

SCIMITARS IN THE SUN

N. RAM interviews ARUNDHATI ROY on a writer's place in politics.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, took the literary world by storm, winning among other things the 1997 Booker Prize and accolades from leading writers and critics. It continues to be one of the best-loved and best-read recent works of literary fiction round the world. It has sold six million copies in 40 languages.

Since then, the novelist has published (always, first in Indian publications) three major political essays – *The End of Imagination*, *The Greater Common Good*, and *Power Politics*. Each has addressed a big and critical issue, an issue that has mattered to millions of people and to the present and future of India. The first is a passionately argued, unilateralist, anti-chauvinist, uncompromising moral protest against nuclear weaponisation in India and Pakistan. The second is an extensively researched, but equally passionate description of what the Sardar Sarovar megadam being built on the Narmada River – and Big Dams generally – have meant to the lives and future of millions of people in India. The third essay argues against the privatisation and corporatisation of essential infrastructure, examining in particular the privatisation of the power sector, which is at the top of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government's agenda today.

Each brilliantly written essay has represented a powerful – writerly and personal – intervention in a controversial arena. *Frontline* and *Outlook* magazines published, more or less simultaneously and as Cover Stories, the first and second essays (in August 1998 and June 1999); *Frontline* published (in February 2000) *The Cost of Living*, the text of the novelist's Nehru Lecture given at Cambridge University at the invitation of Amartya Sen; and *Outlook* published (in November 2000) *Power Politics*.

Interestingly, Roy has turned over the substantial royalties from the book publication of these essays to the move-

ments they espouse. The Booker Prize money was also given to the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) in 1999.

There has been a profound change of context since *The Greater Common Good* was published a year and a half ago. When *Frontline* and *Outlook* cover-featured Roy's indictment of Big Dams in India and the Narmada Valley in particular, it seemed that the issue had attracted a whole new constituency, some of it international. The Sardar Sarovar dam was once again back on the front pages of Indian newspapers. Hope was raised among the activists, and the people of the Narmada Valley, that with their great resistance movement – the NBA – finding support from an internationally renowned writer and new allies and sympathisers, positive things could be achieved. The trend of some of the hearings in the Supreme Court appeared to bolster this hope.

However, in October 2000 the apex court – the movement's last 'institutional' resort – slammed the door in its face. The NBA has denounced the judgment but does not seem to have a new game plan. Recently, Roy has been sharply criticised, notably by the historian-cum-cricketologist Ramachandra Guha, for her writing as well as her personal support for the movement, and also for her intervention on the nuclear and privatisation issues. Guha, in fact, has publicly advised her to confine herself to fiction.

Roy has rarely given extended interviews on her writing or the subjects she writes about. She points out that what she wants to say is contained in the writing. She made an exception by giving this extended interview, in her New Delhi home, to *Frontline's* Editor, N. Ram. In this exclusive, which is our Cover Story, the writer speaks about the issues she espouses, her response to her critics, and her views on a writer's place in society. She also answers some questions relating to *The God of Small Things*, revealing why the novel has not been, and perhaps will never be, made into a film.

N. Ram: Arundhati Roy, the Supreme Court judgment is unambiguous in its support for the Sardar Sarovar dam. Is it all over? Are you, as the saying goes, running on empty?

Arundhati Roy: There are troubled times ahead, and yes, I think we – when I say 'we', I don't mean to speak on behalf of the NBA, I just generally mean people who share their point of view

– yes, I think we *are* up against it. We do have our backs to the wall... but then, as another saying goes, 'It ain't over till the fat lady sings' [smiles]. Remember, there are a total of 30 Big Dams planned in the Narmada Valley. Upstream from the Sardar Sarovar, the people fighting the Maheshwar dam are winning victory after victory. Protests in the Nimad region have forced several foreign investors – Bayernwerk, Pacgen, Siemens – to pull

out. Recently, they managed to make Ogden Energy Group, an American company, withdraw from the project. There's a full-blown civil disobedience movement on there.

But yes, the Supreme Court judgment on the Sardar Sarovar is a tremendous blow – the aftershocks will be felt not just in the Narmada Valley, but all over the country. Wise men – L.C. Jain, Ramaswamy Iyer – have done brilliant analyses of the judgment. The worrying thing is not just that the Court has allowed construction of the dam to proceed, but the manner in which it disregarded the evidence placed before it. It ignored the fact that conditional environmental clearance for the project was given before a *single* comprehensive study of the project was done. It ignored the government of Madhya Pradesh's affidavit that it has no land to resettle the oustees, that in all these years M.P. has not produced a *single* hectare of agricultural land for its oustees. It ignored the fact that *not one* village has been resettled according to the directives of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award, the fact that 13 years after the project was given conditional clearance, *not a single* condition has been fulfilled, that there isn't even a rehabilitation Master Plan – let alone proper rehabilitation. Most importantly, most urgently, it allowed construction to proceed to 90 metres despite the fact that the Court was fully aware that families displaced at the current height of the dam have not yet been rehabilitated – some of



PRADIP KRISHN

them haven't even had their land *acquired* yet! It has, in effect, *ordered* the violation of the Tribunal Award, it has indirectly endorsed the violation of human rights to life and livelihood. There will be mayhem in the Narmada Valley this monsoon if it rains – and of course, mayhem if it doesn't, because then there'll be drought. Either way the people are trapped – between the Rain Gods and the Supreme Court Gods.

For the Supreme Court of India to sanction what amounts to submergence without rehabilitation is an extraordinary thing. Think of the implications – today, the India Country study done for the World Commission on Dams [WCD] says that Big Dams could have displaced up to *56 million people* in this country in the last 50 years! So far there has been, if nothing else at least a pretence, that rehabilitation has been carried out, even though we know that lakhs of

people displaced half a century ago by the famous Bhakra Nangal Dam have *still* not been resettled. But now it looks as though we're going to drop even the charade of rehabilitation.

But the most worrying thing in the Sardar Sarovar judgment is the part where it says that once government begins work on a project, after it has incurred costs, the Court ought to have no further role to play. This, after the very same Court found enough cause in 1994 to hold up construction work for six whole years... With this single statement, the Supreme Court of India is abdicating its supreme responsibility. If the Court has no role to play

Following the October 2000 Supreme Court judgment, construction resumes at the dam site in Gujarat.

