

Professor Amulya Reddy's Introduction to Visthar Lecture by Arundhati Roy on "The Human and Ecological Costs of Big Dams" on 1 July 1999 at Bishop Cotton's Girls School

- There are two reasons why it is a privilege to be at this meeting: (1) the issue and (2) the keynote speaker
- **The issue** : Big dams like Ballistic missiles, Nuclear Tests, Nuclear Power, Mega-power projects, the Bhopal accident, etc., involve conflicts between the Establishment and the People.
- In all these conflicts, the Thinkers (Scientists, engineers, economists, writers, media persons, etc) have to choose sides even though the tossed coin is loaded
- If the tossed coin falls Heads = Establishment, there is Paisa, Posts, Promotions, Perks, Prizes and Privileges. If it falls Tails = the People, there is Exclusion, Banishment, Punishment. About the only consolation in choosing the side of the People is that like Sidney Carton in "The Tale of two Cities", one can say "It is a far far better thing that I have done than I have ever done before" and then hold one's head high before it is chopped off.
- The conflicts have several other features.
- The establishment works in an **undemocratic opaque** manner. The people, particularly so-called Project Affected Persons (PAPs) are excluded from decision-making. They are denied information. Everything has the Official Secrets Act (OSA) stamp. In Bangalore, try to find out about Karnataka Electricity Board, Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board, Bangalore Development Authority, Public Works Department, Elevated Light Rail Transport System, etc., and you will realize how difficult it is to get information. Herein arises the tremendous importance of the work of Aruna Roy on "The Right to Information". The point is that the Emperor does not want the people to know that he has no clothes.
- Technology is **arrogant and over-confident** of its powers. For example, under the 1000 year old magnificent Cologne cathedral, they have built an underground parking lot. Yet technological mistakes abound. For example, the breeder programmes of the US, France and Japan, and the SST. Remembering that it is human to make mistakes, it is better to make small reversible mistakes instead of big irreversible ones.
- The balance sheets of benefits and costs are distorted. Vital impacts are pushed under the carpet because they are difficult to quantify or unquantifiable, e.g., the destruction of communities by displacement and dispersal. Real costs are not counted.
- **Global** benefits are highlighted even though the people at the development sites become the victims of projects. The benefits of development must commence from the project site and radiate outward.

- Alternative ways of delivering the services/outputs provided by the mega-projects are never discussed. The establishments pretends that there is no alternative to the mega-project.
- I shall not say more about the issue. I shall leave it to today's keynote speaker.
- **The Keynote speaker:** Arundhati Roy's book "God of Small Things" is too well known for me to repeat praise.
- Suffice it for me to say that while I was reading it, I would keep exclaiming to my wife "Sheer Poetry!", a very precious expression of mine that I reserve only for elegant cover drives and sweetly timed hook shots in cricket.
- "God of small Things" illustrates how literature provides an alternative path to understanding of the world and the place of humans in it.
- Science, the much acclaimed path to understanding, proceeds by squeezing out emotion during the intellectual analysis, but it culminates in that feeling of elation/emotion at the moment of discovery. We can all recall that emotion in school when a theorem in geometry suddenly became crystal clear.
- But art in general, and literature in particular, provide an equally valid path to understanding. As the Poet Laureate Robert Frost said: "A poem is that which begins in delight and ends in wisdom".
- And "The God of Small Things" is full of delights and wisdom.
- But the Booker Prize author is not just another creative writer. They, particularly, Indian women writers, are proliferating and we are proud of them. But Arundhati Roy has achieved a place of her own.
- A little over a year ago, the nuclear tests came at a very critical time for our country. It was also a critical time for me. I found very few kindred souls among my scientist colleagues to share my agony over the tests. It was a period of loneliness slightly relieved by the Internet which instantly nurtured a small community of dissenters.
- I remember vividly how Arundhati's Roy "End of Imagination" illuminated the gloom. It was thorough, analytical, technically flawless, angry, powerful, a clarion call and a manifesto. It ended loneliness. It empowered.
- And once again her outstanding piece on Large Dams has come to the aid of the NBA led by Medha and Baba Amte.
- I would like to end by recalling "The Wizard of Oz". Remember that the scarecrow wanted a Brain; the Tin man wanted a Heart and the Lion wanted courage. Brains/ Creativity, Heart/Values and Courage/Guts are what we should have. Too many people have brains but no values, and too many good people have values but no guts.

- Arundhati Roy has all these. We should salute her. She is an inspiration. She is precious. Let us listen to her - Arundhati Roy.