary.

Nevertheless, there is too much at stake to remain silent. After all, we don't want to be like good middle-class Germans in the '30s, who drove their

children to piano classes and never noticed the concentration camps springing up around them -- or do we?

There are questions that must be asked. And answered. There is space here for no more than a brief summary of the costs and benefits of Big Dams. A brief summary is all we need.

Ninety per cent of the Big Dams in India are irrigation dams. They are the key, according to planners, of India's "food security".

So how much food do Big Dams produce?

The extraordinary thing is that there is no official government figure for this.

The India Country Study section in the World Commission on Dams Report, (released in London on the 16th of November by Mr Nelson Mandela) was prepared by a team of experts -- the former secretary of water resources, the former director of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, a former secretary of the Central Water Commission and two members of the faculty of the Indian Institute of Public Administration. One of the chapters in the study deduces that the contribution of large dams to India's food grain produce is less than ten percent! *Less than 10 percent!*

Ten per cent of the total produce currently works out to 20 million tons. This year, more than double that amount (42.5 million tons) is rotting in government storehouses while at the same time 350 million Indian citizens live below the poverty line (and while grain is actually being imported!). The ministry of food and civil supplies says that 10 per cent of India's total foodgrain produce is eaten every year by rats. India must be the only country in the world that builds dams, uproots millions of people, submerges thousands of hectares of forest, in order to feed rats.

It's hard to believe that things can go so grievously, so perilously wrong. But they have. It's understandable that those who are responsible find it hard to own up to their mistakes, because Big Dams did not start out as a cynical enterprise. They began as a dream. They have ended as grisly nightmare. It's time to wake up.

So much for the benefits of India's Big Dams. Let's take a look at the costs. How many people have been displaced by Big Dams?

Once again, there is no official record.

In fact, there's no record at all. This is unpardonable on the part of the Indian State. And unpardonable on the part of planners, economists, funding agencies and the rest of the urban intellectual community who are so quick to rise up in defence of Big Dams.

Last year, just in order to do a sanity check, I extrapolated an average from a study of 54 dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration. After quartering the average they arrived at, my very conservative estimate of the number of people displaced by Big Dams in India over the last 50 years was 33 million people. This was jeered at by some economists and planners as being a preposterously exaggerated figure. India's secretary for Rural Development put the figure at 40 million.

Today, a chapter in the India Country Study says the figure could be as high as 56 million people.

That's twice the population of Canada. More than three times the population of Australia.

Think about it: 56 million people displaced by Big Dams in the last 50 years. And India still does not have a national rehabilitation policy.

When the history of India's miraculous leap to the forefront of the Information Revolution is written, let it be said that 56 million Indians (and

their children and their children's children) paid for it with everything they ever had. Their homes, their lands, their languages, their histories.

You can see them from your car window when you drive home every night. Try not to look away. Try to meet their eyes. Fifty-six million displaced, impoverished, pulverized people. Over 60 per cent of them are Dalit and Adivasi. (There is devastating meaning couched in this figure.) There's a saying in the villages of the Narmada Valley -- "You can wake someone who's sleeping. But you can't wake someone who's pretending to be asleep". When it comes to the politics of forced, involuntary displacement, there's a deafening silence in this country. People's eyes glaze over. They behave as though it's just a blip in the democratic process. The nicer ones say, "Oh, but it's such a pity. People must be resettled". (Where? I want to scream, Where's the land? Has someone invented a Land-manufacturing machine?)

The nasties say, "Someone has to pay the price for National Development".

The point is that 56 million is more than a blip, folks. It's civil war.

Quite apart from the human cost of Big Dams, there are the staggering environmental costs. More than five million hectares of submerged forest, ravaged ecosystems, destroyed rivers, defunct, silted up reservoirs, endangered wildlife, disappearing biodiversity, and 10 million hectares of agricultural land that is now waterlogged and saline. Today there are more drought-prone and flood-prone areas in India than there were in 1947. Not a single river in the plains has potable water. Remember, 200 million Indians have no access to safe drinking water.

Planners, when confronted with past mistakes, say sagely, "Yes, it's true that mistakes have been made. But we're on a learning curve." The lives and

livelihoods of 56 million people and all this environmental mayhem serves only to extend the majestic arc of their learning curve.

When will they get off the curve and actually *learn*?

The evidence against Big Dams is mounting alarmingly. None of it appears on the balance sheet. There is no balance sheet. There has not been an official audit, a comprehensive, post-project evaluation, of a single Indian Big Dam to see whether or not it has achieved what it set out to achieve.

This is what is hardest to believe. That the Indian government's unshakable faith in Big Dams is based on nothing. No studies. No system of checks and balances. Nothing at all. And of course, those of us who question it are spies.

Is it unreasonable to call for a moratorium on the construction of Big Dams until "past mistakes" have been rectified and the millions of uprooted people have been truly recompensed and rehabilitated? It is the only way an industry that has so far been based on lies and false promises can redeem itself.

Now let me tell you about the Narmada Valley.

Of the series of thirty Big Dams proposed on the main river, four are mega-dams. Of these, only one -- the Bargi Dam -- has been completed. Three are under construction.

The Bargi Dam was completed in 1990. It cost 10 times more than was budgeted and submerged three times more land than engineers said it would. To save the cost and effort of doing a detailed survey, in order to mark the Full Reservoir Level, one monsoon the government closed the sluice gates and filled the reservoir without warning anybody. Water entered villagers' homes at night. They had to take their children, their cattle, their pots and pans and flee up the hillside. The Narmada Control Authority had

estimated that 70,000 people from 101 villages would be displaced. Instead, when they filled the reservoir, 114,000 people from 162 villages were displaced. In addition, 26 government "resettlement colonies" (which consisted of house plots but no agricultural land) were also submerged. Eventually there was no rehabilitation. Some "oustees" got a meager cash compensation. Most got nothing. Some died of starvation. Others moved to slums in Jabalpur where they work as rickshaw-pullers and construction labor.

Today, 10 years after it was completed, the Bargi Dam irrigates only as much land as it submerged. Only 5 per cent of the land its planners claimed it would irrigate. The government says it has no money to make the canals. Yet work has begun downstream, on the mammoth Narmada Sagar Dam which will submerge 251 villages, on the Maheshwar Dam and of course, on the most controversial dam in history, the Sardar Sarovar.

The Sardar Sarovar Dam is currently 90 meters high. Its final projected height is 138 meters. It is located in Gujarat, but most of the villages that will be submerged by its gigantic reservoir are in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The Sardar Sarovar Dam has become the showcase of India's Violation of Human Rights initiative. It has ripped away the genial mask of Dams-as-Development and revealed its brutish innards. I have written about it extensively in a previous essay (*The Greater Common Good*, Outlook, June 1999) so I'll be brief. The Sardar Sarovar Dam will displace close to half a million people. More than half of them do not officially qualify as "project-affected" and are not entitled to rehabilitation. It will submerge 13,000 hectares of deciduous forest.

In 1985, before a single study had been done, before anyone had any idea what the human cost or environmental impact of the dam would be, the

World Bank sanctioned a \$450-million loan for the dam. The ministry of environment's conditional clearance (without any studies being done) came in 1987! At no point in the decision-making process were the people to be affected consulted or even informed about the project. In 1993, after a spectacular struggle by the extraordinary Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the people of the valley forced the Bank to withdraw from the project. The Gujarat government decided to go ahead with the project.

In 1994, the NBA filed a petition in the Supreme Court. For six years the court put a legal injunction on further construction of the dam. On October 18, 2000, in a shocking 2-1 majority judgment, the Supreme Court lifted the injunction. After having seen it fit to hold up the construction for six years, the court chastised (using unseemly, insulting language) the people of the Narmada Valley for approaching it too late and said that on these grounds alone their petition should be dismissed. It permitted construction to continue according to the guidelines laid down by the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal.

It did this despite the fact that it was aware that the Tribunal Award has been consistently violated for 13 years. Despite the fact that none of the conditions of the environment ministry's clearance have been met. Despite the fact that 13 years have passed and the government hasn't even produced a resettlement plan. Despite the fact that not a single village has been resettled according to the directives of the Tribunal. Despite the fact that the Madhya Pradesh (MP) Government has stated on oath that it has no land to resettle "oustees" (80 per cent of them live in MP). Despite the fact that since construction began, the MP government has not given a single hectare of agricultural land to displaced families. Despite the fact that the court was

fully aware that even families displaced by the dam at its current height have not been rehabilitated.

In other words, the Supreme Court has actually ordered and sanctioned the violation of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award.

"But this is the problem with the government", Mr and Mrs Well-Meaning say. "These things wouldn't happen with a private company. Things like resettlement and rehabilitation of poor people will be so much better managed."

The Maheshwar experience teaches you otherwise.

In a private project, the only thing that's better managed is the corruption, the lies and the swiftness and brutality of repression. And, of course, the escalating costs.

In 1994, the project cost of the Maheshwar Dam was estimated at RS 465 crore. In 1996, following the contract with the S.Kumars, it rose to RS 1,569 crore. Today it stands at RS 2,200 crore. Initially, 80 per cent of this money was to be raised from foreign investors. There has been a procession of them -- Pacgen of the US, Bayernwerk, vew, Siemens and the Hypovereinsbank of Germany. And now, the latest in the line of ardent suitors, Ogden of the US.

According to the NBA's calculations, the cost of the electricity at the factory gate will be RS 6.55 per unit, which is 26 times more expensive than existing hydel power in the state, five-and-a-half times more expensive than thermal power and four times more expensive than power from the central grid. (It's worth mentioning here that Madhya Pradesh today generates 1,500 MW more power than it can transmit and distribute.) Though the installed capacity of the Maheshwar project is supposed to be 400 MW, studies using 28 years of actual river flow data show that 80 per cent of the

electricity will be generated only during the monsoon months when the river is full. What this means is that most of the supply will be generated when it's least needed.

The S. Kumars have no worries on this count. They have Enron as a precedent. They have an escrow clause in their contract, which guarantees them first call on government funds. This means that however much (or however little) electricity they produce, whether anybody buys it or not, for the next 35 years they are guaranteed a minimum payment from the government of approximately RS 600 crore a year. This money will be paid to them even before the employees of the bankrupt seb get their salaries.

What did the S.Kumars do to deserve this largesse? It isn't hard to guess.

So who's actually paying for this dam that nobody needs?

According to government surveys, the reservoir of the Maheshwar Dam will submerge 61 villages. Thirteen will be wholly submerged, the rest will lose their farmlands. As usual, none of the villagers were informed about the dam or their impending eviction. (Of course, if they go to court now they'll be told it's too late since construction has already begun.)

The first surveys were done under a ruse that a railway line was being constructed. It was only in 1997, when blasting began at the dam site, that realization dawned on the people and the NBA became active in Maheshwar. The agency in charge of the survey is the same one that was in charge of the surveys for the Bargi reservoir. We know what happened there.

People in the submergence zone of the Maheshwar dam say that the surveys are completely wrong. Some villages marked for submergence are at a higher level than villages that are not counted as project affected. Since the Maheshwar dam is located in the broad plains of Nimad, even a small miscalculation in the surveys will lead to huge discrepancies between what

is marked for submergence and what is actually submerged. The consequences of these errors will be far worse than what happened at Bargi.

