
**Environmental Sustainability in
the Age of Environmental Crisis
in Arundhati Roy's *The Greater
Common Good***

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Abstract

In the contemporary age of escalating environmental crises, Arundhati Roy emerges as a poignant voice advocating for environmental sustainability. Arundhati Roy stands out in Indian literature, not only as the acclaimed author of “*The God of Small Things*” which won the Booker Prize in 1997 but also as a passionate advocate for social and environmental causes. Unlike her fictional debut, Roy’s subsequent works primarily take the form of politically charged non-fiction. Her unique approach invites comparison with other renowned Contemporary English literature writers who, like her, have used their literary prowess to champion various causes.

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Roy goes beyond conventional storytelling, using her narratives to carve out a distinct ecological and cultural space. Her writings make a detailed map of India that highlights important things about its culture, who its people are, and how they interact with the environment. This paper focuses specifically on Roy's non-fiction pieces, particularly those addressing environmental concerns. Within this realm, she skillfully constructs a narrative map that draws attention to often-overlooked issues and geographical features. In doing so, she offers a fresh perspective distinct from the narratives of earlier writers. Arundhati Roy's "*The Greater Common Good*" delves into the critical theme of environmental sustainability in the face of the contemporary environmental crisis. In this compelling work, Roy explores the intricate interplay between human development and the preservation of the environment, advocating for a holistic approach that prioritizes the greater common good over individual interests.

Roy's contribution extends beyond literature to enrich our understanding of place by shedding light on these marginalized aspects. Her works contribute significantly to discussions on culture, identity, and environmental awareness, making her a noteworthy figure in both the literary and activist realms.

Keywords

Arundhati Roy, environmental sustainability, environmental crisis, activism, social justice, political structures, climate change, literature, sustainable practices, ecological consciousness.

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

-Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru

Sustainable development is a vital goal of every nation in the world and to attain it numerous measures are been taken by them. Every nation dreams of rapid growth and sustainable development to put itself and its citizens on a progressive pedestal but the measures one takes to achieve it are the elephant in the room. Humans in their non-satiated aspiration of sustainable development put the whole ecosystem in jeopardy as the development projects that started with the goals and intentions of benevolence and growth ended up destroying nature and creating havoc in the lives of their fellow human beings. Amid this rapid pseudo development, many environmental movements take place on local as well as global stages. In India, numerous environmental movements were stimulated from Chipko Movement in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand (formerly known as Uttaranchal) in the Himalayan Valley to Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, 1985) in Gujrat. The human race in the name of development continuously exploits natural resources like forests, rivers, minerals, coal, oil, fish, and wildlife to accumulate wealth which results in ecological imbalance and endangers other species and humans as well. Governments all over the world promote globalization as a tool of environmental sustainability but on the other hand simultaneously advocate exploiting natural resources, deforestation, more oil drilling, rapid poisoning of rivers, polluting oceans, and degradation of human life in the name of global trade. Where globalization is defined as, “Globalization is a term used to describe the increasing connectedness and interdependence of world cultures and economies” (National Geographic, 2022).

In the contemporary world, things are changing dynamically with development and growth a grave concern of environmental sustainability poses a challenge to every nation. Environmental sustainability defined as “Environmental sustainability is a conservation concept, which is the meeting of services and resources of present and future generations without affecting the health of the ecosystems that provide them” (Karaca and Ýnce, 2023). Every nation whether developed or developing faces environmental issues and artists of these nations address them in their work to express their opinions as well as

to aware their fellow citizens. Arundhati Roy, a Booker prize-winning author like her fellow artist recognised her responsibility and took it to aware and address the growing concerns of ecological imbalance in her writings. In *The Greater Common Good*, she addresses those issues which are emerging and growing due to rapid development especially dam projects under The Narmada Valley Development project. In this article which was published in *Frontline*, she voiced against the forceful displacement of millions of people from their homes in the name of a greater cause and a huge disparity in compensation to the affected. Roy, through her essay fearlessly voiced addressing the condition of the affected and exposing cheap politics schemed by Governments to meet their means. Here in this essay Arundhati Roy, addressing and supporting the affected people majority of them are Tribal people who face atrocities from the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and agitation by activists and people of affected areas. This essay comprises many instances of the enormity of human cost, the lives lost, and the exploitation of the ecosystem. Roy shares the agony of humanity and the environment as she becomes its part through her intentions, words, and actions and says, “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” (The Greater 1-2). To understand the real scenario Arundhati Roy visited dam sites and spent days with affected people i.e. homeless, destitute, Dalits, marginalized, and tribal people she was moved by the grave conditions of the people which resulted in her passionate efforts in their agitation and support through her essay *The Greater Common Good* in which she states, “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

