

Dwelling as a Border.

By Karen Kachra

You can be a citizen or you can be stateless, but it is difficult to imagine being a border.ⁱ

It is difficult, but we have to imagine this sort of being, this sort of dwelling that I will call living *as* a border. Two questions follow immediately. What *is* this kind of living we are said to have trouble imagining? And why do I say that we *must* persevere in imagining it, in bringing it into our social imaginary?

Let me start with the first question by turning to an essay written by Arundhati Roy, which is titled “the greater common good.”ⁱⁱ Roy tells the story of the great Narmada River, one of India’s largest. The Narmada is under construction, but as you might know, it has been a struggle. Although India has over 3600 major dams, the gradual damming of the Narmada and its 41 tributaries is the largest such project to date. The state’s plan is to build 3200 dams that will reconstitute the Narmada valley into step reservoirs. Thirty are to be major dams, 135 medium and the rest small. Four thousand square kilometers of natural deciduous forest are slated for submergence. In the end, twenty-five *million* people will be affected; many thousands of *them* are also slated for submergence. “We will request you to move from your houses after the dam comes up. If you move it will be good. Otherwise we shall release the waters and drown you all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My hypothesis is that, today, the Narmada is a border. By this I mean that the families who have lived by its rhythmical, tropical bounty, and whose fates, as peoples, are intertwined with the health of the river basin—they are collectively dwelling as a border.

Roy argues that Big Dams like the Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada have costs that far outweigh their purported benefits. Incredibly, this is the case even *without* factoring in the human and environmental costs. According to studies, the Sardar Sarovar will end up *consuming* more electricity than it will produce!^{iv} Factoring in loan repayments and futures loans for the drainage of inevitably “waterlogged” land, Big Dams like Sarovar are, financially speaking, bottomless pits. But whether or not you agree that damming is a

mistake, the fact remains that the mostly Adivasi and Dalit villagers who would be displaced by the technology are living as borders. And that is what I want to explore.

The Narmada is obviously not a border in the ordinary sense of the term: notably, it does not divide one nation-state from another. In a very different context, Étienne Balibar has written about the need to re-conceive what borders are and how they work.^v He suggests that borders are often no longer territorial dividers; rather, they can be found wherever states exert selective controls on populations. Could this be the case for the cyborg ribbon of life that is called the river Narmada, part wild and part tamed?

Consider the functions of borders as Balibar describes them in the postmodern globalized world. Traditionally borders have helped to establish identities. *This* is us, *that* is them; *this* is me, *that* is you. These identity-boundaries have histories, thus so must the us/thems and the me/yous. “Every discussion of borders relates, precisely, to the establishment of definite identities, national or otherwise.”^{vi} Further, according to Balibar, the state uses borders to reduce the complexity of identifying; it seeks to “fix” identities that are, in practice, not very well defined. For instance, the Indian government counts on its citizens to see the installation of its long linked dam-borders as a matter of (re-)establishing national identity. If you are *for* India, you must be for her development, for her modernization, *for* “the greater common good.”

In India it appears that dam building has historically been so strongly associated with nation building that very few people have asked whether dams actually *do* provide fresh water and enable agricultural production like they are thought to. The government has sponsored *not a single* post-project study of any of its dams. Regardless, Roy tells us that “every schoolchild is taught that Big Dams will deliver the people of India from hunger and poverty.”^{vii} Nehru’s famous ‘Dams are the Temples of Modern India’ speech is preached in all languages on the sub-continent. Big Dams have been something of a unifying mantra. Of course, in practice, Indian identity is hardly well defined. As Roy puts it: “Every single Indian citizen could, if he or she wants to, claim to belong to some minority or the other. The fissures, if you look for them, run vertically, horizontally, and are layered, whorled, circular, spiral, inside out and outside in.”^{viii} Given this reality, all of its hectic dam-building (India has 40% of all the Big Dams in the world) begins to

seem like a strenuous effort to stitch up dangerous helter-skelter belongings into a single overriding allegiance. Like most other places, India threatens to spill over its own banks.

