

BOOK REVIEW

Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living*, Modern Library, 1999, 126 pp., \$11.95 (pap.).

During a recent trip to India, my first, I was struck by the imposition of technology into the culture, despite the widespread poverty. Everywhere one turned, billboards touted the latest dot com or advertised training in C++ or Perl. Inevitably, however, below the billboards one would find sidewalk dwellers or streethawkers, none of whom could ever fancy a computer purchase. The newspapers, too, were awash in high-tech advertisements (and cricket scandals and beauty pageants), while news about the majority of Indians—impoverished and free of computers—was nearly non-existent. Clearly, the papers reflected the lives of the middle class. What of everyone else? In *The Cost of Living*, Arundhati Roy raises her voice on behalf of those who pay the price for the advancement of others.

In this slim volume, Roy brings together two controversial essays that were previously published in general interest magazines (*Outlook* and *Frontline*). In these essays, the Booker-Prize winning author of *The God of Small Things* directs her considerable written skills against two sacred cows of Indian governmental policy: dams and nuclear weapons. Both essays are polemics; yet, they raise important issues and deserve serious attention from activists, policymakers, and scholars.

Although written by the same author, the two essays in the volume may appear at first glance to be otherwise unrelated. Upon exploring the book, however, at least two unifying themes emerge. First, both essays raise serious concerns about human efforts to employ technologies that, whatever their perceived benefits, threaten human and natural systems on a large scale. In Roy's view, both large dams and nuclear bombs put human society at war with the natural environment. Second, these essays discuss the often-unexamined costs of technological development and find that not only do all segments of society not benefit from technology, but also that many pay dearly for what is achieved. Third, both ask fundamental questions about democracy, patriotism, and citizenship.

The first essay in the book ("For the Greater Common Good") makes an impassioned plea against completion of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. This river, the fifth longest in India, traverses portions of [Madhya Pradesh](#) and [Maharashtra](#) before winding through the drought-prone state of [Gujarat](#) for most of its course. Originally planned in the time of Nehru, and backed by an international coalition of development interests (the World Bank, Western consultants, Japanese contractors, Indian politicians, and so forth), the Sardar Sarovar Dam threatens the homes of some 40,000 families. Opposed by environmentalists in India and abroad—just this month (June 2000) a protest of the dam is scheduled for New York City—as well as local activists among the affected residents, the dam, partially constructed and way over projected costs, appears to the author as an epic

battle for the soul of the nation. Will India be a nation that cares about the state of its natural environment and the welfare of its least privileged citizens or not?

Trained as an architect, Roy brings more than the novelist's skill as a wordsmith to her task. Rather, she meticulously analyzes the promises made by dam proponents and finds their claims of benefits (irrigation, drinking water, and others) to lack credibility. For example, she finds past Indian dam projects have quickly led to waterlogged soil and soil salinization. Second, she details a cycle of debt-creation imposed on developing nations by large projects funded by foreign loans. Third, she examines government plans for Project Affected Persons (the government's official term for those living in the area that will be flooded by the dam)—many of them Adivasis, the original inhabitants of India, most of whom live in dire poverty—and finds these plans inadequate. Worst of all, she finds that non-landowners, including many of the Adivasis, are scheduled to receive no compensation at all for being displaced. All told, she questions the scientific economic, environmental, and moral bases of the project. By extension, she raises serious doubts about the efficacy and equity of all large dam projects, be they in the developing world or elsewhere.

No doubt, many readers will question her analysis, or at least wonder about its accuracy. For these readers, she offers detailed footnotes of her sources allowing interested readers to perform their own analyses and draw their own conclusions. Furthermore, readers can balance Roy's polemic by visiting the dam's own web site (www.sardarsarovar.com) for an opposing view. Ultimately, despite her impassioned plea in opposition to the dam and its related projects (including numerous additional dams on the Narmada River system), she accepts that some will disagree with her and insist on building the dam, regardless of the costs. These forces may even win (and are winning as this review goes to print). That understood, Roy makes one request of dam supporters and opponents alike:

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.

The second, and briefer, essay in the book, "The End of Imagination," presents a voice of dissent against the general domestic jubilation that accompanied India's first successful nuclear bomb test. In so doing, Roy questions the validity of the theory of deterrence and laments the loss of the moral high ground that building bombs implies. In her words, a better position would have been: "*we have the technology, we can make bombs if we want to, but we won't. We don't believe in them.*" For good measure, she also takes a shot at fundamentalism of all flavors and questions popular portrayals of what it means to be an authentic Indian. In sum, this essay makes a case for nuclear non-proliferation for India regardless of what other nations are doing. The bomb itself, and its potential destruction, she argues, is sufficient reason for not building any.

Together, the two essays in *The Cost of Living* present a significant challenge to new and old democracies alike. Is it enough to argue for the greater common good, when the same group of people is asked to pay the costs over and over? Can democracy truly be maintained in a nuclear weapons

state? Such questions have yet to be answered anywhere definitively. If nothing else, *The Cost of Living* invites all to enter the debate.

[Richard Wallace](#), Ph.D. Candidate,
Urban, Technological, and Environmental Planning
College of Architecture and Urban Planning
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
and
Intern, Community Systems Foundation
1130 Hill Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48104