PARAS SHAH





Tin shacks for resettlement.

in arbitrating between the state and its citizens in the matter of violations of human rights, then what is it here for? If justice isn't a court's business, then what is?

Why do you think things have come to this pass? This figure you have spoken of several times – between 33 million and 56 million people displaced by big dams in the last 50 years – it is hard to imagine something of this magnitude happening in another country without it being somehow taken into serious account...

Without it being taken into account, without it giving pause for thought, without it affecting the nature of our country's decision-making process. The government doesn't even have a record of displaced people, they don't even count as statistics, it's chilling. Terrifying. After everything that has been written, said and done, the Indian government continues to turn a deaf ear to the protests. 695 big dams – 40 per cent of all the big dams being built in the world – are being built in India as we speak. Yet India is the *only* country in the world that refused to allow the World Commission on Dams to hold a public hearing here. The Gujarat Government banned its entry into Gujarat and threatened its representatives with arrest! The World Commission on Dams was an independent commission set up to study the impact of large dams. There were twelve commissioners, some of them representatives of the international dam industry, some were middle-of-the-roads and some were campaigners *against* dams. It was the first comprehensive study of its kind ever done. The report was released in London in November by Nelson Mandela. It's valuable because it's a negotiated document, negotiated between two warring camps and signed by all the commission-

ers. I don't agree with everything that the WCD Report says, not by a long shot – but compared to the Supreme Court judgment that eulogises the virtues of big dams based on *no evidence whatsoever*, the WCD Report is positively enlightened. It's as though the two were written in different centuries. One in the Dark Ages, one now. But it makes no difference here. There was a tiny ripple of interest in the news for a couple of days. Even that's died down. We're back to business as usual. As they say in the army – 'Bash On Regardless'. Literally!

You must have an explanation, a personal theory perhaps, of why the government is so implacable, so unwilling to listen?

Part of the explanation – the relatively innocent part, I'd say – has to do with the fact that belief in Big Dams has become a reflex article of faith. Some people – particularly older planners and engineers – have internalised the Nehruvian thing about Big Dams being the Temples of Modern India. Dams have become India's secular gods – faith in them is impervious to argument. Another important part of the explanation has to do with the simple matter of corruption. Big Dams are gold mines for politicians, bureaucrats, the construction industry... But the really sad, ugly part has less to do with government than with the way our society is structured. More than 60 per cent of the millions of people displaced by dams are Dalit and Adivasi. But Adivasis account for only 8 per cent and Dalits about 15 per cent of our population. So you see what's happening here – a vast majority of displaced people don't even weigh in as real people.

And another thing – what percentage of the people who plan these mammoth projects are Dalit, Adivasi or even rural? Zero.

There is no egalitarian social contact *whatsoever* between the two worlds. Deep at the heart of the horror of what's going on, lies the caste system: this layered, horizontally divided society with no vertical bolts, no glue – no intermarriage, no social mingling, no human – *humane* – interaction that holds the layers together. So when the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away, it happens silently. It doesn't create the torsion, the upheaval, the blowout, the sheer structural damage that it might, had there been the equivalent of vertical bolts. This works perfectly for the supporters of these projects.

But even those of us who do understand and sympathise with the issue, even if we feel concern, scholarly concern, writerly concern, journalistic concern – the press has done a reasonably persistent job of keeping it in the news – still, for the most part, there's no real *empathy* with those who pay the price. Empathy would lead to passion, to incandescent anger, to wild indignation, to action. Concern, on the other hand, leads to articles, books, Ph.Ds, fellowships. Of course, it is dispassionate enquiry that has created the pile-up of incriminating evidence against Big Dams. But now that the evidence *is* available and is in the public domain, it's time to do something about it.

Instead, what's happening now is that the relationship between concern and empathy is becoming oppositional, confrontational. When concern turns on empathy and says 'this town isn't big enough for the two of us,' then we're in trouble, big trouble. It means something ugly is afoot. It means concern has become a professional enterprise, a profitable business that's protecting its interests like any other. People have set up shop, they don't want the furniture disturbed. That's when this politics becomes murky, dangerous and manipulative. This is exactly what's happening now – any display of feeling, of sentiment, is being frowned upon by some worthy keepers of the flame. Every emotion must be stifled, must appear at the high table dressed for dinner. Nobody's allowed to violate the dress code or, god forbid, appear naked. The guests must not be embarrassed. The feast must go on...

But to come back to your question: as long as the protest remains civil and well-mannered, as long as we – the self-appointed opinion-makers – all continue to behave in respectable ways, as long as we continue to mindlessly defer to institutions that have themselves begun to cynically drop any pretence of being

moral, just, or respectable – why should the government listen? It's doing just fine.

Speaking of embarrassment, you have been criticised for embarrassing the NBA, for being tactless in your comments about the Supreme Court, for calling India a Banana Republic, for comparing the Supreme Court judgment to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia...

I'm being arraigned for bad behaviour [laughs]. I wear that criticism as a badge of honour. If 'tactless' was all I was about that judgment, then I'm guilty of an extreme form of moderation. As for embarrassing the NBA – the NBA has said and done far more radical things than I have... After the judgment, Baba Amte said – let me read this out – "*the judiciary at times wearing the cloak of priesthood, suffocates the human rights of the poor. Corruption and capital are given legitimacy instead of adhering to the rule of law...*" Its leader Medha Patkar was arrested for picketing the gates of the Supreme Court.

Anybody who thinks that I have been intemperate has their ear very far from the ground. They have no idea how people in the valley reacted to the judgment. Days after it came out, a spontaneous procession of youngsters buried it in a filthy public gutter in Badwani. I was there, I saw it happen – the rallying slogan was '*Supreme Court ne kya kiya? Nyaya ka satyanaash kiya*' – (What has the Supreme Court done? It has destroyed Justice!)

But I want to make it quite clear that I am an independent citizen. I don't have a Party line. I stated my opinion. Not carelessly, I might add, I said what I thought. If that embarrassed anybody, it's a pity, but it's too bad. But perhaps my critics should check back with the NBA before voicing their touching concern.