The unprecedented struggle over the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam might then be seen as a token of the fact that borders are, in Balibar's terms, becoming ever more prone to "vacillation." As a border, the Narmada is less like a *line* and more like a *zone*. The scale and the sweep of who it affects and how they will be affected is changeable. Indeed, as Roy points out, consistent numbers that chart the people who are to be displaced, or the acreage to be submerged, have never actually been agreed upon by the local governments involved. The people who dwell along the Narmada are living in a kind of shadow zone. The specter of their future displacement is uncertain—are they inside or outside the bounds of the water's future reach? Will they know when they will no longer be able to live in the valley? (In the past, some villagers have gotten no warning when reservoirs were dammed and flood waters swallowed their homes.) What will "resettlement" bring?

These families who dwell as borders are neither this nor that. They are caught between two worlds—of the river life they once knew and the nameless shanty towns that are their future. Their being is ambivalent because they are forced to live without a sense of the future. They do not make plans because any day now their land might be taken or their crops flooded or their neighbors flushed out of their houses. These people are refugees in their own ancestral homeland. Like many other poor people who exist as borders, waiting to move on or be moved, these villagers spend their time negotiating their presence. And also, negotiating their presents—how many moments does one have left?

Balibar draws an interesting conclusion from the thickening of borders into zones where people indefinitely dwell. He states that the quantitative relation between 'border' and 'territory' is being inverted. "This means that borders are becoming the object of protest and contestation as well as of an unremitting reinforcement..."^{ix} Borders have stopped functioning as a limit to the political (marking where the political community ends) and started functioning as political entities themselves. The fight is on. Somehow, unlike the millions of invisible people who have already been displaced in duplicate, triplicate, quadruplicate—by dams and power centers and again by artillery ranges and

uranium mines—the people who live along the Narmada are attempting to have a say in who they are and how they will live. *This* border is a contested one. As Roy illustrates, the contest is imminently political. The struggle has involved, on the one hand, stand-offs, protests, petitions, court cases, independent scientific reviews, marches, hunger strikes and resettlement; on the other, arrests, beatings, surveyors, bulldozers, money, loans, land enclosures, stonewalling, policy-making and -breaking, bad math, bad faith, and resettlement. In sum, the border Narmada has itself become realized for what it is: a political, indeed internationally political, institution. What this means for those living on it, is that their very lives have become a political wrangle. They are negotiating for their lives. Mostly they lose, though, like Ram Bai, who now lives in a slum outside Jalalapur. “Why didn’t they just poison us?” she asked, “then we wouldn’t have to live in this shit-hole and the Government could have survived along with its precious dam all to itself.”^x

It is worth stressing the idealized and violent nature of borders. For ideals and violence go hand in hand.^{xi} Borders must be conceived of as capable of marking lines that people are willing, in their patriotic faith, to kill or be killed over. “[T]hey would not be idealized, conceived of as the support of the universal, if they were not imagined as the point at which ‘world-views’, and thus also views of man, were at stake: the point at which one must choose, and choose *oneself*,” writes Balibar.^{xii} So we should not be surprised that in the “development” of the Narmada, among so many others, there continues to be a lot of violence. Primarily, this violence is directed against those who are displaced by Big Dams, who are sometimes considered, in the state’s terminology, “project affected” persons (PAPs).^{xiii} The Narmada has become a place where one must choose, and the state chooses itself. Itself? The vast majority of rural river dwellers are untouchables (Dalits) and aboriginal peoples (like the Adivasi). They are the racially, ethnically, socially other—the *them*. In Roy’s words: “The ethnic ‘otherness’ of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation Builders. It’s like having an expense account. Someone *else* pays the bills. People from another country. Another world.”^{xiv}

Thus, in another sense, the people who dwell along the Narmada are borders because they are *neither* citizens *nor* stateless. “You can be a citizen or you can be stateless...” wrote Green. And in this case? It seems fairly obvious that the aboriginal peasants who live in these wild remotes do not *really* count as members of the nation.

Routinely, their lives simply fail to be factored into the public planning of the dams' development, let alone given consideration. Of the ones who actually try to get some consideration from "their" government, things like this happen.... In 1999, three thousand of them came to Delhi to protest their situation to a Grievance Redressal Committee. They traveled overnight by train and slept on the streets. The President would not meet them because he had an eye infection. The Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment would not meet them either. She asked for a written representation. When the representation was handed to her, she scolded the delegation for not having written it in English.