There are other egregious assumptions in the "survey". Annexure 6 of the resettlement plan states that there are 176 trees and 38 wells in all the affected 61 villages combined. The villagers point out that in just a single village -- Pathrad -- there are 40 wells and over 4,000 trees.

As with trees and wells, so with people.

There is no accurate estimate of how many people will be affected by the dam. Even the project authorities admit that new surveys must be done. So far they've managed to survey only one out of the 61 villages. The number of affected households rose from 190 (in the preliminary survey) to 300 (in the new one).

In circumstances like these, it's impossible for even the NBA to have an accurate idea of the numbers of project-affected people. Their rough guess is about 50,000. More than half of them are Kevats, Kahars and other Dalits...ancient communities of ferrymen, fisherfolk, sand quarriers and cultivators of the riverbed when the waters recede in the dry season. Most of them own no land, but the river sustains them and means more to them than anyone else. If the dam is built, thousands of them will lose their only source of livelihood. Yet simply because they are landless, they do not qualify as project-affected and will not be eligible for rehabilitation.

Jalud is the first of the 61 villages that is slated for submergence in the reservoir of the dam. As early as 1985, 12 families, mostly Dalit, who had small holdings near the dam site, had their land acquired. When they protested, cement was poured into their water pipes, their standing crops were bulldozed, and the police occupied the land by force. All 12 families

are now landless and work as wage labor. The new "private" initiative has made no effort to help them.

According to the environmental clearance from the Central government, the people affected by the project ought to have been resettled three years ago, in 1997. To date, the S.Kumars haven't even managed to produce a list of project-affected people, let alone land on which they are to be resettled. Yet, construction continues. The S.Kumars are so well entrenched with the state government that they don't need to even pretend to cover their tracks.

This is how India works.

This is the genesis of the Maheshwar Dam. This is the legacy that the Ogden Energy Group of the US is so keen to inherit. What they don't realize is that the fight is on. Over the last three years, the struggle against the Maheshwar Dam has grown into a veritable civil disobedience movement, though you wouldn't know it if you read the papers. The mainstream media is hugely dependent on revenue from advertising. The S.Kumars sponsor massive advertisements for their blended suitings. After their James Bond campaign with Pierce Brosnan, they've signed India's biggest film star -- Hrithik Roshan -- as their star campaigner. It's extraordinary how much silent admiration and support a hunk in a blended suit can evoke.

Over the last two years, tens of thousands of villagers have captured the dam site several times and halted construction work. Protests in the region forced two companies, Bayernwerk and vew of Germany, to withdraw from the project. The German company Siemens remained in the fray (angling for an export credit guarantee from Hermes, the German ECA).

In the summer of 2000, the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development sent in a team of experts headed by Richard Bissell

(former chairman of the inspection panel of the World Bank) to do an independent review of the Resettlement and Rehabilitation aspects of the project. The report published on the 15th of June this year, was unambiguous that resettlement and rehabilitation of people displaced by the Maheshwar Dam was simply not possible.

At the end of August, Siemens withdrew its application for a Hermes guarantee.

The people of the valley don't get much time to recover between bouts of fighting. In September, the S. Kumars were part of the Indian prime minister's business entourage when he visited the US. Desperate to replace Siemens, they were hoping to convert their memorandum of understanding with Ogden into a final contract. That, fortunately (for Ogden as much as the people of Maheshwar), hasn't happened yet.

The only time I have ever felt anything close to what most people would describe as national pride was when I walked one night with 4,000 people towards the Maheshwar dam site, where we knew hundreds of armed policemen were waiting for us. From the previous evening, people from all over the valley had begun to gather in a village called Sulgaon. They came in tractors, in bullock carts and on foot. They came prepared to be beaten, humiliated and taken to prison.

We set out at three in the morning. We walked for three hours -- farmers, fishermen, sand quarriers, writers, painters, filmmakers, lawyers, journalists. All of India was represented. Urban, rural, touchable, untouchable. This alliance is what gives the movement its raw power, its intellectual rigor and its phenomenal tenacity. As we crossed fields and forded streams, I remember thinking -- this is my land, this is the dream to which the whole of me belongs, this is worth more to me than anything else in the world. We

were not just fighting against a dam. We were fighting for a philosophy. For a worldview.

We walked in utter silence. Not a throat was cleared. Not a bidi lit. We arrived at the dam site at dawn. Though the police were expecting us, they didn't know exactly where we would come from. We captured the dam site. People were beaten, humiliated and arrested.

I was arrested and pushed into a private car that belonged to the S. Kumars. I remember feeling a hot stab of shame -- as quick and sharp as my earlier sense of pride. This was my land too. My feudal land. Where even the police is privatized (On the way to the police station, they complained that the S. Kumars had given them nothing to eat all day.) That evening, there were so many arrests, the jail could not contain the people. The administration broke down and abandoned the jail. The people locked themselves in and demanded answers to their questions. So far, none have been forthcoming.

A Dutch documentary filmmaker recently asked me a very simple question: What can India teach the world?

A documentary filmmaker needs to see to understand. I thought of three places I could take him to.

First, to a "Call Centre College" in Gurgaon on the outskirts of Delhi. I thought it would be interesting for a filmmaker to see how easily an ancient civilization can be made to abase itself completely. In a Call Centre College, hundreds of young English-speaking Indians are being groomed to man the backroom operations of giant transnational companies. They are trained to answer telephone queries from the US and the UK (on subjects ranging from a credit card inquiry to advice about a malfunctioning washing machine.) On no account must the caller know that his or her inquiry is

being attended to by an Indian, sitting at a desk on the outskirts of Delhi. The Call Center Colleges train their students to speak in American and British accents. They have to read foreign papers so that they can chit chat about the news or the weather. On duty they have to change their given names. Sushma becomes Susie, Govind becomes Jerry, Advani becomes Andy. (Hi! I'm Andy, gee, hot day innit? Shoot, how can I help ya?)

They're paid exactly one-tenth of the salaries of their counterparts abroad. From all accounts, call centers are billed to become a trillion-dollar industry. Recently the Tatas announced their plans to redeploy 20,000 of their retrenched workers in call centers after a brief "period of training" for the business, such as "picking up the American accent and slang". The news report said that the older employees may find it difficult to work at night -- a requirement for US-based companies, given the time difference between India and the US.

The second place I thought I'd take the filmmaker to is an rss shakha where the terrible backlash to this enforced abasement is being nurtured and groomed. Where ordinary people march around in khaki shorts and learn that amassing nuclear weapons, religious bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, book burning and outright hatred are the ways in which to retrieve a nation's lost dignity. Here he might see for himself how the two arms of government work in synergy. How they have evolved and pretty near perfected an extraordinary pincer action -- while one arm is busy selling the nation off in chunks, the other, to divert attention, is orchestrating a baying, howling, deranged chorus of cultural nationalism. It would be fascinating to actually see how the inexorable ruthlessness of one process results in the naked, vulgar, terrorism perpetrated by the other. They're Siamese twins -- Advani and Andy. They share organs. They have the ability to say two entirely

contradictory things simultaneously, to hold all positions at all times. There's no separating them.

The third place I thought I'd take him to is the Narmada Valley. To witness the ferocious, magical, magnificent, tenacious and above all non-violent resistance that has grown on the banks of that beautiful river.

What is happening to our world is almost too colossal for human comprehension to contain. But it is a terrible, terrible thing. To contemplate its girth and circumference, to attempt to define it, to try and fight it all at once, is impossible. The only way to combat it is by fighting specific wars in specific ways. A good place to begin would be the Narmada Valley. In the present circumstances, the only thing in the world worth globalizing, is dissent. Dissent with options. Dissent with imagination. You'll find it in the Narmada Valley.

The borders are open. Come on in. Let's bury Rumpelstiltskin.

THE ALGEBRA OF INFINITE JUSTICE

September 2001

In the aftermath of the unconscionable September 11 suicide attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre, an American newscaster said: "Good and evil rarely manifest themselves as clearly as they did last Tuesday. People who we don't know massacred people who we do. And they did so with contemptuous glee." Then he broke down and wept.

Here's the rub: America is at war against people it doesn't know, because they don't appear much on TV. Before it has properly identified or even begun to comprehend the nature of its enemy, the US government has, in a rush of publicity and embarrassing rhetoric, cobbled together an "international coalition against terror", mobilised its army, its air force, its navy and its media, and committed them to battle.

The trouble is that once America goes off to war, it can't very well return without having fought one. If it doesn't find its enemy, for the sake of the

enraged folks back home, it will have to manufacture one. Once war begins, it will develop a momentum, a logic and a justification of its own, and we'll lose sight of why it's being fought in the first place.

What we're witnessing here is the spectacle of the world's most powerful country reaching reflexively, angrily, for an old instinct to fight a new kind of war. Suddenly, when it comes to defending itself, America's streamlined warships, cruise missiles and F-16 jets look like obsolete, lumbering things. As deterrence, its arsenal of nuclear bombs is no longer worth its weight in scrap. Box-cutters, penknives, and cold anger are the weapons with which the wars of the new century will be waged. Anger is the lock pick. It slips through customs unnoticed. Doesn't show up in baggage checks.

Who is America fighting? On September 20, the FBI said that it had doubts about the identities of some of the hijackers. On the same day President George Bush said, "We know exactly who these people are and which governments are supporting them." It sounds as though the president knows something that the FBI and the American public don't.

In his September 20 address to the US Congress, President Bush called the enemies of America "enemies of freedom". "Americans are asking, 'Why do they hate us?' " he said. "They hate our freedoms - our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." People are being asked to make two leaps of faith here. First, to assume that The Enemy is who the US government says it is, even though it has no substantial evidence to support that claim. And second, to assume that The Enemy's motives are what the US government says they are, and there's nothing to support that either.

For strategic, military and economic reasons, it is vital for the US government to persuade its public that their commitment to freedom and

democracy and the American Way of Life is under attack. In the current atmosphere of grief, outrage and anger, it's an easy notion to peddle. However, if that were true, it's reasonable to wonder why the symbols of America's economic and military dominance - the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon - were chosen as the targets of the attacks. Why not the Statue of Liberty? Could it be that the stygian anger that led to the attacks has its taproot not in American freedom and democracy, but in the US government's record of commitment and support to exactly the opposite things - to military and economic terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry and unimaginable genocide (outside America)? It must be hard for ordinary Americans, so recently bereaved, to look up at the world with their eyes full of tears and encounter what might appear to them to be indifference. It isn't indifference. It's just augury. An absence of surprise. The tired wisdom of knowing that what goes around eventually comes around. American people ought to know that it is not them but their government's policies that are so hated. They can't possibly doubt that they themselves, their extraordinary musicians, their writers, their actors, their spectacular sportsmen and their cinema, are universally welcomed. All of us have been moved by the courage and grace shown by firefighters, rescue workers and ordinary office staff in the days since the attacks.

America's grief at what happened has been immense and immensely public. It would be grotesque to expect it to calibrate or modulate its anguish. However, it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own. Because then it falls to the rest of us to ask the hard questions and

say the harsh things. And for our pains, for our bad timing, we will be disliked, ignored and perhaps eventually silenced.