But in the time-honoured tradition of our worst politicians, may I clarify what I *actually* said? I was talking to the press about the fact that the Supreme Court judgment had made things worse for the NBA than they were before it went to court. The Court ordered that the final arbiter of any dispute would be the Prime Minister. This is so clearly in contravention of the directives laid down by the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award. I said that a country in which it is left to the Prime Minister to clear a large dam project without any scientific studies being done; in which it is left to the Prime Minister to decide the final height of a dam regard-

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star news/strip advt.



ANU PUSHKARNA

Medha Patkar leads a dharna outside the Supreme Court gates.

less of how much water there is in the river; in which it is left to the Prime Minister to decide whether or not there is land available for resettlement – sounds very much like a Banana Republic to me. What's the point of committees and Ministries and authorities if it's all up to Big Daddy in the end?

As for the business about the NATO bombing – I was talking to a not-very-bright journalist, it turns out. I said that when the developed countries were industrialising, most of them had colonies which they cannibalised on their way up. We, on the other hand, have no colonies, so we turn upon ourselves and begin to gnaw at the edges of our own societies. I told him that it reminded me of the tiger in the Belgrade zoo which, driven insane with fear by the NATO bombing, began to eat its own limbs. This was twisted into the absurd statement that was eventually published. But it's my fault. I should have known better than to try and explain this to a disinterested journalist.

What next? Where does the struggle go from here?

I don't know, really. It has to move into a different gear. All our eyes are on the NBA, waiting for its next move. It will take some time to evolve a strategy. But they are extraordinary people – brilliant. I have never met a group of people with their range of skills – their mobilisation abilities, their intellectual rigour, their political acumen. Their ability to move effortlessly from a dharna in Jalsindhi to arguing a subtle legal point in the Supreme Court, to making a presentation about the situation in the valley which leaves the World Bank no option but to pull out. The monsoon will be a terrible time for them –

if it rains, people will need help on an emergency footing. The whole Adivasi belt will go under.

You see, while the rest of us sit around arguing about how much we ought to respect the Supreme Court judgment, the people in the valley have no option. They can hardly be expected to respectfully accept their own dispossession. They will fight – How? is the question, and a very important one. The judgment, apart from what it says about the Sardar Sarovar, has sent out another very grave signal. After all, the 15-year-old struggle in the valley has so far been a spectacularly non-violent one. Now if that has come to naught, yielded nothing, I fear to think about what must be going through peoples' heads. They watch as the world around them gets more and more violent – as kidnappings, hijackings and the events that unfold in another valley further north grab the attention of the government and yield instant results. Already extremist groups have taken up position in parts of Madhya Pradesh. I'm sure they're watching the Narmada Valley with great interest. I don't know what would happen if the NBA were to lose ground. I worry. I really do...

It's something the government must think very seriously about. A 15-year-old non-violent peoples' movement is an extraordinary, magnificent thing. If it is dismissed in this contemptuous fashion, if violence is the only thing that forces the government to the negotiating table, then anarchy lurks around the corner.

Meanwhile in Gujarat, interesting, predictable things are happening. The false propaganda, the deliberate misinformation about the Sardar Sarovar is all coming home to roost. As long as the project was stalled, as long as it was

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a *potential* dam, it was easy to sell to voters as a miracle dam – the Sardar Sarovar will mend your bad knee, will produce your daughter's dowry, will serve you breakfast in bed. But major disputes over the water have already begun. People in Kutch and Saurashtra are waking up to the Big Con. The Kutch and Saurashtra branch of the BJP boycotted the inauguration of construction ceremony at the dam site. You know what happened there – three BJP Ministers had their official Cielos burnt by an irate BJP mob, one Minister was hurt and had to be airlifted out. The Kutch Jal Sankat Nivaran Samiti has a case against the government in court asking for construction to be stayed until Kutch is given its fair share of water. But a most interesting development is that the spokesperson of the Sardar Sarovar dam, the public face of the pro-dam lobby – Narmada Minister Jai Narain Vyas – was unceremoniously sacked recently. In the long run, it's probably good for Vyas – he'll be associated with the 'victory', but not with the murky politics of who gets the water. You can see it happening before your eyes: consensus in Gujarat is quickly coming unstuck.

Still, the honest answer to your question is: I don't really know what next. The answer will come, should come, from the people of the Narmada Valley.

Have you read Ramachandra Guha's tirade against you in The Hindu?

[Smiles] Tirades. Plural. Yes, yes, of course I have. He's become like a stalker who shows up at my doorstep every other Sunday. Some days he comes alone. Some days he brings his friends and family, they all chant and stamp... It's an angry little cottage industry that seems to have sprung up around me. Like a bunch of keening god-squadders, they link hands to keep their courage up and egg each other on – Aunt Slushy the novelist who's hated me for years, Uncle Defence Ministry who loves big dams, Little Miss Muffet who thinks I should watch my mouth. Actually, I've grown quite fond of them and I'll miss them when they're gone. It's funny, when I wrote *The God of Small Things*, I was attacked by the Left – when I wrote *The End of Imagination*, by the Right. Now I'm accused by Guha and his Ra-Ra club of being – simultaneously – extreme left, extreme right, extreme green, RSS, Swadeshi Jagran Manch and by some devilish sleight of hand, on Guha's side too! Goodness, he's skidding on his own tail!

I don't know what it is with me and these academics-cum-cricket statisticians – Guha's the third one that I seem to have sent into an incensed orbit. Could it be my bad bowling action?...[laughs]

Why have you chosen not to respond to Guha? Do you, as many others seem to, dismiss it as just a bad case of envy?

No, no, not at all. That would be too convenient, too easy. One could end up saying that about everybody who was critical. No, I think that would be unfair. I'd say it's far more complex and interesting than that. Guha's outburst is dressed up as an attack on my 'style' – but it's not really that at all. If you part the invective, you'll see that our differences are serious, and seriously political. Chittaroopa Palit of the NBA has done a wonderful dissection of Guha's politics in her article "The historian as gatekeeper" [*Frontline*, January 5, 2001].