But if the border-dwellers are not, in fact, citizens, neither are they truly stateless. After all it is the state (represented by the President and the Minister) that sanctions and pursues their displacement; the nation-state, in turn within a network of global capital, has rendered their homeland a border zone. It is precisely because these villagers cannot escape the state (even when it provides them no services or rights,) that they are living in a predicament. We might describe this predicament, along with Balibar, as a matter of being simultaneously included and excluded. Or what he calls "the internal exclusion of the poor."^{xv} One way to characterize this new kind of exclusion is as a kind of superfluity:

[T]he most massive form of poverty in today's world is the one we see in *underdeveloped* countries, where the combination of the destruction of traditional activities, the domination of foreign financial institutions, the establishment of a so-called New World Order, and so on, leads to a situation—which, of course, nobody either wanted or anticipated—in which millions of human beings are *superfluous*. Nobody needs them—they are, so to speak, disposable people...^{xvi}

The 'disposable human being' is indeed a social phenomenon, but it tends to look, at least in some cases, like a 'natural' phenomenon, or a phenomenon of violence in which the boundaries between what is human and what is natural, or what is post-human and what is post-natural, tend to become blurred...^{xvii}

Undoubtedly it is not always the case that those who live as borders wind up as disposable people. It just so happens that the border Narmada is being constructed

according to the logic that makes traditional life superfluous, indeed an obstacle, for Development. Balibar's insight is that this exclusion begins to look 'natural,' as if those who get excluded are simply and inevitably the chaff of the scythe that clears the path to "the greater common good." Their suffering is inevitable. Nothing can be done, a sad fact of life. In 1948, at this time, Nehru let the cat out of the bag (perhaps it wasn't yet quite in), when he spoke to the very people who were to lose their homes for progress. "If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country," he told them.^{xviii} Nowadays the state speaks through the courts and the courts do not speak of (apparently inevitable) suffering, but rather of numbers.

Returning to this matter of exclusion through inclusion, of being left out from the inside...How does this work? Perhaps it is also apt to say, taking off from Balibar, that the border Narmada functions as a condition of possibility for institutions.^{xix} The violent inscribing and maintenance of the border by the state has to do essentially with the way that enforcing borders provides a protected *atmosphere* (recall Nietzsche's second untimely meditation) in which to nurture the practices, for example, of democratic community.

If the border was defined fictively in a simple, simplistic way and if...that simplicity was *forced*—that is to say, subjected to forcing by the state—it was precisely for this reason. But the consequence has been that the borders within which the conditions for a relative democracy have in some cases been won have themselves always been absolutely anti-democratic institutions, beyond the reach of any political purchase or practice.^{xx}

It is unclear whether the Sardar Sarovar dam, or any of the other dams making up the overhaul of the Narmada are beyond the reach of political purchase. They have certainly been sites of quintessentially democratic political practices such as popular protests. However, it is equally obvious that the implementation of the dams, the very instituting of the border, continues to occur in a completely undemocratic fashion. Villagers are not consulted, nor are they even warned when their homes will be washed away by rising water levels. In India, the state's only legal requirement for compensation for the loss of one's land and one's way of life is a small cash payment. (In reality, this often comes

late, and only to men.) Have the claims of the Adivasi villagers and their supporters gone unheard by the state?^{xxi}

If it is correct to think of the Narmada as a condition for democracy, what institutions does it condition? Most obviously, it conditions economic relations that plug India in to a global economy: from agricultural exports and golf courses^{xxii} to the regulation and sale of water itself.^{xxiii} The dammed Narmada also offers governments greater purchase on “their” citizenry: if the state controls the water basin, it in turn has a hand in power production, agricultural production, in the creation of public heritage parks, in the better maintenance of the utilities of its cities, and ultimately in the health and well-being of its population. Then there is the function of re-inscribing the identity of the nation-state.