The world will probably never know what motivated those particular hijackers who flew planes into those particular American buildings. They were not glory boys. They left no suicide notes, no political messages; no organisation has claimed credit for the attacks. All we know is that their belief in what they were doing outstripped the natural human instinct for survival, or any desire to be remembered. It's almost as though they could not scale down the enormity of their rage to anything smaller than their deeds. And what they did has blown a hole in the world as we knew it. In the absence of information, politicians, political commentators and writers (like myself) will invest the act with their own politics, with their own interpretations. This speculation, this analysis of the political climate in which the attacks took place, can only be a good thing.

But war is looming large. Whatever remains to be said must be said quickly. Before America places itself at the helm of the "international coalition against terror", before it invites (and coerces) countries to actively participate in its almost godlike mission - called Operation Infinite Justice until it was pointed out that this could be seen as an insult to Muslims, who believe that only Allah can mete out infinite justice, and was renamed Operation Enduring Freedom- it would help if some small clarifications are made. For example, Infinite Justice/Enduring Freedom for whom? Is this America's war against terror in America or against terror in general? What exactly is being avenged here? Is it the tragic loss of almost 7,000 lives, the gutting of five million square feet of office space in Manhattan, the destruction of a section of the Pentagon, the loss of several hundreds of thousands of jobs, the bankruptcy of some airline companies and the dip in

the New York Stock Exchange? Or is it more than that? In 1996, Madeleine Albright, then the US secretary of state, was asked on national television what she felt about the fact that 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of US economic sanctions. She replied that it was "a very hard choice", but that, all things considered, "we think the price is worth it". Albright never lost her job for saying this. She continued to travel the world representing the views and aspirations of the US government. More pertinently, the sanctions against Iraq remain in place. Children continue to die.

So here we have it. The equivocating distinction between civilisation and savagery, between the "massacre of innocent people" or, if you like, "a clash of civilisations" and "collateral damage". The sophistry and fastidious algebra of infinite justice. How many dead Iraqis will it take to make the world a better place? How many dead Afghans for every dead American? How many dead women and children for every dead man? How many dead mojahedin for each dead investment banker? As we watch mesmerised, Operation Enduring Freedom unfolds on TV monitors across the world. A coalition of the world's superpowers is closing in on Afghanistan, one of the poorest, most ravaged, war-torn countries in the world, whose ruling Taliban government is sheltering Osama bin Laden, the man being held responsible for the September 11 attacks.

The only thing in Afghanistan that could possibly count as collateral value is its citizenry. (Among them, half a million maimed orphans. There are accounts of hobbling stampedes that occur when artificial limbs are airdropped into remote, inaccessible villages.) Afghanistan's economy is in a shambles. In fact, the problem for an invading army is that Afghanistan has no conventional coordinates or signposts to plot on a military map - no big cities, no highways, no industrial complexes, no water treatment plants.

Farms have been turned into mass graves. The countryside is littered with land mines - 10 million is the most recent estimate. The American army would first have to clear the mines and build roads in order to take its soldiers in.

Fearing an attack from America, one million citizens have fled from their homes and arrived at the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The UN estimates that there are eight million Afghan citizens who need emergency aid. As supplies run out - food and aid agencies have been asked to leave - the BBC reports that one of the worst humanitarian disasters of recent times has begun to unfold. Witness the infinite justice of the new century. Civilians starving to death while they're waiting to be killed.

In America there has been rough talk of "bombing Afghanistan back to the stone age". Someone please break the news that Afghanistan is already there. And if it's any consolation, America played no small part in helping it on its way. The American people may be a little fuzzy about where exactly Afghanistan is (we hear reports that there's a run on maps of the country), but the US government and Afghanistan are old friends.

In 1979, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) launched the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA. Their purpose was to harness the energy of Afghan resistance to the Soviets and expand it into a holy war, an Islamic jihad, which would turn Muslim countries within the Soviet Union against the communist regime and eventually destabilise it. When it began, it was meant to be the Soviet Union's Vietnam. It turned out to be much more than that. Over the years, through the ISI, the CIA funded and recruited almost 100,000 radical mujahideen from 40 Islamic countries as soldiers for America's proxy war. The rank and file of the mujahideen were unaware

that their jihad was actually being fought on behalf of Uncle Sam. (The irony is that America was equally unaware that it was financing a future war against itself.)

In 1989, after being bloodied by 10 years of relentless conflict, the Russians withdrew, leaving behind a civilisation reduced to rubble. Civil war in Afghanistan raged on. The jihad spread to Chechnya, Kosovo and eventually to Kashmir. The CIA continued to pour in money and military equipment, but the overheads had become immense, and more money was needed. The mujahideen ordered farmers to plant opium as a "revolutionary tax". The ISI set up hundreds of heroin laboratories across Afghanistan. Within two years of the CIA's arrival, the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland had become the biggest producer of heroin in the world, and the single biggest source of the heroin on American streets. The annual profits, said to be between \$100bn and \$200bn, were ploughed back into training and arming militants.

In 1996, the Taliban - then a marginal sect of dangerous, hardline fundamentalists - fought its way to power in Afghanistan. It was funded by the ISI, that old cohort of the CIA, and supported by many political parties in Pakistan. The Taliban unleashed a regime of terror. Its first victims were its own people, particularly women. It closed down girls' schools, dismissed women from government jobs, and enforced sharia laws under which women deemed to be "immoral" are stoned to death, and widows guilty of being adulterous are buried alive. Given the Taliban government's human rights track record, it seems unlikely that it will in any way be intimidated or swerved from its purpose by the prospect of war, or the threat to the lives of its civilians.

After all that has happened, can there be anything more ironic than Russia and America joining hands to re-destroy Afghanistan? The question is, can you destroy destruction? Dropping more bombs on Afghanistan will only shuffle the rubble, scramble some old graves and disturb the dead.

The desolate landscape of Afghanistan was the burial ground of Soviet communism and the springboard of a unipolar world dominated by America. It made the space for neocapitalism and corporate globalisation, again dominated by America. And now Afghanistan is poised to become the graveyard for the unlikely soldiers who fought and won this war for America.

And what of America's trusted ally? Pakistan too has suffered enormously. The US government has not been shy of supporting military dictators who have blocked the idea of democracy from taking root in the country. Before the CIA arrived, there was a small rural market for opium in Pakistan. Between 1979 and 1985, the number of heroin addicts grew from zero to one-and-a-half million. Even before September 11, there were three million Afghan refugees living in tented camps along the border. Pakistan's economy is crumbling. Sectarian violence, globalisation's structural adjustment programmes and drug lords are tearing the country to pieces. Set up to fight the Soviets, the terrorist training centres and madrasahs, sown like dragon's teeth across the country, produced fundamentalists with tremendous popular appeal within Pakistan itself. The Taliban, which the Pakistan government has supported, funded and propped up for years, has material and strategic alliances with Pakistan's own political parties.

Now the US government is asking (asking?) Pakistan to garotte the pet it has hand-reared in its backyard for so many years. President Musharraf, having pledged his support to the US, could well find he has something resembling civil war on his hands.

India, thanks in part to its geography, and in part to the vision of its former leaders, has so far been fortunate enough to be left out of this Great Game. Had it been drawn in, it's more than likely that our democracy, such as it is, would not have survived. Today, as some of us watch in horror, the Indian government is furiously gyrating its hips, begging the US to set up its base in India rather than Pakistan. Having had this ringside view of Pakistan's sordid fate, it isn't just odd, it's unthinkable, that India should want to do this. Any third world country with a fragile economy and a complex social base should know by now that to invite a superpower such as America in (whether it says it's staying or just passing through) would be like inviting a brick to drop through your windscreen.

Operation Enduring Freedom is ostensibly being fought to uphold the American Way of Life. It'll probably end up undermining it completely. It will spawn more anger and more terror across the world. For ordinary people in America, it will mean lives lived in a climate of sickening uncertainty: will my child be safe in school? Will there be nerve gas in the subway? A bomb in the cinema hall? Will my love come home tonight? There have been warnings about the possibility of biological warfare - smallpox, bubonic plague, anthrax - the deadly payload of innocuous crop-duster aircraft. Being picked off a few at a time may end up being worse than being annihilated all at once by a nuclear bomb.

The US government, and no doubt governments all over the world, will use the climate of war as an excuse to curtail civil liberties, deny free speech, lay off workers, harass ethnic and religious minorities, cut back on public spending and divert huge amounts of money to the defence industry. To what purpose? President Bush can no more "rid the world of evil-doers" than

he can stock it with saints. It's absurd for the US government to even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease. Terrorism has no country. It's transnational, as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike. At the first sign of trouble, terrorists can pull up stakes and move their "factories" from country to country in search of a better deal. Just like the multi-nationals.

Terrorism as a phenomenon may never go away. But if it is to be contained, the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings who, even if they are not on TV, have loves and griefs and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven's sake, rights. Instead, when Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, was asked what he would call a victory in America's new war, he said that if he could convince the world that Americans must be allowed to continue with their way of life, he would consider it a victory.

The September 11 attacks were a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong. The message may have been written by Bin Laden (who knows?) and delivered by his couriers, but it could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America's old wars. The millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the 17,500 killed when Israel - backed by the US - invaded Lebanon in 1982, the 200,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm, the thousands of Palestinians who have died fighting Israel's occupation of the West Bank. And the millions who died, in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, at the hands of all the terrorists, dictators and genocidists whom the American government supported, trained, bankrolled and supplied with arms. And this is far from being a comprehensive list.

For a country involved in so much warfare and conflict, the American people have been extremely fortunate. The strikes on September 11 were only the second on American soil in over a century. The first was Pearl Harbour. The reprisal for this took a long route but ended with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This time the world waits with bated breath for the horrors to come.

Someone recently said that if Osama bin Laden didn't exist, America would have had to invent him. But, in a way, America did invent him. He was among the jihadis who moved to Afghanistan in 1979 when the CIA commenced its operations there. Bin Laden has the distinction of being created by the CIA and wanted by the FBI. In the course of a fortnight, he has been promoted from suspect to prime suspect and then, despite the lack of any real evidence, straight up the charts to being "wanted dead or alive".

From all accounts, it will be impossible to produce evidence (of the sort that would stand scrutiny in a court of law) to link Bin Laden to the September 11 attacks. So far, it appears that the most incriminating piece of evidence against him is the fact that he has not condemned them.

From what is known about the location of Bin Laden and the living conditions in which he operates, it's entirely possible that he did not personally plan and carry out the attacks - that he is the inspirational figure, "the CEO of the holding company". The Taliban's response to US demands for the extradition of Bin Laden has been uncharacteristically reasonable: produce the evidence, then we'll hand him over. President Bush's response is that the demand is "non-negotiable".

(While talks are on for the extradition of CEOs - can India put in a side request for the extradition of Warren Anderson of the US? He was the

chairman of Union Carbide, responsible for the Bhopal gas leak that killed 16,000 people in 1984. We have collated the necessary evidence. It's all in the files. Could we have him, please?)

But who is Osama bin Laden really? Let me rephrase that. What is Osama bin Laden? He's America's family secret. He is the American president's dark doppelganger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilised. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gunboat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of "full-spectrum dominance", its chilling disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agenda that has munched through the economies of poor countries like a cloud of locusts. Its marauding multinationals who are taking over the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the water we drink, the thoughts we think. Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and gradually becoming interchangeable. Their guns, bombs, money and drugs have been going around in the loop for a while. (The Stinger missiles that will greet US helicopters were supplied by the CIA. The heroin used by America's drug addicts comes from Afghanistan. The Bush administration recently gave Afghanistan a \$43m subsidy for a "war on drugs"....)