My style, my language, is not something superficial, like a coat that I wear when I go out. My style is *me* – even when I'm at home. It's the *way* I think. My style *is* my politics. Guha claims that we – he and I – are 'objectively' on the same side. I completely disagree. We are worlds apart, our politics, our arguments.

I'm inclined to put as great a distance as possible between the Guhas of the world and myself.

Take his book – his biography of Verrier Elwin. It's competent and cleanly written. But our political differences *begin* with his choice of subject – personally, I think we've had enough, come on, *enough* stories about white men, however interesting they are, and their adventures in the heart of darkness. As a subject for a biography, frankly, I'm much more interested in Kosi Elwin, his Gond wife.

And the title of his book! – *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*. His tribals! His tribals? For heaven's sake! Did he own them? Did he buy them? There's a bog, a marsh, a whole political swampland stretching between us right here. But it's his other work, his history books – he calls himself an ecological historian, you know that, don't you?

Yes, I believe so...

Well, he's co-authored two books. One claims to be *An Ecological History of India*, nothing less, the other he calls *Ecology and Equity*. The sub-title is *The Use and Abuse of Nature in*



Medha Patkar at the 'Rally for the Valley' in 1999.



Pledging to save the river.

Contemporary India and it was published as recently as 1995. In his ecological history, big dams don't merit *so much as a mention*. The other one has a thumbnail sketch of the struggle against big dams, and a cursory, superficial account of the struggle in the Narmada Valley. For someone who sets himself up as a chronicler of the ecological history of a country that is the third largest builder of big dams in the world, that has 3,600 big dams which have displaced maybe up to 56 million people, that have submerged *millions* of acres of prime forest land, that have led to the waterlogging and salinisation of vast areas, that have destroyed estuarine ecosystems and drastically altered the ecology of almost every river in this country – wouldn't you say that the man has missed a wee thing or two! For goodness' sake – today, big dams are *the* staging ground for the most contentious debates on ecology, equity, social justice, bureaucratic and political intrigue, international finance and corruption on an unimaginable scale. Why does *none* of this merit attention from this ecological historian?

I'll tell you why: no amount of research, however painstaking, can make up for political vacuousness. If you don't ask the right questions, you don't get the right answers. If your politics

is clear, if you had your ear to the ground, you wouldn't, you couldn't *possibly*, miss your mark so completely.

Look at the work of people like Ashish Kothari, Ramesh Billorey, Claude Alvarez, Himanshu Thakker, Shripad Dharmadhikary, and further afield, Edward Goldsmith, Nicholas Hildeyard, Patrick McCully – McCully's book, *Silenced Rivers*, is a dazzling analysis of the ecology and politics of big dams. Even someone like Anil Agarwal, though his views on the subject differ from those of the NBA – at least he engages with the issue. Their work is out there, it's vital stuff, it occupies centre-stage in the debate – but let's face it, all of this puts Mr. Guha in an extremely embarrassing position. He's like one of the creatures that didn't make it onto the ark. An ecological historian who missed the boat completely.

Sublimating shame into anger, we all know, is a common human failing. So what does Guha do? He picks the most visible target from amongst those who he feels are embarrassing him, and lets fly. If he had disputed my facts, if he had taken apart my argument, I could have respected him. I look forward to that devastating, incisive, logical tearing apart of my argument... Actually, that's a complete lie, I'm quite grateful that Guha's



COURTESY: NBA

the Jurassic notion that politics and literature are mutually exclusive, who *is* he – the headboy? Cupboard captain? What's next? Is he going to put me on a diet? Choose my wardrobe? Sentence me to mustard bellbottoms for a whole month?

Why have you not responded to Guha's charges?

Well, for one because I thought that four Sundays in a row (he's already used up three) discussing Arundhati Roy's work would be a bit much for readers... and anyway, how does one respond to a Punch and Judy show?

Guha hasn't really read my work – he's ransacked it, wearing lenses so thick with animus that they blur his vision. He's virtually imagined the essays he wishes I'd written in order for him to demolish with his piercing wit and intellect, while his friends and colleagues nod and grin. Any response from me would end up sounding like – oh, I didn't say this, I didn't mean that... But if he can't be bothered to read my work carefully, why bother with a response?

Let me give you an example of what I mean: Guha tries to ridicule me for comparing big dams to nuclear bombs. But I've *never* done that – my essay says ... here's exactly what it says – [reads]:

"Big Dams are to a nation's 'development' what nuclear bombs are to its military arsenal. They are both weapons of mass destruction, 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..."

Surely Guha ought to know that this, in the English language, is what's called a relative analogy. In a relative analogy, one is comparing two relationships. I'm saying that big dams and nuclear bombs are both political instruments, extremely undemocratic political instruments. But I'm not saying bombs are dams. I'm not saying that dams are radioactive when they explode or that nuclear bombs irrigate agricultural land. If I say Amitabh Bachchan is to film stars what Coke is to fizzy drinks, I'm not comparing Amitabh Bachchan to a Coke or saying that film stars are fizzy drinks. In algebra, if I say $x:y$ what $w:r$, it doesn't mean I'm saying $x = w$.

This is just one small example, there are other more sinister ones. For instance, he picks out one sentence from my new essay *Power Politics* that was published recently in *Outlook*. It says:

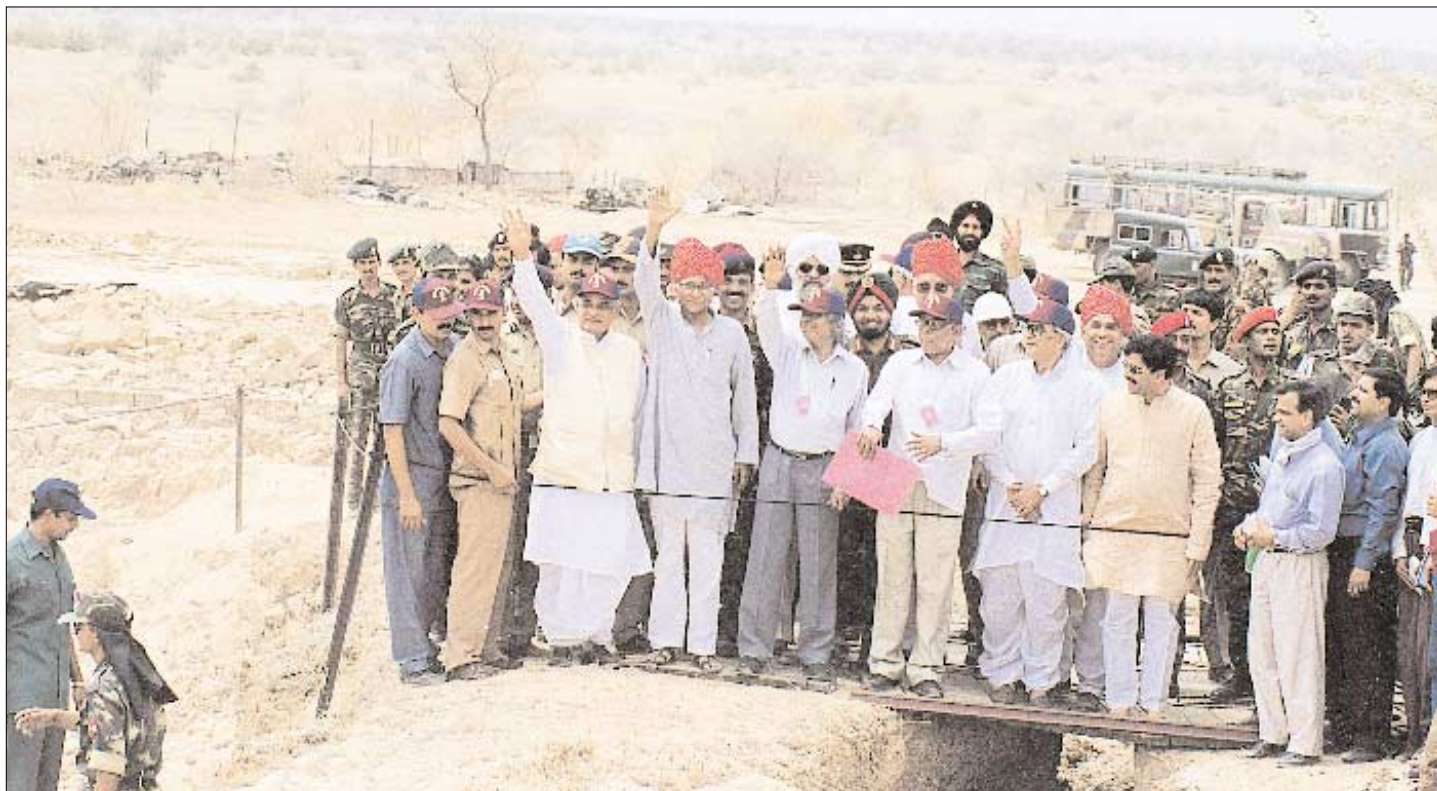
"When the history of India's miraculous leap to the forefront of the Information Revolution is written, let it be said that 56 million Indians (and their children and their children's children) paid for it with everything they ever had."

Here's how Guha scores one of the more tragic 'own goals' since Escobar – you know what happened to Escobar! Guha isolates the sentence out of context and kicks it towards his own goal, then flies to the goal post to stage a spectacular save. He has to use his instinct to decide whether to dive to his left or right. He dives – surprise surprise – to his extreme right. It's not the horror of 56 million displaced people that bothers him. It's my reference to the Information Revolution, which was used to compare the meteoric development of one sector of the Indian economy with the horrific dispossession of another. Guha gratuitously makes out that I'm attacking – not just attacking – being "grossly slanderous" to the IT giants,

made such a spectacle of himself. Does he have *anything* substantial to say? Apart from insulting me personally, deliberately, wilfully, maliciously, Guha has no argument against my argument, nothing to say about my facts. So he tries to legislate on how I ought to *feel* about them. Never was there a more passionate indictment of passion, a more hysterical denunciation of hysteria – he's right, I *am* hysterical. I'm screaming from the bloody rooftops. And he and his smug little club are going *Shhhh... you'll wake the neighbours!* But I *want* to wake the neighbours, that's my whole point. I want everybody to open their eyes.

Anyway, as far as I am concerned, it's not his insults I find as corny as the rest of it – his pronouncements about what's good for the environmental movement and what's not – the quaintness of which is, that *he's* good for the movement and I'm not. His pronouncements on what constitutes good writing. His does, mine doesn't. His unsolicited advice – advice to the NBA to disengage from me, advice to me to stop writing political essays and go back to literature. I mean apart from being someone with

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SHANKER CHAKRAVARTY

Roy's essay *The End of Imagination* is a passionate and powerful moral protest against nuclear weaponisation in India and Pakistan. In this 1998 photograph, Prime Minister Vajpayee and his entourage are seen in a jubilant mood at the site of the Pokhran nuclear tests.

Tata, Wipro and I forget who else – he actually names particular companies... *I don't!* Having invented the insult, our intrepid knight in shining armour rallies to their defence. Is he real? Is he looking for friends in high places? Or has he just stunned himself on the goalpost?

Talking about your essay The Greater Common Good, critics like Guha and B.G. Verghese say that it's sentimental without being factual, that it romanticises Adivasi life-styles...

That's pretty rich coming from the ecologist who missed the ark! I don't want to sound arrogant – this is the trouble about defending oneself, immodesty goes with the territory! Sentimental without being factual? Look, just because I don't wave my footnotes in peoples' faces and don't do the academic heavy breathing stuff, it doesn't mean I haven't studied the subject in depth. I don't believe that there's a single fact or argument – social, ecological, economic or political – about the Sardar Sarovar dam that's missing, or that has not been addressed, in my essay. For this I have to thank the NBA for making available to me every document at its disposal – and all the people who've published wonderful work on this issue over the years. I'm talking of Himanshu Thakker, L.C. Jain, the FMG Report, Ramaswamy Iyer, Shripad Dharmadhikary, the Morse Committee Report, Rahul Ram's booklet *Muddy Waters*, Ashish Kothari... I owe a lot to long, sparky conversations with brilliant people in the valley, to *Kaise jeebo re* – Jharana Jhaveri and Anurag Singh's documentary film, which first sent me on my travels in the Narmada Valley... It's a long, long list, and it's been more vital and insightful and instructive than doing years of research in a library.