(The Greater 2). In India, politicians ask for votes in the name of growth and development resulting in governments that kick-start development projects for development which eventually reflects in increasing GDP (Gross Domestic Production). From the outside, it seems that the nation is progressing but this development is limited to special groups of elite and rich as they get tenders of these projects which immensely grow their net worth on the other hand the poor and marginalised bear its vicious aftermaths. The purpose of development is to empower and uplift every sector and community of a nation but the harsh reality is that it satiates the greed of a few at the expense of others. Roy asks probing and pinching questions about why the poor and marginalized bear the expense of every development that takes place for the benevolence of the whole in the name of the Greater Common Good. Since Independence many development projects have taken place to make India a developed nation this dream has uprooted and displaced millions of fellow Indians and put them into misery through dams, power plants, industries, mines, etc. The majority of affected people are tribals, Dalits, and marginal groups who struggle to get compensation or even representation. According to N.C. Saxena, “former Secretary to the Planning Commission is reported to have said in an open meeting that the number of development-induced displaced people since independence is more than 50 million and most of them have not been resettled”(Fernandes, 2022). Roy understands the gravity of the issue and addresses it as “They’re 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 lifting into the rich. Their reservoirs displace huge population of people, leaving them homeless and destitute....They cause floods, water logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes” (The Greater 4). Through this essay, Roy portrays the vivid picture of people who once fed on their land by cultivating their grains and on natural resources available in their vicinity are now been herded out of their lands and homes in the name of national interest for the greater common good. These people are facing a hard time coping with situations of new domains as they struggle to get jobs,

and rehabilitation and become victims of xenophobia and violence. These multipurpose development projects not only affect the livelihood of people but also cause numerous problems that have hazardous effects on human life as well as on the environment. Roy, through her essay, clears the air that she is not against development but against the overlooked atrocities on affected people and ecology as she states in the essay, "I'm not an anti-development junkie, nor a proselytiser for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition" (The Greater 1-2). Roy clears her points and stands as she knows that she lives in a world where stating your opinion about governmental policies welcomes an anti-national tag and exposing the dark side of any development makes one anti-development.

India like any other developing nation relies on its natural resources and the key to development goes through harnessing these resources to one's desire. The survey of Statista from 2011 to 2022 released in December 2023 shows the sector-wise GDP distribution where the agriculture sector holds 16.73% share and for agriculture dams play a vital role in irrigating fields which produce crops to fill empty stomachs. Since Independence Indian politicians inaugurate here and there different development projects which include dams as well. The first prime minister of India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in 1961 envisioned by India's Ironman Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel whose statue (statue of unity) standing in Gujrat facing the direction of Sardar Sarovar Dam and the dam was inaugurated in 2017 by current prime minister of India Narendra Modi. In the opening lines of the essay *The Greater Common Good*, Roy quoted from the speech of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru which he delivered in 1948 addresses the villagers of Odisha who were to be displaced by the Hirakund dam which says, "If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country" (The Greater 1). Nehru further adds about dams, "Dams are the Temples of Modern India" (The Greater 3). Roy adds to this statement, "one that he grew to regret in his own lifetime" (The Greater 4). Throughout the essay, she portrays India criticizing dams making anti-development and anti-national governments equate these development projects to nation-building.

Roy satires on the growing dam construction industry, “Dam-building grew to be equated with Nation-building” (The Greater 4). Roy, fearlessly satires tender concerns of the Supreme Court of India in the case of displacement and rehabilitation, “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 Greater 1). Roy shows a grave concern in this democratic eco-system of India where neither the government nor the judiciary pay heed to address the elephant in the room and instead kill time on arguing less prior issues. Resettlement is a challenge that is visible to all but addressing it is not the concern of these democratic institutions. Through her essay Roy busts the bubble of people who embrace dams as an emblem of progressiveness and development instead they also are less democratic and monuments of corruption which majorly favours few those are governments, contractors, business owners, banks, and investors. People need to be aware of the underwhelming aspects of these monumental progressions as these achievements come at an irredeemable cost. The essay majorly focuses on the Sardar Sarovar Dam and questions the rehabilitation of the affected as it has displaced many people from their native places. Roy satires governmental policies that advocate sustainable development and environmental sustainability but fail to implement any although the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 was amended in 1984 there was no National Rehabilitation Policy existed at that time. The first National Rehabilitation Policy came into the picture in 2004 almost two decades later the controversial Narmada BachaoAndolan (NBA) shook the foundation of the Indian government and its biggest funder The World Bank. Here Narmada BachaoAndolan is “The Narmada BachaoAndolan (NBA) was a mass movement that began in 1985 to protest against the lack of an appropriate resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) policy for the more than 250,000 people who faced submergence during the construction of big dams along the Narmada river” (“1985: Narmada BachaoAndolan - Frontline”). Roy in the essay describes how the government dislocates people, acquiring their lands and paying cash compensation which reaches few and