These interventions are not necessarily misguided (provided, of course, that we leave to one side the very real question of the efficacy of Big Dams in meeting their stated aims.) But we have already seen how the border functions to *actively differentiate groups*. This point could be approached via Foucault’s analysis of biopower—the way modern states regulate their populations.^{xxiv} Keyword: “their.” The thing that enables is the same thing that excludes: in our case, a river-border.

Foucault argues that the regulation of the nation as a population is an essentially positive mode of government. Meaning that state power works, in a biopolitical regime, to produce and protect the welfare of its citizens, rather than primarily to repress or reduce individual liberties. In modernity, the nation-state *makes* live and (merely) *lets* die. (“Why didn’t they just poison us?” *is* indeed the question, Ram Bai.) If the state aims to assert what is an essentially sovereign right to *kill*, it cannot avail itself of the discourse of biopolitics. Unless, that is, it plays a race card. In his Collège de France lectures of 1976, Foucault suggests that race, in a racist context, plays the role of fracturing the biological spectrum of the population so that political distinctions can be made. The logic: by exterminating the racial other, the social underclass, the weirdos, the uncivilized, the dirty savages, the state can actually *enhance* the well-being of its population! To the degree to which the state cleans up its mess, so to speak, to this degree the unity, the purity, the vitality of the nation grows. Indeed, its very *health is at stake*. Dams *must* be built!

“People say the Sardar Sarovar dam is an expensive project. But it is bringing drinking water to millions. This is our lifeline. Can you put a price on this? Does the air we breathe have a price? We will live. We will drink. We will bring glory to the state of Gujarat.”^{xxv} No doubt the chief minister’s wife is not intending to remind us of the ecological, historical and human costs of the project. These “prices” are like echoes behind her words; they are invisible creatures, disposable nothings. They are excluded from the vision of “we will live.” Not because they are *beyond* the scope of Gujarat’s regulatory power but precisely because they are *caught up in it*.

The extermination of the Adivasi and Dalit and millions of other people and their cultures is well in hand throughout the world.^{xxvi} A few of these sites have become border zones that are being contested by people who are, these days, neither this nor that. One could highlight the parallels (and the differences) to colonial genocides. Roy uses images of fascist purges. The squalid camps to which the Adivasi are resettled, where they tend to be conscripted for cheap manual labor, are queasily similar to concentration camps. Is this pushing it? Even if I haven’t seen these places, others have. Certainly, we have trouble imagining it. But don’t democratic states have borders too?

The need to persevere in imagining what it is like to dwell-as-a-border is an ethical obligation. If we are not reflective about the ways in which the dissolution of some people(s) actually conditions “our” ways of life, then we are simply not alive to the consequences of our collective action and/or inaction. The being of those who dwell as borders, in the sense that I have tried to evoke here using Roy and Balibar, is one of fatally serious consequence. And the fact is that it is not an inevitable or ‘natural’ one.

Perseverance is involved for those of us who are not living in border zones like the Narmada precisely because—despite the international political intrigue, juicy betrayals and police crackdowns, the horror of families up-ended and torn apart and the pathos of pristine wilderness being crushed for uncertain gain, the quiet sorrow of ancient ways of life being extinguished—border life is somehow so easily forgotten. The Sardar Sarovar, for example, is not news anymore. For those who are living as borders, however, life does not just “go on,” as we like to say. Life has not gone on for decades; and for how many more?

Relatively speaking, the Narmada is a success story. There the extermination and the devastation has been spun out and dragged on long enough for ordinary people to wake up to the fact of its happening. The people who live without futures have called us (however briefly) into their world.^{xxvii} Is it *easier* or *harder* to persevere in questioning the mindset and the practices that produce border zones than it is to persevere in living as a border for as long you can still struggle? I do not know. There is no end in sight. No closure. No glamour, no fireworks, no tidy ledger of accomplishments or condemnations. Just an in-between, where, at best, how we *all* live is thrown into question.

Notes

ⁱ André Green, *La Folie Privée: psychanalyse des cas-limites*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990: 107, cited in Étienne Balibar, "What is a Border?" in *Politics and the Other Scene*. Trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner. London: Verso, 2002: 75.