Now Bush and Bin Laden have even begun to borrow each other's rhetoric. Each refers to the other as "the head of the snake". Both invoke God and use the loose millenarian currency of good and evil as their terms of reference. Both are engaged in unequivocal political crimes. Both are dangerously armed - one with the nuclear arsenal of the obscenely powerful, the other with the incandescent, destructive power of the utterly hopeless.

The fireball and the ice pick. The bludgeon and the axe. The important thing to keep in mind is that neither is an acceptable alternative to the other.

President Bush's ultimatum to the people of the world - "If you're not with us, you're against us" - is a piece of presumptuous arrogance. It's not a choice that people want to, need to, or should have to make.

WAR IS PEACE

October 2001

As darkness deepened over Afghanistan on Sunday, October 7, 2001, the US government, backed by the International Coalition Against Terror (the new, amenable surrogate for the United Nations), launched air strikes against Afghanistan. TV channels lingered on computer-animated images of Cruise missiles, stealth bombers, Tomahawks, 'bunker-busting' missiles and Mark 82 high-drag bombs. All over the world, little boys watched goggle-eyed and stopped clamouring for new video games.

The UN, reduced now to an ineffective abbreviation, wasn't even asked to mandate the air strikes. (As Madeleine Albright once said, "The US acts multilaterally when it can, and unilaterally when it must.")

The 'evidence' against the terrorists was shared amongst friends in the 'Coalition'. After conferring, they announced that it didn't matter whether or not the 'evidence' would stand up in a court of law. Thus, in an instant, were centuries of jurisprudence carelessly trashed.

Nothing can excuse or justify an act of terrorism, whether it is committed by religious fundamentalists, private militia, people's resistance movements - or whether it's dressed up as a war of retribution by a recognised government. The bombing of Afghanistan is not revenge for New York and Washington. It is yet another act of terror against the people of the world. Each innocent person that is killed must be added to, not set off against, the grisly toll of civilians who died in New York and Washington.

People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them. People get killed. Governments moult and regroup, hydra-headed. They first use flags to shrink-wrap peoples' minds and suffocate real thought, and then as ceremonial shrouds to cloak the mangled corpses of the willing dead. On both sides, in Afghanistan as well as America, civilians are now hostage to the actions of their own governments. Unknowingly, ordinary people in both countries share a common bond - they have to live with the phenomenon of blind, unpredictable terror. Each batch of bombs that is dropped on Afghanistan is matched by a corresponding escalation of mass hysteria in America about anthrax, more hijackings and other terrorist acts.

There is no easy way out of the spiralling morass of terror and brutality that confronts the world today. It is time now for the human race to hold still, to delve into its wells of collective wisdom, both ancient and modern. What happened on September 11 changed the world forever. Freedom, progress, wealth, technology, war - these words have taken on new meaning. Governments have to acknowledge this transformation and approach their

new tasks with a modicum of honesty and humility. Unfortunately, up to now, there has been no sign of any introspection from the leaders of the International Coalition. Or the Taliban.

When he announced the air strikes, President George Bush said, "We're a peaceful nation." America's favourite ambassador, Tony Blair, (who also holds the portfolio of Prime Minister of the UK), echoed him: "We're a peaceful people."

So now we know. Pigs are horses. Girls are boys. War is Peace.

Speaking at the FBI headquarters a few days later, President Bush said: "This is our calling. This is the calling of the United States of America. The most free nation in the world. A nation built on fundamental values that reject hate, reject violence, rejects murderers and rejects evil. We will not tire."

Here is a list of the countries that America has been at war with - and bombed - since World War II: China (1945-46, 1950-53), Korea (1950-53), Guatemala (1954, 1967-69), Indonesia (1958), Cuba (1959-60), the Belgian Congo (1964), Peru (1965), Laos (1964-73), Vietnam (1961-73), Cambodia (1969-70), Grenada (1983), Libya (1986), El Salvador (1980s), Nicaragua (1980s), Panama (1989), Iraq (1991-1999), Bosnia (1995), Sudan (1998), Yugoslavia (1999). And now Afghanistan.

Certainly it does not tire - this, the Most Free nation in the world. What freedoms does it uphold? Within its borders, the freedoms of speech, religion, thought; of artistic expression, food habits, sexual preferences (well, to some extent) and many other exemplary, wonderful things. Outside its borders, the freedom to dominate, humiliate and subjugate - usually in the service of America's real religion, the 'free market'. So when the US government christens a war 'Operation Infinite Justice', or 'Operation

Enduring Freedom', we in the Third World feel more than a tremor of fear. Because we know that Infinite Justice for some means Infinite Injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for others.

The International Coalition Against Terror is largely a cabal of the richest countries in the world. Between them, they manufacture and sell almost all of the world's weapons, they possess the largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction - chemical, biological and nuclear. They have fought the most wars, account for most of the genocide, subjection, ethnic cleansing and human rights violations in modern history, and have sponsored, armed, and financed untold numbers of dictators and despots. Between them, they have worshipped, almost deified, the cult of violence and war. For all its appalling sins, the Taliban just isn't in the same league.

The Taliban was compounded in the crumbling crucible of rubble, heroin, and landmines in the backwash of the Cold War. Its oldest leaders are in their early 40s. Many of them are disfigured and handicapped, missing an eye, an arm or a leg. They grew up in a society scarred and devastated by war. Between the Soviet Union and America, over 20 years, about \$45 billion worth of arms and ammunition was poured into Afghanistan.

The latest weaponry was the only shard of modernity to intrude upon a thoroughly medieval society. Young boys - many of them orphans - who grew up in those times, had guns for toys, never knew the security and comfort of family life, never experienced the company of women. Now, as adults and rulers, the Taliban beat, stone, rape, and brutalise women; they don't seem to know what else to do with them. Years of war have stripped them of gentleness, inured them to kindness and human compassion. They

dance to the percussive rhythms of bombs raining down around them. Now they've turned their monstrosity on their own people.

With all due respect to President Bush, the people of the world do not have to choose between the Taliban and the US government. All the beauty of human civilization - our art, our music, our literature - lies beyond these two fundamentalist, ideological poles. There is as little chance that the people of the world can all become middle-class consumers as there is that they'll all embrace any one particular religion.

The issue is not about Good vs Evil or Islam vs Christianity as much as it is about space. About how to accommodate diversity, how to contain the impulse towards hegemony - every kind of hegemony, economic, military, linguistic, religious, and cultural. Any ecologist will tell you how dangerous and fragile a monoculture is. A hegemonic world is like having a government without a healthy opposition. It becomes a kind of dictatorship. It's like putting a plastic bag over the world and preventing it from breathing. Eventually, it will be torn open.

One and a half million Afghan people lost their lives in the 20 years of conflict that preceded this new war.

Afghanistan was reduced to rubble, and now, the rubble is being pounded into finer dust. By the second day of the airstrikes, US pilots were returning to their bases without dropping their assigned payload of bombs.

As one senior official put it, Afghanistan is "not a target-rich environment". At a press briefing at the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld, US defence secretary, was asked if America had run out of targets. "First we're going to re-hit targets," he said, "and second, we're not running out of targets, Afghanistan is..." This was greeted with gales of laughter in the Briefing Room. By the third day of the strikes, the US defence department

boasted that it had "achieved air supremacy over Afghanistan". (Did they mean that they had destroyed both, or maybe all 16, of Afghanistan's planes?)

On the ground in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance - the Taliban's old enemy, and therefore the International Coalition's newest friend - is making headway in its push to capture Kabul. (For the archives, let it be said that the Northern Alliance's track record is not very different from the Taliban's. But for now, because it's inconvenient, that little detail is being glossed over.)

The visible, moderate, "acceptable" leader of the Alliance, Ahmed Shah Masood, was killed in a suicide-bomb attack early in September. The rest of the Northern Alliance is a brittle confederation of brutal warlords, ex-communists, and unbending clerics. It is a disparate group divided along ethnic lines, some of whom have tasted power in Afghanistan in the past.

Until the US air strikes, the Northern Alliance controlled about 5 per cent of the geographical area of Afghanistan. Now, with the Coalition's help and 'air cover', it is poised to topple the Taliban. Meanwhile, Taliban soldiers, sensing imminent defeat, have begun to defect to the Alliance. So the fighting forces are busy switching sides and changing uniforms. But in an enterprise as cynical as this one, it seems to matter hardly at all. Love is hate, north is south, peace is war.

Among the global powers, there is talk of 'putting in a representative government'. Or, on the other hand, of 'restoring' the Kingdom to Afghanistan's 89-year-old former king, Zahir Shah, who has lived in exile in Rome since 1973. That's the way the game goes - support Saddam Hussein, then 'take him out'; finance the mujahideen, then bomb them to smithereens; put in Zahir Shah and see if he's going to be a good boy. (Is it

possible to 'put in' a representative government? Can you place an order for Democracy - with extra cheese and jalapeno peppers?)

Reports have begun to trickle in about civilian casualties, about cities emptying out as Afghan civilians flock to the borders which have been closed. Main arterial roads have been blown up or sealed off. Those who have experience of working in Afghanistan say that by early November, food convoys will not be able to reach the millions of Afghans (7.5 million according to the UN) who run the very real risk of starving to death during the course of this winter. They say that in the days that are left before winter sets in, there can either be a war, or an attempt to reach food to the hungry. Not both.

As a gesture of humanitarian support, the US government air-dropped 37,000 packets of emergency rations into Afghanistan. It says it plans to drop a total of 5,000,000 packets. That will still only add up to a single meal for half-a-million people out of the several million in dire need of food. Aid workers have condemned it as a cynical, dangerous, public-relations exercise. They say that air-dropping food packets is worse than futile. First, because the food will never get to those who really need it. More dangerously, those who run out to retrieve the packets risk being blown up by landmines. A tragic alms race.

Nevertheless, the food packets had a photo-op all to themselves. Their contents were listed in major newspapers. They were vegetarian, we're told, as per Muslim Dietary Law(!) Each yellow packet, decorated with the American flag, contained: rice, peanut butter, bean salad, strawberry jam, crackers, raisins, flat bread, an apple fruit bar, seasoning, matches, a set of plastic cutlery, a serviette and illustrated user instructions.

After three years of unremitting drought, an air-dropped airline meal in Jalalabad! The level of cultural ineptitude, the failure to understand what months of relentless hunger and grinding poverty really mean, the US government's attempt to use even this abject misery to boost its self-image, beggars description.

Reverse the scenario for a moment. Imagine if the Taliban government was to bomb New York City, saying all the while that its real target was the US government and its policies. And suppose, during breaks between the bombing, the Taliban dropped a few thousand packets containing nan and kababs impaled on an Afghan flag. Would the good people of New York ever find it in themselves to forgive the Afghan government? Even if they were hungry, even if they needed the food, even if they ate it, how would they ever forget the insult, the condescension? Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of New York City, returned a gift of \$10 million from a Saudi prince because it came with a few words of friendly advice about American policy in the Middle East. Is pride a luxury only the rich are entitled to?