marginal left empty-handed, “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 fertilizer” (The Greater 6).

The Narmada Valley Development Project is one of the biggest and most ambitious dam projects in India which comprises 3200 dams, out of which there are 30 major, 135 medium, and the rest are small dams as Roy states, “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” (The Greater 10). This project itself has a huge impact on the environment and human life as along with irrigation to distant places of Kutch and Saurashtra it brings ecological imbalance and huge displacement of people as Roy captures all of it in her essays, “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 twenty-five million people who live in the valley” (The Greater 10). The World Bank took its interest in financing the project as it does to any other project across the globe even before the sanction of the Ministry of Environment which came in 1987 but the bank was ready with its first loan installment of \$450 million in 1985 for the controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam. All this financial assistance falls under international aid as the bank focuses on the interest it gets rather than the principal amount. The Third World countries accept these development aids open-handed and embrace economic subjugation willingly “According to the World Bank Annual Report, last year (1998), after the arithmetic, India paid the Bank 478 million dollars more than it received” (The Greater 10). Arundhati Roy provides a detailed analysis of Sardar

Sarovar Dam in 1961 government officials reached out to the people of Kothie village who were told some of their land was needed for making a helipad for the arrival of an important person who was going to visit them. Amidst reaped crops ready to harvest they made a helipad villagers were paid in cash which they thought was for their crop but it was for their land. The important person was Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru who made his speech and laid the foundation of the Sardar Sarovar Dam by pressing, “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” (The Greater 22). Roy being a critic of selfish schemes of government satires their lack of R&D about the impacts of these development projects, “Could Nehru have known when he pressed that button that he had unleashed an incubus?” (The Greater 22). The height of the dam was initially fixed at 49.8 metres but as time passed the height reached 138.68 meters which concerns many environmental activists and people of affected areas. Medha Patkar, Baba Amte pioneers of Narmada Bachao Andolan along with Arundhati Roy, Alok Agarwal, Rahul Ram, and others supported the cause and fought for the people forcefully displaced by the government to acquire land for their magnum opus. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy unfolds astonishing facts about the Narmada Valley Development Project and portrays an insightful picture in front of concerned authorities and government to take appropriate measures to address these neglected issues to minimize human and environmental costs and optimize the resources optimally. Roy expresses her concern, “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” (The Greater 30). In this age of environmental crisis, it is hard to parallel environmental sustainability with development projects, and for every government, it is high time to protect and nurture the environment, culture, and its people.

From her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy remains an ardent supporter of human cause whether it's about the place of humans in a caste-ridden Indian society, the place of a

transgender in a binary world, or justice and rehabilitation of affected people she excels in projecting all notions with equal vivacity. Roy shakes her leg with hundreds of activists in the cause of dam-affected people for their proper representation and rehabilitation as the majority of them are tribal people and marginal groups who failed to produce any document for their representation and as per governmental policies no document no compensation. Hence a forceful displacement with no relief aid. Roy spent a great time with the displaced tribal people to understand their misery in their whereabouts where they are living under inhumane conditions. She describes a resettlement site 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 Greater 20). People who once had their own homes, own lands and are now left to live in misery just to support the national interest for the greater common good. Roy passionately put her efforts into highlighting the cause through her writing, her actions, and her Booker Prize amount which held high the morale of NBA activists who themselves been through the atrocities of the system. Since Independence millions of people have been displaced by these development projects Roy says, “The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war” (The Greater 7). The Government promised people to give land for land before acquiring their land for the “national interest” but later settled the matter with cash compensation which created disparity and chaos among the rehabilitees. The tribal people who made homes in the forest become an integral part of the environment and get discounted in this game of land acquisition in “National Interest”. In the Narmada Valley Development Project, the tribal people get no cash compensation from the government as they failed to produce legal documentation on official papers tribal people are refugees of the Narmada Valley Project but in reality government refused to displace them, and rehabilitate them and they are left in submergence.