As for the charge of romanticising Adivasi life-styles – I thought the time when that sort of thing sent a frisson of excitement through the academic community had come and gone. I mean, come on – even the good old Gujarat Government feeds at that foetid trough. When I was writing *The Greater Common Good* I was acutely aware of two things: One, that I was not going to write on 'behalf' of anyone but myself because I think that's the most honest thing to do – in our society particularly, the politics of 'representation' is complicated and fraught with danger and dishonesty. Two, I was not writing an anthropological account of the lifestyles of people that I knew very little about. I was writing about social justice, about the politics of involuntary displacement, about what happens to people who are forcibly uprooted from an environment they know well and dumped in a world they know nothing about – a world in which, instead of a forest and a river and farmlands, they have unemployment and a tin shack. It's an unfair, unequal bargain for anybody – Adivasi or Aggarwal. At no point in my essay have I even attempted to describe Adivasi lifestyle, let alone romanticise it. Here's an early passage from *The Greater Common Good* [reads]:

"... 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 or a proselytiser for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition..."

Does that sound particularly romantic? The fact is I grew up in a village – not an Adivasi village, but a village nevertheless. As a child, all I ever dreamed of was escaping. I don't need to do 'research' or 'field-work' or write a Ph.D. to figure out what goes on. Anyone who's read *The God of Small Things* could work that out. If I do

"No amount of research, however painstaking, can make up for political vacuousness. If you don't ask the right questions, you don't get the right answers."

romanticise anything, it's the freedom, the anonymity of urban life...

I'm sorry to go on about this, but Guha also denounces your work as self-indulgent and unoriginal. A serious charge against a fiction writer, wouldn't you say?

Self-indulgence is not the kind of charge that one can refute. If I *am* self-indulgent then... what can I say? I'll stand in the corner and hang my head in shame! [laughs] But I think that the accusation has really to do with the fact that I often write in the first person. Like I said, I do that deliberately. I guess academics and journalists are trained to believe that saying "I" is somehow anathema – because they're supposed to come across as objective. Of course that's nonsense – a person who conceals his or her identity is no more objective than a person who reveals it. *Any* clued-in anthropologist should know that. For an artist, a painter, a writer, a singer, introspection – contemplating the self, placing yourself in the picture to see where you fit – is often what art is all about. For a writer, to use the first person is a common narrative device. It's not just crudity, it's a *fallacy*, to equate this with self-indulgence. Mind you, this is not the only time that Guha shows a reflexive hostility towards writers and an opacity to literature.

There's a fine but important difference between self-indulgence and self-awareness. Self-awareness, in this case, is being aware – when you write – that you are complicit, that you are a beneficiary of the terrible politics of the society in which you live. When you reveal who you are and how you have benefited. Self-indulgence is when, masquerading as a concerned academic, you fill the Sunday papers with personal invective against somebody you don't like, and follow that up by selectively publishing your friends' personal letters of support, and then your rejoinder that supports their support... and so on.

As for the charge of being unoriginal – when one is writing to advocate a political position, or in support of a peoples' move-

COURTESY: NEHRU MEMORIAL MUSEUM AND LIBRARY



Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the Bhakra Nangal project site.

ment that has been yelling its lungs out for the last fifteen years, one is not *trying* to be original, one is adding one's voice to theirs in order for *them* to be heard. Almost by definition, one is reiterating what they are saying. My essays are not about me or my brilliance or my originality or lack of it. They're not meant to be a career move – they're about re-stating the issue, they're about saying the *same* things over and over again...

You actually do say something about this in your essays...

Yes, I'm flattered that you remember. Here, from *The End of Imagination* (*Frontline*, August 14, 1998) [reads]:

"There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than to re-state a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people... and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably. But I am prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible..."

star news/strip advt.



HARIKRISHNA & DEEPA JANI

September 21, 1999: As the Narmada rises, Medha Patkar and Samarpit Dal volunteers in the satyagraha hut at Dhomkhedi.

And again, in *The Cost of Living* [Frontline, February 18, 2000], my Nehru Lecture on Big Dams:

"If you're a writer, you tend to keep those aching eyes open ... Every day you are reminded that there is no such thing as innocence. And every day you have to think of new ways of saying old and obvious things. Things about love and greed. Things about politics and governance. About power and powerlessness... things that must be said over and over again..."

You see, once again Guha is guilty of flabby conclusions drawn from sloppy reading. Frankly, between his suspect politics and slapdash scholarship, a woman's spoiled for choice. Does anyone have the right to defame someone in such careless, wanton fashion? I think he owes me a public apology.

What about the charge that you simplify things, express them in black and white?

I don't *simplify* things. I try and explain complicated things *in simple language*. That's an entirely different enterprise. I find it offensive, this notion that things are too complicated to explain to an ordinary reader – again, this coterie, this club-mentality. I write about things that vitally affect people's lives. To say that things are too complicated

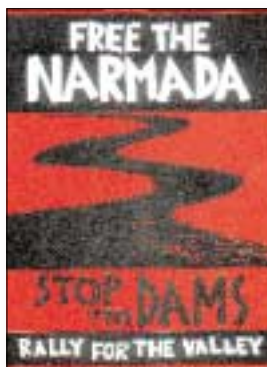
to explain is just not good enough. They *must* be explained. Experts love to hijack various aspects of an issue – displacement, rehabilitation, drainage, hydrology – and carry them off to their lairs where they guard them against the curiosity of the interested layperson. But eventually it's not rocket science. It's about our daily lives. All these things must be understood, connected up and explained – simply and cogently. It's not enough to accuse me of simplifying things – how? what? where? Be specific. I can handle it. Everybody needs to know and understand what's going on. Not just the headboy and cupboard captain or the people who went to good schools. Not explaining something is a way of wrest-

ing power and holding onto it. It's a way of making yourself seem important, of trying to sound cleverer than you are. Of course I understand, there's jobs and money in that. But beyond a point, it becomes vulgar...