Far from stamping it out, igniting this kind of rage is what creates terrorism. Hate and retribution don't go back into the box once you've let them out. For every 'terrorist' or his 'supporter' that is killed, hundreds of innocent people are being killed too. And for every hundred innocent people killed, there is a good chance that several future terrorists will be created.

Where will it all lead?

Setting aside the rhetoric for a moment, consider the fact that the world has not yet found an acceptable definition of what 'terrorism' is. One country's terrorist is too often another's freedom fighter. At the heart of the matter lies the world's deep-seated ambivalence towards violence. Once violence is accepted as a legitimate political instrument, then the morality

and political acceptability of terrorists (insurgents or freedom fighters) becomes contentious, bumpy terrain.

The US government itself has funded, armed, and sheltered plenty of rebels and insurgents around the world. The CIA and Pakistan's ISI trained and armed the mujahideen who, in the 1980s, were seen as terrorists by the government in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. While President Reagan posed with them for a group portrait and called them the moral equivalents of America's founding fathers.

Today, Pakistan - America's ally in this new war - sponsors insurgents who cross the border into Kashmir in India. Pakistan lauds them as 'freedom fighters', India calls them 'terrorists'. India, for its part, denounces countries who sponsor and abet terrorism, but the Indian army has, in the past, trained separatist Tamil rebels asking for a homeland in Sri Lanka - the LTTE, responsible for countless acts of bloody terrorism.

(Just as the CIA abandoned the mujahideen after they had served its purpose, India abruptly turned its back on the LTTE for a host of political reasons. It was an enraged LTTE suicide-bomber who assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.)

It is important for governments and politicians to understand that manipulating these huge, raging human feelings for their own narrow purposes may yield instant results, but eventually and inexorably, they have disastrous consequences. Igniting and exploiting religious sentiments for reasons of political expediency is the most dangerous legacy that governments or politicians can bequeath to any people - including their own. People who live in societies ravaged by religious or communal bigotry know that every religious text - from the Bible to the Bhagwad Gita - can be

mined and misinterpreted to justify anything, from nuclear war to genocide to corporate globalisation.

This is not to suggest that the terrorists who perpetrated the outrage on September 11 should not be hunted down and brought to book. They must be. But is war the best way to track them down? Will burning the haystack find you the needle? Or will it escalate the anger and make the world a living hell for all of us?

At the end of the day, how many people can you spy on, how many bank accounts can you freeze, how many conversations can you eavesdrop on, how many e-mails can you intercept, how many letters can you open, how many phones can you tap? Even before September 11, the CIA had accumulated more information than is humanly possible to process. (Sometimes, too much data can actually hinder intelligence - small wonder the US spy satellites completely missed the preparation that preceded India's nuclear tests in 1998.)

The sheer scale of the surveillance will become a logistical, ethical and civil rights nightmare. It will drive everybody clean crazy. And freedom - that precious, precious thing - will be the first casualty. It's already hurt and haemorrhaging dangerously.

Governments across the world are cynically using the prevailing paranoia to promote their own interests. All kinds of unpredictable political forces are being unleashed. In India, for instance, members of the All India People's Resistance Forum, who were distributing anti-war and anti-US pamphlets in Delhi, have been jailed. Even the printer of the leaflets was arrested. The right-wing government (while it shelters Hindu extremists groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal) has banned the Students' Islamic Movement of India and is trying to revive an anti-terrorist act which

had been withdrawn after the Human Rights Commission reported that it had been more abused than used. Millions of Indian citizens are Muslim. Can anything be gained by alienating them?

Every day that the war goes on, raging emotions are being let loose into the world. The international press has little or no independent access to the war zone. In any case, mainstream media, particularly in the US, has more or less rolled over, allowing itself to be tickled on the stomach with press hand-outs from military men and government officials. Afghan radio stations have been destroyed by the bombing. The Taliban has always been deeply suspicious of the Press. In the propaganda war, there is no accurate estimate of how many people have been killed, or how much destruction has taken place. In the absence of reliable information, wild rumours spread.

Put your ear to the ground in this part of the world, and you can hear the thrumming, the deadly drumbeat of burgeoning anger. Please. Please, stop the war now. Enough people have died. The smart missiles are just not smart enough. They're blowing up whole warehouses of suppressed fury.

President George Bush recently boasted: "When I take action, I'm not going to fire a \$2 million missile at a \$10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt. It's going to be decisive." President Bush should know that there are no targets in Afghanistan that will give his missiles their money's worth. Perhaps, if only to balance his books, he should develop some cheaper missiles to use on cheaper targets and cheaper lives in the poor countries of the world. But then, that may not make good business sense to the Coalition's weapons manufacturers.

It wouldn't make any sense at all, for example, to the Carlyle Group—described by the Industry Standard as 'the world's largest private equity

firm', with \$12 billion under management. Carlyle invests in the defence sector and makes its money from military conflicts and weapons spending.

Carlyle is run by men with impeccable credentials. Former US defence secretary Frank Carlucci is Carlyle's chairman and managing director (he was a college roommate of Donald Rumsfeld's). Carlyle's other partners include former US secretary of state James A. Baker III, George Soros, Fred Malek (George Bush Sr's campaign manager).

An American paper - the Baltimore Chronicle and Sentinel - says that former President George Bush Sr is reported to be seeking investments for the Carlyle Group from Asian markets. He is reportedly paid not inconsiderable sums of money to make 'presentations' to potential government-clients.

Ho Hum. As the tired saying goes, it's all in the family.

Then there's that other branch of traditional family business - oil. Remember, President George Bush (Jr) and Vice-President Dick Cheney both made their fortunes working in the US oil industry.

Turkmenistan, which borders the northwest of Afghanistan, holds the world's third largest gas reserves and an estimated six billion barrels of oil reserves. Enough, experts say, to meet American energy needs for the next 30 years (or a developing country's energy requirements for a couple of centuries.) America has always viewed oil as a security consideration and protected it by any means it deems necessary. Few of us doubt that its military presence in the Gulf has little to do with its concern for human rights and almost entirely to do with its strategic interest in oil.

Oil and gas from the Caspian region currently moves northward to European markets. Geographically and politically, Iran and Russia are major impediments to American interests.

In 1998, Dick Cheney - then CEO of Halliburton, a major player in the oil industry - said: "I can't think of a time when we've had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian. It's almost as if the opportunities have arisen overnight." True enough.

For some years now, an American oil giant called Unocal has been negotiating with the Taliban for permission to construct an oil pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and out to the Arabian Sea. From here, Unocal hopes to access the lucrative 'emerging markets' in South and Southeast Asia. In December 1997, a delegation of Taliban mullahs travelled to America and even met US State Department officials and Unocal executives in Houston.

At that time the Taliban's taste for public executions and its treatment of Afghan women were not made out to be the crimes against humanity that they are now. Over the next six months, pressure from hundreds of outraged American feminist groups was brought to bear on the Clinton administration. Fortunately, they managed to scuttle the deal. And now comes the US oil industry's big chance.

In America, the arms industry, the oil industry, the major media networks, and, indeed, US foreign policy, are all controlled by the same business combines. Therefore, it would be foolish to expect this talk of guns and oil and defence deals to get any real play in the media.

In any case, to a distraught, confused people whose pride has just been wounded, whose loved ones have been tragically killed, whose anger is fresh and sharp, the inanities about the 'Clash of Civilisations' and the 'Good vs Evil' discourse come home in unerringly. They are cynically doled out by government spokesmen like a daily dose of vitamins or anti-depressants.

Regular medication ensures that mainland America continues to remain the enigma it has always been - a curiously insular people, administered by a pathologically meddling, promiscuous government.

And what of the rest of us, the numb recipients of this onslaught of what we know to be preposterous propaganda? The daily consumers of the lies and brutality smeared in peanut butter and strawberry jam being air-dropped into our minds just like those yellow food packets. Shall we look away and eat because we're hungry, or shall we stare unblinking at the grim theatre unfolding in Afghanistan until we retch collectively and say, in one voice, that we have had enough?

As the first year of the new millennium rushes to a close, one wonders - have we forfeited our right to dream? Will we ever be able to re-imagine beauty? Will it be possible ever again to watch the slow, amazed blink of a newborn gecko in the sun, or whisper back to the marmot who has just whispered in your ear - without thinking of the World Trade Center and Afghanistan?

COME SEPTEMBER

September 2002

Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it's actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative—they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different techniques of storytelling. For reasons that I don't fully understand, fiction dances out of me, and nonfiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning.

The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as nonfiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. John Berger, that most wonderful writer, once wrote: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one."

There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolutist ideology against another, but as a storyteller who wants to share her way of seeing. Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories; it's about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power. I believe that the accumulation of vast unfettered power by a State or a country, a corporation or an institution—or even an individual, a spouse, a friend, a sibling—regardless of ideology, results in excesses such as the ones I will recount here.

Living as I do, as millions of us do, in the shadow of the nuclear holocaust that the governments of India and Pakistan keep promising their brain-washed citizenry, and in the global neighbourhood of the War Against Terror (what President Bush rather biblically calls “The Task That Never Ends”), I find myself thinking a great deal about the relationship between Citizens and the State.

In India, those of us who have expressed views on Nuclear Bombs, Big Dams, Corporate Globalization and the rising threat of communal Hindu fascism—views that are at variance with the Indian Government's—are branded 'anti-national.' While this accusation doesn't fill me with indignation, it's not an accurate description of what I do or how I think. Because an 'anti-national' is a person who is against his or her own nation and, by inference, is pro some other one. But it isn't necessary to be 'anti-national' to be deeply suspicious of all nationalism, to be anti-nationalism. Nationalism of one kind or another was the cause of most of the genocide of the twentieth century. Flags are bits of coloured cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people's brains and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead. [Applause] When independent-thinking people (and here I do not

include the corporate media) begin to rally under flags, when writers, painters, musicians, filmmakers suspend their judgment and blindly yoke their art to the service of the “Nation,” it’s time for all of us to sit up and worry. In India, we saw it happen soon after the Nuclear tests in 1998 and during the Cargill War against Pakistan in 1999. In the U.S. we saw it during the Gulf War and we see it now during the “War Against Terror.” That blizzard of Made-in-China American flags.

Recently, those who have criticized the actions of the U.S. government (myself included) have been called “anti-American.” Anti-Americanism is in the process of being consecrated into an ideology.

The term “anti-American” is usually used by the American establishment to discredit and, not falsely—but shall we say inaccurately—define its critics. Once someone is branded anti-American, the chances are that he or she will be judged before they are heard, and the argument will be lost in the welter of bruised national pride.

But what does the term “anti-American” mean? Does it mean you are anti-jazz? Or that you’re opposed to freedom of speech? That you don’t delight in Toni Morrison or John Updike? That you have a quarrel with giant sequoias? Does it mean that you don’t admire the hundreds of thousands of American citizens who marched against nuclear weapons, or the thousands of war resisters who forced their government to withdraw from Vietnam? Does it mean that you hate all Americans?

This sly conflation of America’s culture, music, literature, the breathtaking physical beauty of the land, the ordinary pleasures of ordinary people with criticism of the U.S. government’s foreign policy (about which, thanks to America’s “free press”, sadly most Americans know very little) is a deliberate and extremely effective strategy. It’s like a retreating army taking

cover in a heavily populated city, hoping that the prospect of hitting civilian targets will deter enemy fire.