On October 18th, 2000, the supreme court of India decreed its final verdict on the PIL filed by Narmada BachaoAndolan against the state governments of Gujrat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and Union of India under a three-judge panel from which the majority judgment by justice Kirpal and justice Anand ordered in favour of Sardar Sarovar Dam construction and gave green signal to raise its height to 138.68 meters whereas justice Barouch remains against this decision. Roy along with other activists criticized this decision which resulted in her being charged and found guilty under “scandalizing authorities with malafide intentions” a punishable offense under section 12 of the Contempt of Court Act and Justice G. B. Pattnaik and R. P. Sethi sentenced her to one day of simple imprisonment and imposed a fine of Rs. 2,000 on which Roy responds with dignity, “I stand by what I said. And I am prepared to suffer the consequences. The dignity of the court will be upheld by the quality of their judgments, the quality of these judgments will be assessed by the people of this country. The message is clear. Any citizen who dares to criticize the court does so at his or her own peril, the judgement only confirms what I said in my affidavit. It is a sad realization for me, because I feel the Supreme Court of India is an important institution and citizens of India have high expectations from it”(Bureau, 2002). Many unsung heroes of environmental causes committed many atrocities just to do the right thing. Roy through her essay stresses environmental sustainability along with the growth and development of a nation as it is a vital phenomenon for the very existence of human beings along with other species. Throughout *The Greater Common Good*, Roy portrays the ecological imbalance and atrocities of displaced people and asks all to stand against pseudo-development to protect nature and people with no representation. She asks her fellow national citizens to share the atrocities and agony of displaced people and fight for appropriate rehabilitation and compensation. Roy vindicates her insights as “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" (The Greater 8). For environmental sustainability, every nation needs to keep a check on its policies of exploitation of natural resources for development and constantly look for alternatives to strike a harmonious cord between the environment and development. Roy addresses the impact of dams on the lives of other species, "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" (The Greater 24). It impacts on economic structure and livelihood of many as in the absence of freshwater fishes like Hilsa deplete gradually and eventually extinct. At present, in India, there are 5334 dams and 447 are under construction which still dislocating people and causing ecological imbalance. In the race of growth and development human has destroyed their environment as well as the lives of their fellows. In India alone millions of people get displaced in the name of development, "In India around 50 million people have been displaced due to development projects in over 50 years. Around 21.3 million development-induced IDPs include those displaced by dams (16.4 million), mines (2.55 million), industrial development (1.25 million) and wild life sanctuaries and national parks (0.6 million)" ("Displacement and Rehabilitation of People Due to Developmental .."). Dams being the emblem of growth and development are also a reason for water logging, land salinization.

Arundhati Roy, in her various writings, replicates real issues that affect humans across the globe. In *The Greater Common Good*, she encapsulates threats to human lives, biodiversity, and the environment caused by rapacious desires for the growth and development of human beings. In this encounter, she advocates environmental sustainability as the focal point of every development to ensure nourishment and protection of all species and the environment

as well but in this sojourn of her she encountered criticism from her contemporary intellectuals like Ramachandra Guha an ecological historian and author says, “I am a liberal slightly inclined to the left. But I am opposed to extremism, to intellectual dishonesty and intellectual vulgarisation, whether it comes from the right or the left. My critique of Arundhati Roy was in that context. I found her an intellectual vulgariser of the left which is why I called her the ArunShourie of the left — she falsified, exaggerated, used hyperboles, suppressed fact, overwrote — all that Shourie did from the other side” (“I’m Glad That Arundhati Roy Took My advice, 2024”). B.G. Verghese winner of the 1975 Ramon Magsaysay award winner journalist remarked on Roy’s writings, “Her poetry was charming; the facts were wrong” (“BG Verghese, 2024: He Was One of the First to Call for Journalistic Ethics ..”). Even *The Greater Common Good*, received denouncing remarks from many people who attributed it as unoriginal and tribal romanticized text although Roy did extensive research for this essay which reflected in her factually laden content. Roy advocates those voices that are being unheard in all her writings and takes her responsibility as a literary writer to awaken and aware people of their rights and protect the environment which she never baffles in lashing out at the Indian socio-political and judicial system for handling the environment and ecology undemocratically. Along with her novels and non-fiction writings, Roy articulates a deep map that penetrates the consciousness of people around the globe and with *The Greater Common Good*, she advocates environmental sustainability parallel to growth and development in the time of environmental crisis.

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