As for my monochromatic vision, things *are* more black and white than we like to admit. The subtlety is seeping out of our lives at a pretty nifty pace.

One of the more persistent criticisms of the NBA and you is that you are Negativists, Nay sayers...

Ah yes, that's the "Has Medha Patkar ever





HARIKRISHNA & DEEPA JANI

Medha Patkar and others being removed by the police from the site of the satyagraha.

made a gobar gas plant?" school of thought. I just don't understand it. Big Dams wreak havoc. They have displaced millions of people, destroyed rivers and estuaries, submerged forests. The Narmada Valley project alone will submerge 4,000 square kilometres of forest. How does the fight to save this count as negativity? If there's a forest fire raging and someone's trying to put it out, is it negativism or is it conservation? If everything is destroyed there'll be nothing left to conserve! The NBA has been an inspiration to peoples' movements all over the world – how can you knock this? Any *one* of its activists is worth more national pride than all the Miss Worlds and Miss Universes put together a thousand times over. There are amazing people doing the most wonderful work in water-harvesting and water management all over India. Premjibhai Patel of Upleta, Manubhai Mehta of Savarkundla, the Tarun Bharat Sangh in Alwar and hundreds of others dotted across the country. But the fire-fighters and the water-harvesters are *both* part of the alternative solution. *Neither* would be much good without the other. One makes space for the other. The NBA is like an ice-breaker – a ship that clears the way through cliffs of ice for other ships to sail through. There's no need for Medha Patkar to prove herself by designing a gobar gas plant, or for Rajinder

Singh of the Tarun Bharat Sangh to prove himself by leading a dharna. They *both* do what they do wonderfully well. Pitting them against each other is small-minded, and it's destructive.

And while criticising the NBA, what does Mr. Guha hold up as his alternative vision? Dr. Pushpangadan, who collects rare medicinal plants – there won't be many of those around if the forests disappear. And JFM [Joint Forest Management] schemes in Bengal. I mean: what's he trying to say? That the World Bank and the Ford Foundation are the new radicals in town? The new peoples' movements? What's this? A wonky worldview? Or a grateful nudge and a wink to old friends?

"I don't simplify things. I try and explain complicated things in simple language. That's an entirely different enterprise."

In his attack on your new essay Power Politics published in Outlook (November 27, 2000), Guha says – and I quote: "...instead of turning on globalisation... we should come to terms with it, bend it as best we can to our interests – if we want to hold our own against foreign capital, we must encourage innovation by our technologists and entrepreneurs, not mock them as Roy does." Your comment?

I'm getting a bit tired of this bloke. You know, I think he must have read someone else's essay. Because I haven't yet – at least not that

I'm aware of – written an essay on globalisation. *Power Politics*, for anyone who's prepared to read it and not just the blurb on the cover of *Outlook*, is an essay that argues specifically against the privatisation and corporatisation of *essential infrastructure*. The word 'globalisation' is not mentioned in the entire essay, not *once*. However, if and when I do write about globalisation, I can assure you that my views on the subject will be very different from Guha's.

But to answer his charge that I have mocked our technologists – take a look at this, it's a passage from *Power Politics*.

"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 sweat shop. It is being forced into 'joint ventures' (one with GE, one with Siemens) where its only role is to provide cheap labour 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."

Does this sound like I'm *mocking* our technologists? Seriously, are we talking about the *same* essay? Is there some other Arundhati Roy? Arundhati Rao? Aradhana Roy? Does she write essays for *Outlook* and *Frontline*? And this man lectures me about intellectual probity?

The globalisation debate has a very interesting spin on it – all its admirers, from Bill Clinton, Kofi Annan, A.B. Vajpayee to the cheering brokers in the stalls, all of them say the same lofty things: if we have the right institutions of governance in place – effective courts, good laws, honest politicians, participative 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.

My point is that if all this was in place, then almost *anything* would succeed: socialism, communism, you name it. Everything works in Paradise, even a poor old Banana Republic! But in an imperfect world, is it globalisation that's going to bring us all this bounty? Is that what's happening here now that India is on the fast track to the free market? Does any *one* thing on that lofty list apply to the Narmada issue? Has the Supreme Court been just and accountable? State institutions transparent? Have people had a say, have they even been *informed* of decisions that vitally affect their lives? The answer is no, no, no... And strange to say – in this beleaguered democracy, is it the votaries of globalisation who are out there on the streets demanding accountability and responsible government? Of course not! And when someone else does – the NBA, or another peoples' movement, or an unfortunate private citizen, and has to contend with the police or, worse, academics with dubious politics – do these guys spring to their defence?

People have said that your essay *Power Politics* is self-contradictory because it is an argument against the market and globalisation by one who is placed at the heart of the global market for celebrity-hood.

People have said? [chuckles] It's the old boy again, isn't it – what's his thesis this time? That *all* celebrities *must* support globalisation? Or that all writers who sell more than a certain number of copies of a book must support globalisation? What's the cut-off? Thirty thousand copies? Do language editions count? Audio books? Braille?

I learned that The God of Small Things has sold six million copies in some forty languages. Your agent, David Godwin, also tells me that you've turned down offers for film rights from all over the world, including Hollywood. Are you waiting for the right director? Can we ever expect to see a film version of your novel?

No... it's not about the right director. I don't think my book would make a good film. Besides,

I don't think cinema *has* to be the last stop for literature, for novels. I had written two feature screenplays before I started writing *The God of Small Things*. I was feeling a little confined by the 'externality' of cinema. I wanted to be free to write from *within*, from *inside* peoples' hearts and heads. I wanted to feel free to write a whole page describing the moon and the trees in the river, not just have to write *Scene 21. Ext. Night. River.*

Perhaps *because* I was a screenwriter, I set out to write a stubbornly visual but unfilmable book. And I did. The most visual thing about *The God of Small Things* are the *feelings*. How would you film lonely, frightened little Rahel communing with a kangaroo-shaped waste bin in Cochin Airport? I don't see cinema capturing the magic whisper,



PRADIP KRISHNEN

"Each reader of *The God of Small Things* has his or her own version of the film running inside their heads. It would be a pity to let a single film-maker appropriate all those versions, and force-fit them into a single, definitive one."