But there are many Americans who would be mortified to be associated with their government's policies. The most scholarly, scathing, incisive, hilarious critiques of the hypocrisy and the contradictions in U.S. government policy come from American citizens. When the rest of the world wants to know what the U.S. government is up to, we turn to Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Howard Zinn, Ed Herman, Amy Goodman, Michael Albert, Chalmers Johnson, William Blum and Anthony Amove to tell us what's really going on.

Similarly, in India, not hundreds, but millions of us would be ashamed and offended if we were in any way implicated with the present Indian government's fascist policies which, apart from the perpetration of State terrorism in the valley of Kashmir (in the name of fighting terrorism), have also turned a blind eye to the recent state-supervised pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat. It would be absurd to think that those who criticize the Indian government are "anti-Indian"—although the government itself never hesitates to take that line. It is dangerous to cede to the Indian government or the American government or anyone for that matter, the right to define what "India" or "America" are or ought to be.

To call someone "anti-American", indeed to be anti-American, (or for that matter, anti-Indian or anti-Timbuktuan) is not just racist, it's a failure of the imagination. An inability to see the world in terms other than those the establishment has set out for you. If you're not a Bushie you're a Taliban. If you don't love us, you hate us. If you're not Good, you're Evil. If you're not with us, you're with the terrorists.

Last year, like many others, I too made the mistake of scoffing at this post-September 11th rhetoric, dismissing it as foolish and arrogant. But I've realized it's not foolish at all. It's actually a canny recruitment drive for a misconceived, dangerous war. Everyday I'm taken aback at how many people believe that opposing the war in Afghanistan amounts to supporting terrorism, of voting for the Taliban. Now that the initial aim of the war—capturing Osama bin Laden (dead or alive)—seems to have run into bad weather, the goalposts have been moved. It's being made out that the whole point of the war was to topple the Taliban regime and liberate Afghan women from their burqas, we are being asked to believe that the U.S. marines are actually on a feminist mission. (If so, will their next stop be America's military ally Saudi Arabia?) Think of it this way: in India there are some pretty reprehensible social practices against “untouchables”, against Christians and Muslims, against women. Pakistan and Bangladesh have even worse ways of dealing with minority communities and women. Should they be bombed? Should Delhi, Islamabad and Dhaka be destroyed? Is it possible to bomb bigotry out of India? Can we bomb our way to a feminist paradise? [Laughter] Is that how women won the vote in the U.S? Or how slavery was abolished? Can we win redress for the genocide of the millions of Native Americans upon whose corpses the United States was founded by bombing Santa Fe?

None of us need anniversaries to remind us of what we cannot forget. So it's no more than coincidence that I happen to be here, on American soil, in September—this month of dreadful anniversaries. Uppermost on everybody's mind of course, particularly here in America, is the horror of what has come to be known as 9/11. Nearly three thousand civilians lost their lives in that lethal terrorist strike. The grief is still deep. The rage still

sharp. The tears have not dried. And a strange, deadly war is raging around the world. Yet, each person who has lost a loved one surely knows secretly, deeply, that no war, no act of revenge, no daisy-cutters dropped on someone else's loved ones or someone else's children, will blunt the edges of their pain or bring their own loved ones back. War cannot avenge those who have died. War is only a brutal desecration of their memory.

To fuel yet another war—this time against Iraq—by cynically manipulating people's grief, by packaging it for TV specials sponsored by corporations selling detergent and running shoes, is to cheapen and devalue grief, to drain it of meaning. What we are seeing now is a vulgar display of the business of grief, the commerce of grief, the pillaging of even the most private human feelings for political purpose. It is a terrible, violent thing for a State to do to its people.

It's not a clever-enough subject to speak of from a public platform, but what I would really love to talk to you about is Loss. Loss and losing. Grief, failure, brokenness, numbness, uncertainty, fear, the death of feeling, the death of dreaming. The absolute relentless, endless, habitual, unfairness of the world. What does loss mean to individuals? What does it mean to whole cultures, whole people who have learned to live with it as a constant companion?

Since it is September 11th we're talking about, perhaps it's in the fitness of things that we remember what that date means, not only to those who lost their loved ones in America last year, but to those in other parts of the world to whom that date has long held significance. This historical dredging is not offered as an accusation or a provocation. But just to share the grief of history. To thin the mists a little. To say to the citizens of America, in the gentlest, most human way: "Welcome to the World."

Twenty-nine years ago, in Chile, on the 11th of September 1973, General Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in a CIA-backed coup. “Chile should not be allowed to go Marxist just because its people are irresponsible,” said Henry Kissinger, Nobel Peace Laureate, then the U.S. Secretary of State.

After the coup, President Allende was found dead inside the presidential palace. Whether he was killed or whether he killed himself, we’ll never know. In the regime of terror that ensued, thousands of people were killed. Many more simply “disappeared”. Firing squads conducted public executions. Concentration camps and torture chambers were opened across the country. The dead were buried in mine shafts and unmarked graves. For seventeen years the people of Chile lived in dread of the midnight knock, of routine “disappearances”, of sudden arrest and torture. Chileans tell the story of how the musician Victor Jara had his hands cut off in front of a crowd in the Santiago stadium. Before they shot him, Pinochet’s soldiers threw his guitar at him and mockingly asked him to play.

In 1999, following the arrest of General Pinochet in Britain, thousands of secret documents were declassified by the U.S. government. They contain unequivocal evidence of the CIA’s involvement in the coup as well as the fact that the U.S. government had detailed information about the situation in Chile during General Pinochet’s reign. Yet, Kissinger assured the general of his support: “In the United States as you know, we are sympathetic to what you’re trying to do,” he said. “We wish your government well.”

Those of us who have only ever known life in a democracy, however flawed, would find it hard to imagine what living in a dictatorship and enduring the absolute loss of freedom means. It isn’t just those who Pinochet

murdered, but the lives he stole from the living that must be accounted for too.

Sadly, Chile was not the only country in South America to be singled out for the U.S. government's attentions. Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, El Salvador, Peru, Mexico and Colombia—they've all been the playground for covert—and overt—operations by the CIA. Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been killed, tortured or have simply disappeared under the despotic regimes that were propped up in their countries. If this were not humiliation enough, the people of South America have had to bear the cross of being branded as people who are incapable of democracy—as if coups and massacres are somehow encrypted in their genes.

This list does not, of course, include countries in Africa or Asia that suffered U.S. military interventions—Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, Laos, and Cambodia. For how many Septembers for decades together have millions of Asian people been bombed, and burned, and slaughtered? How many Septembers have gone by since August 1945, when hundreds of thousands of ordinary Japanese people were obliterated by the nuclear strikes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? For how many Septembers have the thousands who had the misfortune of surviving those strikes endured that living hell that was visited on them, their unborn children, their children's children, on the earth, the sky, the water, the wind, and all the creatures that swim and walk and crawl and fly? Not far from here, in Albuquerque, is the National Atomic Museum where Fat Man and Little Boy (the affectionate nicknames for the bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) were available as souvenir earrings. Funky young people wore them. A massacre

dangling in each ear. But I'm straying from my theme. It's September that we're talking about, not August.

September 11th has a tragic resonance in the Middle East, too. On the 11th of September 1922, ignoring Arab outrage, the British government proclaimed a mandate in Palestine, a follow-up to the 1917 Balfour Declaration which imperial Britain issued, with its army massed outside the gates of Gaza. The Balfour Declaration promised European Zionists a national home for Jewish people. (At the time, the Empire on which the Sun Never Set was free to snatch and bequeath national homes like a school bully distributes marbles.)

How carelessly imperial power vivisected ancient civilizations. Palestine and Kashmir are imperial Britain's festering, blood-drenched gifts to the modern world. Both are fault lines in the raging international conflicts of today.

In 1937, Winston Churchill said of the Palestinians, I quote, "I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly-wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place." That set the trend for the Israeli State's attitude towards the Palestinians. In 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir said, "Palestinians do not exist." Her successor, Prime Minister Levi Eschol said, "What are Palestinians? When I came here (to Palestine), there were 250,000 non-Jews, mainly Arabs and Bedouins. It was a desert, more than underdeveloped. Nothing." Prime Minister Menachem Begin called Palestinians "two-legged

beasts.” Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir called them “grasshoppers” who could be crushed. This is the language of Heads of State, not the words of ordinary people.

In 1947, the U.N. formally partitioned Palestine and allotted 55 per cent of Palestine’s land to the Zionists. Within a year, they had captured 76 per cent. On the 14th of May 1948 the State of Israel was declared. Minutes after the declaration, the United States recognized Israel. The West Bank was annexed by Jordan. The Gaza strip came under Egyptian military control, and formally Palestine ceased to exist except in the minds and hearts of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people who became refugees. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza strip.

Over the decades there have been uprisings, wars, intifadas. Tens of thousands have lost their lives. Accords and treaties have been signed. Cease-fires declared and violated. But the bloodshed doesn’t end. Palestine still remains illegally occupied. Its people live in inhuman conditions, in virtual Bantustans, where they are subjected to collective punishments, twenty-four-hour curfews, where they are humiliated and brutalized on a daily basis. They never know when their homes will be demolished, when their children will be shot, when their precious trees will be cut, when their roads will be closed, when they will be allowed to walk down to the market to buy food and medicine. And when they will not. They live with no semblance of dignity. With not much hope in sight. They have no control over their lands, their security, their movement, their communication, their water supply. So when accords are signed, and words like “autonomy” and even “statehood” bandied about, it’s always worth asking: What sort of autonomy? What sort of State? What sort of rights will its citizens have?

Young Palestinians who cannot control their anger turn themselves into human bombs and haunt Israel's streets and public places, blowing themselves up, killing ordinary people, injecting terror into daily life, and eventually hardening both societies' suspicion and mutual hatred of each other. Each bombing invites merciless reprisal and even more hardship on Palestinian people. But then suicide bombing is an act of individual despair, not a revolutionary tactic. Although Palestinian attacks strike terror into Israeli citizens, they provide the perfect cover for the Israeli government's daily incursions into Palestinian territory, the perfect excuse for old-fashioned, nineteenth-century colonialism, dressed up as a new-fashioned, twenty-first-century "war".

Israel's staunchest political and military ally is and always has been the U.S. The U.S. government has blocked, along with Israel, almost every U.N. resolution that sought a peaceful, equitable solution to the conflict. It has supported almost every war that Israel has fought. When Israel attacks Palestine, it is American missiles that smash through Palestinian homes. And every year Israel receives several billion dollars from the United States—taxpayers' money.

What lessons should we draw from this tragic conflict? Is it really impossible for Jewish people who suffered so cruelly themselves—more cruelly perhaps than any other people in history—to understand the vulnerability and the yearning of those whom they have displaced? Does extreme suffering always kindle cruelty? What hope does this leave the human race with? What will happen to the Palestinian people in the event of a victory? When a nation without a state eventually proclaims a state, what kind of state will it be? What horrors will be perpetrated under its flag?

Is it a separate state that we should be fighting for or, the rights to a life of liberty and dignity for everyone regardless of their ethnicity or religion?

Palestine was once a secular bulwark in the Middle East. But now the weak, undemocratic, by all accounts corrupt but avowedly non-sectarian P.L.O., is losing ground to Hamas, which espouses an overtly sectarian ideology and fights in the name of Islam. To quote from their manifesto: “we will be its soldiers and the firewood of its fire, which will burn the enemies.”