ⁱⁱ Arudhati Roy, "the greater common good," in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. London: Flamingo, 2002: 43-126. She has a second essay in the same volume that also refers to the Narmada Valley dam project. See "power politics": 129-163.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morarji Desai, speaking at a public meeting in the submergence zone of the Pong Dam, 1961. Roy illustrates that, despite a changed rhetorical strategy, the government still practices essentially the same tactic.

^{iv} Roy, "the greater common good," 75. She cites a study by S. Dharmadhikary, "Hydropower at Sardar Sarovar: Is It Necessary, Justified, Affordable?" in W. F. Fisher, ed. *Towards Sustainable Development? Struggling Over India's Narmada River*. New York: M.F. Sharpe, 1995: 141.

^v See several papers that are now collected in English in the volume Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*. New York: Verso, 2002. In particular I draw upon "Ambiguous Identities," "What is a Border?," "The Borders of Europe," and "Violence, Ideality and Cruelty."

^{vi} Balibar, "What is a Border?," 76.

^{vii} Roy, "the greater common good," 51.

^{viii} Roy, "the greater common good," 27.

^{ix} Balibar, "The Borders of Europe," 92.

^x She is cited in Roy, "the greater common good," 50.

^{xi} For example see Balibar, "Violence, Ideality and Cruelty," in *Politics and the Other Scene*. New York: Verso, 2002: 129-145.

^{xii} Balibar, "The Borders of Europe," 94.

^{xiii} I stress that many people who are in fact affected by the development are not counted as "project affected," and thus are not even included in this unsavory category.

^{xiv} Roy, "the greater common good," 56.

^{xv} Balibar, "Violence, Ideality, and Cruelty," 141.

^{xvi} Balibar, "Violence, Ideality, and Cruelty," 142. Bernard Ogilvie coined the term "disposable person." See also Bernard Ogilvie, "Violence et Representation: la production de l'homme jetable," *Lignes* 26 October 1995.

^{xvii} Balibar, "Violence, Ideality, and Cruelty," 143.

^{xviii} Cited in Roy, "the greater common good," 43.

^{xix} Balibar, "What is a Border?" 84.

^{xx} Balibar, "What is a Border?" 84.

^{xxi} On October 18, 2000 a three-judge bench of India's Supreme Court ruled against the public interest litigation introduced by the public advocacy group the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Notably, one dissenting judge who made it clear that he disagreed with everything in the majority opinion report. On March 29, 2001, the NBA's review petition of the report was dismissed in chambers without a hearing. Dams continue to be built by various governmental authorities who have consistently failed to live up to guidelines for water treatment and resettlement. The judgment (laughably) stated that there was no reason to "assume that the authorities will not function properly." See Roy, "the greater common good" for a heartbreaking summary of this matter, pp 124-126.

^{xxii} Planners of the Sardar Sarovar envisage a series of five star hotels, golf courses and water parks. These luxuries are justified as the only way to raise money to complete the "Wonder Canal" that is the backbone of the project.

^{xxiii} Planners of Sardar Sarovar irrigation also dream of an electronic irrigation scheme in which a "single authority" will manage all groundwater and surface water supplies. This "authority" will, apparently, *own and then sell water* to farmers (who can afford it). It will also, effectively, decide who grows what and where. It has already done this, however, making promises to numerous major sugar mills along the river basin, whose CEO's, incidentally, all have interesting connections to the "single authority" developing the Narmada.

^{xxiv} Michel Foucault, *'Society Must be Defended': lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: an introduction*. Volume One. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1978.

^{xxv} Urmilaben Patel, wife of Gujarat Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel, speaking at a public rally in Delhi in 1993. Cited in Roy, "the greater common good," 50.

^{xxvi} The many enlightening books of ethnobotanist Wade Davis explore the on-going extinction of indigeneous languages as unique ways of life.

^{xxvii} On the other hand, who has heard from or even about the hundreds of thousands of peasants being replaced by Three Gorges Dam in China? We did just hear from Merrill Lynch that the Yangtse Electric Power stock—the company funding the project—had a massive initial public offering. "Chinese energy stocks are a hot topic, not only domestically but internationally as well," a representative said. See BBC News, "Huge Appetite for Chinese Dams," November 6, 2003.