RAJIV PRASAD

'History House', now the Taj Garden Retreat, at Kumarakom in Kerala, photographed in December 2000 as it waited for Prime Minister Vajpayee.

the helicopter kisses, the secret breathing of a cement kangaroo. Not unless you were making the Walt Disney version.

Also, I think that each reader of *The God of Small Things* has his or her own version of the film running inside their heads – there are six million different versions of the film. It would be a pity, don't you think, to let a single film-maker extinguish and appropriate all those versions, and force-fit them into a single, definitive one. This decentralised democracy is fine by me [smiles].

And this may sound silly, but I couldn't bear the idea of seeing actors play Estha, Rahel, Velutha, Ammu, Chacko... it would kill me. I love them too much. I always will.

It's interesting that Prime Minister Vajpayee has been vacationing in a resort in Kerala made internationally famous by *The God of Small Things*. The media have been full of this connection...

[smiles]... yes. "*The History House. Whose doors were locked and windows open. With cool stone floors and dim walls and billowing ship-shaped shadows on the walls. Where plump, translucent lizards lived behind old pictures and waxy, crumbling ancestors with tough toe-nails and breath that smelled of yellow maps gossiped in sibilant, papery whispers...*" I know that bit by heart. When I was a child it was an old, abandoned, crumbling house that filled my

imagination. It's odd, when the Prime Minister goes vacationing in the setting of your worst, most private, childhood terrors. But wasn't it Toni Morrison who said something like "literature is a very private thing, fashioned for public consumption"? It's funny how my terrors have become a tourist paradise... but it's okay. I'm a big girl now [laughs].

Coming back to the issue of celebrity-hood – what's your relationship with it? How does it affect your writing? How do you deal with it?

Celebrity-hood – I hate that word. How do I deal with it? When Rock Hudson's career was on the skids, if he heard of a friend or colleague who was doing well, he'd say "Damn him, I hope he dies." That's a bit how I feel about my celebrity-hood. When I see a picture of myself in the papers, I feel hostile towards my public self and say "Damn her, I hope she dies"... [smiles].

But actually, it's a very, very difficult thing for a person to come to terms with. For a while I thought it would drive me clean crazy. But I think I'm beginning to get the hang of it now. I worked it out from first principles – I'm a writer *first* and a celebrity next. I'm a writer who *happens* to have become, for the moment, a celebrity. As a matter of principle, I never do anything because I'm a celebrity. I don't inaugurate things, I don't appear as a chief guest anywhere, I don't 'grace' occasions, I don't



"She's the good one, I'm the bad one, and the bad news is that we're friends."

do chat shows, I don't do interviews – unless of course I'm rubbing ecological historians! – or have something very specific to say.

But I also don't *not* do the things I *want* to do. I live, I love, I bum around, but above all, I write. And I support what I write. The celebrity part just trails along behind me making a heck of a noise – like a tin can attached to a cat's tail. I can't take it off – but it'll fall off on its own sooner or later. For now, I try to ignore it. Of course, it's not that simple. Every time I show up at an NBA dharna – and whether or not I show up is always a collective decision taken *with* them – the Press invariably reports that I 'led' it along with Medha. Now that's ridiculous! Ridiculous to equate us in any way, ridiculous to imply that I *lead* anything, leave alone the NBA. Fortunately, both Medha and I are aware of the double-edged nature of media attention. As I keep saying, she's the good one, I'm the bad one, and the bad news is that we're friends!

How does all this affect your writing? It's given you a lot of space to say what you want to say. Does that put any pressure on you? Do you run the risk of becoming a rag-bag of good causes?

Make no mistake, it's not the tin can, not celebrity-hood, that's given me the space. It's my writing. I'm very clear on that

one. I'm a celebrity *because* I'm a writer, not the other way around. After all, you or Vinod Mehta of *Outlook* – you're not running a soup kitchen, are you? You give me the space because it's worth it to you, because you know that I am read.

But if you're asking whether the fact that I *know* the space is available puts pressure on me – it does. At times. Because for me, to say *nothing* is as political an act as to say what I *do* say. There are these two voices virtually at war within me – one that wants me to dive underground and work on another book, another that refuses to let me look away, that drags me deep into the heart of what's going on around me. As for becoming a ragbag of good causes – you're right, the pressure is tremendous. Simply because horror lurks around every corner, and it's hard to listen to an account of it and then say that you can do nothing to help. But, you know, for me to become an ambassador of good causes would do injustice to the causes and a great violence to my writing self – and that's something that I will not sacrifice. At any cost. A singer sings, a painter paints, a writer writes. For some it's a profession. For others it's a calling. One does it because one must.

It sounds like a lonely place that you work from. What do you find most difficult about being who you are and doing what you do?

Well, every writer – good, bad, successful or not – who's sitting at a desk looking at a blank piece of paper, is lonely. It's probably the loneliest work in the world. But once the work is done, it's different. I'm not lonely at all – I'm the opposite of lonely. How can I, of all people, complain? I like to think that if by chance I were to become completely destitute, I could spend the rest of my life walking into people's homes and saying, "I wrote *The God of Small Things*, will you give me lunch?" It's a wonderful feeling. When I go to the Narmada Valley, I see my essay being read in Hindi, in Gujarati, in Marathi – even translated orally into Bhilali. I see parts of it being performed as a play. What more could a writer ask for? How much less lonely can I be?

It's true that I write about contentious things. Closer to home, there's some hostility. Each time I step out I hear the snicker-snack of knives being sharpened, I catch the glint of scimitars in the sun. But that's good. It keeps me sharp – fit, alert, it focusses my thought, hones my argument, makes me very careful about what I say and how I say it. On the whole, it isn't a bad university to go to. I don't have the luxury of carelessness that some of my critics do.

Well, even Ramachandra Guha applauds you for your courage and the NBA for its loyalty to you.

Courage and loyalty? They sound like kind words for a good horse. D'you think that's what he meant when he called us 'neigh-sayers'? [laughs helplessly]... Sorry about that, Ram! ■