The world is called upon to condemn suicide bombers. But can we ignore the long road they have journeyed on before they have arrived at this destination? September 11, 1922 to September 11, 2002—eighty years is a long time to have been waging war. Is there some advice the world can give the people of Palestine? Should they just take Golda Meir’s suggestion and make a real effort not to exist?

In another part of the Middle East, September 11th strikes a more recent cord. It was on the 11th of September 1990 that George W. Bush, Sr., then President of the U.S., made a speech to a joint session of Congress announcing his government’s decision to go to war against Iraq.

The U.S. government says that Saddam Hussein is a war criminal, a cruel military despot who has committed genocide against his own people. That’s a fairly accurate description of the man. In 1988, Saddam Hussein razed hundreds of villages in northern Iraq, used chemical weapons and machine guns to kill thousands of Kurdish people. Today we know that that same year the U.S. government provided him with \$500 million in subsidies to buy American farm products. The next year, after he had successfully completed his genocidal campaign, the U.S. government doubled its subsidy to \$1 billion. It also provided him with high-quality germ seed for anthrax,

and helicopters and dual-use material that could be used to manufacture chemical and biological weapons. So it turns out that while Saddam Hussein was carrying out his worst atrocities, the U.S. and the U.K. governments were his close allies.

So what changed? In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. His sin was not so much that he had committed an act of war, but that he had acted independently, without orders from his master. This display of independence was enough to upset the power equation in the Gulf. So it was decided that Saddam Hussein be exterminated, like a pet that has outlived its owner's affection.

The first Allied attack on Iraq took place on January '91. The world watched the prime-time war as it was played out on T.V. (In India in those days you had to go to a five-star hotel lobby to watch CNN.) Tens of thousands of people were killed in a month of devastating bombing. What many do not know is that the war never ended then. The initial fury simmered down into the longest sustained air attack on a country since the Vietnam War. Over the last decade American and British forces have fired thousands of missiles and bombs on Iraq. In the decade of economic sanctions that followed the war, Iraqi civilians have been denied food, medicine, hospital equipment, ambulances, clean water—the basic essentials.

About half a million Iraqi children have died as a result of the sanctions. Of them, Madeleine Albright, then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, famously said, "It's a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it." "Moral equivalence" was the term that was used to denounce those of us who criticized the war on Afghanistan. Madeleine Albright cannot be

accused of moral equivalence. What she said was just straightforward algebra.

A decade of bombing has not managed to dislodge Saddam Hussein, “the Beast of Baghdad”. Now, almost 12 years on, President George Bush, Jr. has ratcheted up the rhetoric once again. He’s proposing an all-out war whose goal is nothing short of a regime change. The New York Times says that the Bush administration is following, quote, “a meticulously planned strategy to persuade the public, the Congress, and the Allies of the need to confront the threat of Saddam Hussein.” Andrew. H. Card, Jr., the White House Chief of Staff, described how the administration was stepping up its war plans for the fall, and I quote, “From a marketing point of view”, he said, “you don’t introduce new products in August.” This time the catchphrase for Washington’s “new product” is not the plight of Kuwaiti people but the assertion that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. “Forget the feckless moralizing of peace lobbies”, wrote Richard Perle, a former advisor to President Bush, “We need to get him before he gets us.”

Weapons inspectors have conflicting reports of the status of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, and many have said clearly that its arsenal has been dismantled and that it does not have the capacity to build one. However, there is no confusion over the extent and range of America’s arsenal of nuclear and chemical weapons. Would the U.S. government welcome weapons inspectors? Would the U.K.? Or Israel?

What if Iraq does have a nuclear weapon, does that justify a pre-emptive U.S. strike? The U.S. has the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world and it’s the only country in the world to have actually used them on civilian populations. If the U.S. is justified in launching a pre-emptive strike on Iraq, why, then any nuclear power is justified in carrying out a pre-emptive strike

on any other. India could attack Pakistan, or the other way around. If the U.S. government develops a distaste for, say, the Indian Prime Minister, can it just “take him out” with a pre-emptive strike?

Recently the United States played an important part in forcing India and Pakistan back from the brink of war. Is it so hard for it to take its own advice? Who is guilty of feckless moralizing? Of preaching peace while it wages war? The U.S., which George Bush has called “the most peaceful nation on earth”, has been at war with one country or another every year for the last fifty.

Wars are never fought for altruistic reasons. They’re usually fought for hegemony, for business. And then of course there’s the business of war.

Protecting its control of the world’s oil is fundamental to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. government’s recent military interventions in the Balkans and Central Asia have to do with oil. Hamid Karzai, the puppet President of Afghanistan installed by the U.S., is said to be a former employee of Unocal, the American-based oil company. The U.S. government’s paranoid patrolling of the Middle East is because it has two-thirds of the world’s oil reserves. Oil keeps America’s engines purring sweetly. Oil keeps the Free Market rolling. Whoever controls the world’s oil, controls the world’s market. And how do you control the oil?

Nobody puts it more elegantly than The New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman. In an article called, “Craziness Pays”, he said, “The U.S. has to make it clear to Iraq and U.S. allies that . . . American will use force without negotiation, hesitation or U.N. approval.” His advice was well taken. In the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan as well as in the almost daily humiliation the U.S. government heaps on the U.N. In his book on globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Friedman says, and I quote,

“The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist. McDonalds cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas . . . and the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies to flourish is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps.” Perhaps this was written in a moment of vulnerability, but it’s certainly the most succinct, accurate description of the project of corporate globalization that I have read.

After the 11th of September 2001 and the War Against Terror, the hidden hand and fist have had their cover blown—and we have a clear view now of America’s other weapon—the Free Market—bearing down on the Developing World, with a clenched, unsmiling smile. The Task That Never Ends is America’s perfect war, the perfect vehicle for the endless expansion of American imperialism. In Urdu, the word for Profit, as in “p-r-o-f-i-t”, is fayda. Al Qaida means The Word, The Word of God, The Law. So, in India, some of us call the War Against Terror, Al Qaida versus Al Fayda—The Word versus The Profit (no pun intended.)

For the moment it looks as though Al Fayda will carry the day. But then you never know . . .

In the last ten years of unbridled Corporate Globalization, the world’s total income has increased by an average of 2.5 percent a year. And yet the numbers of poor in the world has increased by 100 million. Of the top hundred biggest economies, 51 are corporations, not countries. The top 1 percent of the world has the same combined income as the bottom 57 percent and that disparity is growing. And now, under the spreading canopy of the War Against Terror, this process is being hustled along. The men in suits are in an unseemly hurry. While bombs rain down on us, and cruise missiles skid across the skies, while nuclear weapons are stockpiled to make

the world a safer place, contracts are being signed, patents are being registered, oil pipelines are being laid, natural resources are being plundered, water is being privatized, and democracies are being undermined.

In a country like India, the “structural adjustment” end of the Corporate Globalization project is ripping through people’s lives. “Development” projects, massive privatization, and labour “reforms” are pushing people off their lands and out of their jobs, resulting in a kind of barbaric dispossession that has few parallels in history. Across the world, as the “Free Market” brazenly protects Western markets and forces developing countries to lift their trade barriers, the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer. Civil unrest has begun to erupt in the global village. In countries like Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia and India, the resistance movements against Corporate Globalization are growing. To contain them, governments are tightening their control. Protesters are being labelled “terrorists” and then being dealt with as such. But civil unrest does not only mean marches and demonstrations and protests against globalization. Unfortunately, it also means a desperate downward spiral into crime and chaos and all kinds of despair and disillusionment which as we know from history (and from what we see unspooling before our eyes), gradually becomes a fertile breeding ground for terrible things—cultural nationalism, religious bigotry, fascism and of course, terrorism.

All these march arm-in-arm with corporate globalization.

There is a notion gaining credence that the Free Market breaks down national barriers, and that Corporate Globalization’s ultimate destination is a hippie paradise where the heart is the only passport and we all live happily

together inside a John Lennon song. (“Imagine there’s no country . . .”) But this is a canard.

What the Free Market undermines is not national sovereignty, but democracy. As the disparity between the rich and poor grows, the hidden fist has its work cut out for it. Multinational corporations on the prowl for “sweetheart deals” that yield enormous profits cannot push through those deals and administer those projects in developing countries without the active connivance of State machinery—the police, the courts, sometimes even the army. Today Corporate Globalization needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, preferably authoritarian governments in poorer countries to push through unpopular reforms and quell the mutinies. It needs a press that pretends to be free. It needs courts that pretend to dispense justice. It needs nuclear bombs, standing armies, sterner immigration laws, and watchful coastal patrols to make sure that it’s only money, goods, patents, and services that are being globalized— not the free movement of people, not a respect for human rights, not international treaties on racial discrimination or chemical and nuclear weapons, or greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, or god forbid, justice. It’s as though even a gesture towards international accountability would wreck the whole enterprise.

Close to one year after the War against Terror was officially flagged off in the ruins of Afghanistan, in country after country freedoms are being curtailed in the name of protecting freedom, civil liberties are being suspended in the name of protecting democracy. All kinds of dissent are being defined as “terrorism”. All kinds of laws are being passed to deal with it. Osama bin Laden seems to have vanished into thin air. Mullah Omar is supposed to have made his escape on a motorbike. (They could have sent

TinTin after him.) [Laughter] The Taliban may have disappeared but their spirit, and their system of summary justice is surfacing in the unlikeliest of places. In India, in Pakistan, in Nigeria, in America, in all the Central Asian republics run by all manner of despots, and of course in Afghanistan under the U.S.-backed, Northern Alliance.

Meanwhile down at the mall there's a mid-season sale. Everything's discounted—oceans, rivers, oil, gene pools, fig wasps, flowers, childhoods, aluminium factories, phone companies, wisdom, wilderness, civil rights, ecosystems, air—all 4,600 million years of evolution. It's packed, sealed, tagged, valued and available off the rack. (No returns). As for justice—I'm told it's on offer too. You can get the best that money can buy.

Donald Rumsfeld said that his mission in the War Against Terror was to persuade the world that Americans must be allowed to continue their way of life. When the maddened king stamps his foot, slaves tremble in their quarters. So, standing here today, it's hard for me to say this, but “The American Way of Life” is simply not sustainable. Because it doesn't acknowledge that there is a world beyond America. [Applause]

But fortunately, power has a shelf life. When the time comes, maybe this mighty empire will, like others before it, overreach itself and implode from within. It looks as though structural cracks have already appeared. As the War Against Terror casts its net wider and wider, America's corporate heart is haemorrhaging. For all the endless, empty chatter about democracy, today the world is run by three of the most secretive institutions in the world: The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, all three of which, in turn, are dominated by the U.S. Their decisions are made in secret. The people who head them are appointed behind closed doors. Nobody really knows anything about them, their

politics, their beliefs, their intentions. Nobody elected them. Nobody said they could make decisions on our behalf. A world run by a handful of greedy bankers and C.E.O.'s whom nobody elected can't possibly last.

Soviet-style communism failed, not because it was intrinsically evil but because it was flawed. It allowed too few people to usurp too much power. Twenty-first-century market capitalism, American style, will fail for the same reasons. Both are edifices constructed by the human intelligence, undone by human nature.

The time has come, the Walrus said. Perhaps things will become worse and then better. Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

THE PANDEMIC IS A PORTAL

The novelist on how coronavirus threatens India — and what the country, and the world, should do next

April 2020

Who can use the term “gone viral” now without shuddering a little? Who can look at anything anymore — a door handle, a cardboard carton, a bag of vegetables — without imagining it swarming with those unseeable, undead, unliving blobs dotted with suction pads waiting to fasten themselves on to our lungs?

Who can think of kissing a stranger, jumping on to a bus or sending their child to school without feeling real fear? Who can think of ordinary pleasure and not assess its risk? Who among us is not a quack epidemiologist, virologist, statistician and prophet? Which scientist or doctor is not secretly

praying for a miracle? Which priest is not — secretly, at least — submitting to science?

And even while the virus proliferates, who could not be thrilled by the swell of birdsong in cities, peacocks dancing at traffic crossings and the silence in the skies?

The number of cases worldwide this week crept over a million. More than 50,000 people have died already. Projections suggest that number will swell to hundreds of thousands, perhaps more. The virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital, and the terrible illness it has brought in its wake has locked humans down in their countries, their cities and their homes.

But unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest — thus far — in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.

The mandarins who are managing this pandemic are fond of speaking of war. They don't even use war as a metaphor, they use it literally. But if it really were a war, then who would be better prepared than the US? If it were not masks and gloves that its frontline soldiers needed, but guns, smart bombs, bunker busters, submarines, fighter jets and nuclear bombs, would there be a shortage?

Night after night, from halfway across the world, some of us watch the New York governor's press briefings with a fascination that is hard to

explain. We follow the statistics and hear the stories of overwhelmed hospitals in the US, of underpaid, overworked nurses having to make masks out of garbage bin liners and old raincoats, risking everything to bring succour to the sick. About states being forced to bid against each other for ventilators, about doctors' dilemmas over which patient should get one and which left to die. And we think to ourselves, "My God! This is America!"

The tragedy is immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes. But it isn't new. It is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years. Who doesn't remember the videos of "patient dumping" — sick people, still in their hospital gowns, butt naked, being surreptitiously dumped on street corners? Hospital doors have too often been closed to the less fortunate citizens of the US. It hasn't mattered how sick they've been, or how much they've suffered.

At least not until now — because now, in the era of the virus, a poor person's sickness can affect a wealthy society's health. And yet, even now, Bernie Sanders, the senator who has relentlessly campaigned for healthcare for all, is considered an outlier in his bid for the White House, even by his own party.

The tragedy is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years

And what of my country, my poor-rich country, India, suspended somewhere between feudalism and religious fundamentalism, caste and capitalism, ruled by far-right Hindu nationalists?

In December, while China was fighting the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan, the government of India was dealing with a mass uprising by hundreds of thousands of its citizens protesting against the brazenly discriminatory anti-Muslim citizenship law it had just passed in parliament.

The first case of Covid-19 was reported in India on January 30, only days after the honourable chief guest of our Republic Day Parade, Amazon forest-eater and Covid-denier Jair Bolsonaro, had left Delhi. But there was too much to do in February for the virus to be accommodated in the ruling party's timetable. There was the official visit of President Donald Trump scheduled for the last week of the month. He had been lured by the promise of an audience of 1m people in a sports stadium in the state of Gujarat. All that took money, and a great deal of time.

Then there were the Delhi Assembly elections that the Bharatiya Janata Party was slated to lose unless it upped its game, which it did, unleashing a vicious, no-holds-barred Hindu nationalist campaign, replete with threats of physical violence and the shooting of "traitors".

It lost anyway. So then there was punishment to be meted out to Delhi's Muslims, who were blamed for the humiliation. Armed mobs of Hindu vigilantes, backed by the police, attacked Muslims in the working-class neighbourhoods of north-east Delhi. Houses, shops, mosques and schools were burnt. Muslims who had been expecting the attack fought back. More than 50 people, Muslims and some Hindus, were killed.

Thousands moved into refugee camps in local graveyards. Mutilated bodies were still being pulled out of the network of filthy, stinking drains when government officials had their first meeting about Covid-19 and most Indians first began to hear about the existence of something called hand sanitiser.

March was busy too. The first two weeks were devoted to toppling the Congress government in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh and installing a BJP government in its place. On March 11 the World Health

Organization declared that Covid-19 was a pandemic. Two days later, on March 13, the health ministry said that corona “is not a health emergency”.

Finally, on March 19, the Indian prime minister addressed the nation. He hadn't done much homework. He borrowed the playbook from France and Italy. He told us of the need for “social distancing” (easy to understand for a society so steeped in the practice of caste) and called for a day of “people's curfew” on March 22. He said nothing about what his government was going to do in the crisis, but he asked people to come out on their balconies, and ring bells and bang their pots and pans to salute health workers.

He didn't mention that, until that very moment, India had been exporting protective gear and respiratory equipment, instead of keeping it for Indian health workers and hospitals.

Not surprisingly, Narendra Modi's request was met with great enthusiasm. There were pot-banging marches, community dances and processions. Not much social distancing. In the days that followed, men jumped into barrels of sacred cow dung, and BJP supporters threw cow-urine drinking parties. Not to be outdone, many Muslim organisations declared that the Almighty was the answer to the virus and called for the faithful to gather in mosques in numbers.

On March 24, at 8pm, Modi appeared on TV again to announce that, from midnight onwards, all of India would be under lockdown. Markets would be closed. All transport, public as well as private, would be disallowed.

He said he was taking this decision not just as a prime minister, but as our family elder. Who else can decide, without consulting the state governments that would have to deal with the fallout of this decision, that a nation of 1.38bn people should be locked down with zero preparation and with four hours' notice? His methods definitely give the impression that India's prime

minister thinks of citizens as a hostile force that needs to be ambushed, taken by surprise, but never trusted.

Locked down we were. Many health professionals and epidemiologists have applauded this move. Perhaps they are right in theory. But surely none of them can support the calamitous lack of planning or preparedness that turned the world's biggest, most punitive lockdown into the exact opposite of what it was meant to achieve.

The man who loves spectacles created the mother of all spectacles.

As an appalled world watched, India revealed herself in all her shame — her brutal, structural, social and economic inequality, her callous indifference to suffering.

The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual.

Many driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight, began a long march home to their villages. They walked for days, towards Badaun, Agra, Azamgarh, Aligarh, Lucknow, Gorakhpur — hundreds of kilometres away. Some died on the way.

Our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens like so much unwanted accrual.

They knew they were going home potentially to slow starvation. Perhaps they even knew they could be carrying the virus with them, and would infect their families, their parents and grandparents back home, but they desperately needed a shred of familiarity, shelter and dignity, as well as food, if not love.

As they walked, some were beaten brutally and humiliated by the police, who were charged with strictly enforcing the curfew. Young men were made to crouch and frog jump down the highway. Outside the town of Bareilly, one group was herded together and hosed down with chemical spray.

A few days later, worried that the fleeing population would spread the virus to villages, the government sealed state borders even for walkers. People who had been walking for days were stopped and forced to return to camps in the cities they had just been forced to leave.

Among older people it evoked memories of the population transfer of 1947, when India was divided and Pakistan was born. Except that this current exodus was driven by class divisions, not religion. Even still, these were not India's poorest people. These were people who had (at least until now) work in the city and homes to return to. The jobless, the homeless and the despairing remained where they were, in the cities as well as the countryside, where deep distress was growing long before this tragedy occurred. All through these horrible days, the home affairs minister Amit Shah remained absent from public view.

When the walking began in Delhi, I used a press pass from a magazine I frequently write for to drive to Ghazipur, on the border between Delhi and Uttar Pradesh.

The scene was biblical. Or perhaps not. The Bible could not have known numbers such as these. The lockdown to enforce physical distancing had

resulted in the opposite — physical compression on an unthinkable scale. This is true even within India's towns and cities. The main roads might be empty, but the poor are sealed into cramped quarters in slums and shanties.

Every one of the walking people I spoke to was worried about the virus. But it was less real, less present in their lives than looming unemployment, starvation and the violence of the police. Of all the people I spoke to that day, including a group of Muslim tailors who had only weeks ago survived the anti-Muslim attacks, one man's words especially troubled me. He was a carpenter called Ramjeet, who planned to walk all the way to Gorakhpur near the Nepal border.

“Maybe when Modi decided to do this, nobody told him about us. Maybe he doesn't know about us”, he said.

“Us” means approximately 460m people.

State governments in India (as in the US) have showed more heart and understanding in the crisis. Trade unions, private citizens and other collectives are distributing food and emergency rations. The central government has been slow to respond to their desperate appeals for funds. It turns out that the prime minister's National Relief Fund has no ready cash available. Instead, money from well-wishers is pouring into the somewhat mysterious new PM-CARES fund. Pre-packaged meals with Modi's face on them have begun to appear.

In addition to this, the prime minister has shared his yoga nidra videos, in which a morphed, animated Modi with a dream body demonstrates yoga asanas to help people deal with the stress of self-isolation.

The narcissism is deeply troubling. Perhaps one of the asanas could be a request-asana in which Modi requests the French prime minister to allow us to renege on the very troublesome Rafale fighter jet deal and use that €7.8bn

for desperately needed emergency measures to support a few million hungry people. Surely the French will understand.

As the lockdown enters its second week, supply chains have broken, medicines and essential supplies are running low. Thousands of truck drivers are still marooned on the highways, with little food and water. Standing crops, ready to be harvested, are slowly rotting.

The economic crisis is here. The political crisis is ongoing. The mainstream media has incorporated the Covid story into its 24/7 toxic anti-Muslim campaign. An organisation called the Tablighi Jamaat, which held a meeting in Delhi before the lockdown was announced, has turned out to be a “super spreader”. That is being used to stigmatise and demonise Muslims. The overall tone suggests that Muslims invented the virus and have deliberately spread it as a form of jihad.

The Covid crisis is still to come. Or not. We don't know. If and when it does, we can be sure it will be dealt with, with all the prevailing prejudices of religion, caste and class completely in place.

Today (April 2) in India, there are almost 2,000 confirmed cases and 58 deaths. These are surely unreliable numbers, based on woefully few tests. Expert opinion varies wildly. Some predict millions of cases. Others think the toll will be far less. We may never know the real contours of the crisis, even when it hits us. All we know is that the run on hospitals has not yet begun.

India's public hospitals and clinics — which are unable to cope with the almost 1m children who die of diarrhoea, malnutrition and other health issues every year, with the hundreds of thousands of tuberculosis patients (a quarter of the world's cases), with a vast anaemic and malnourished population vulnerable to any number of minor illnesses that prove fatal for

them — will not be able to cope with a crisis that is like what Europe and the US are dealing with now.

All healthcare is more or less on hold as hospitals have been turned over to the service of the virus. The trauma centre of the legendary All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi is closed, the hundreds of cancer patients known as cancer refugees who live on the roads outside that huge hospital driven away like cattle.

People will fall sick and die at home. We may never know their stories. They may not even become statistics. We can only hope that the studies that say the virus likes cold weather are correct (though other researchers have cast doubt on this). Never have a people longed so irrationally and so much for a burning, punishing Indian summer.

What is this thing that has happened to us? It's a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus. Some believe it's God's way of bringing us to our senses. Others that it's a Chinese conspiracy to take over the world.

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.