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Essay
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The Place: The Narmada Valley in the Indian State of Gujarat

Two women sit on charpoys talking quietly in the hard heat of 43 degrees under the shade of a banyan tree. There is little other sound. The road in the distance is dusty.

Gayatri Spivak: I am a committed Marxist feminist...The capitalist system is corrupt. Mother India is sinking under ideological pap. Her pap smear has come back cancerous. Her growing millions – 1 billion and rising - have an insatiable thirst for water that is unquenchable. ‘Shining India’ is a delusion – an example of Althusser’s false consciousness.¹

A Sanyasi² slowly walks by, his hands raised in supplication.

Gayatri Spivak: What was I just saying - the opiate of the masses, heh...[a hard grin settles on her face]³

Vandana Shiva: Deep change is required. We both agree. However, I have coined the term “earth democracy”⁴ to describe my position. I believe that direct and basic democracy coupled with the resurrection of the “commons,” and community rights will achieve this end. India is not sinking.

Suddenly an enraged Muslim villager yells from the curtain of her purdah⁵ at the Sanyasi.

¹ Spivak, G. (1988), *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in Nelson C. & L. Grossberg (eds.), (1988), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Spivak argues that “Ideology as “false consciousness” (being deceived) has been called into question by Althusser.” Althusser in Lenin and Philosophy, p 13, wrote “Class instinct is subjective and spontaneous. Class position is objective and rational. To arrive at proletarian class positions, the class instinct of proletarians only needs to be educated; the class instinct of the petty bourgeoisie, and hence of intellectuals, has, on the contrary, to be revolutionized.”

² A Sanyasi is a devout Hindu who has renounced worldly life.

³ Karl Marx believed religion to be the “...opiate of the masses...”

⁴ <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global.vshiva3.html> Interview with Vandana Shiva (2002) : Discussing *Water Wars*. Shiva argues that there are three planks to earth democracy “...First, recognizing once again that we are just one inhabitant, one species among many on the earth...Second, ...the highest powers need to go right to the bottom...” and third, “...if you really want to conserve resources you’ve got to put the powers to make decisions about natural resources on the ground...”

⁵ The practice of purdah may only involve a woman wearing a veil. However, in many parts of India, purdah involves the separation of women into domestic dwellings by a physical screen effectively hiding women from the sight of men and strangers.

Muslim woman: Facists! Murderers of the sons of Islam. Right wing fundamentalists! Don't you dare talk to me of the path of enlightenment when the Shen Shiva⁶ is spreading its bloody pall over the streets of Mumbai as millions more people try to squash into that rat hole. Hypocrites! Hindu patriarchs refuse contraception to their wives and daughters under the obscene guise of pativrata⁷ and inflict forced sterilisations on the community. Burn on your own funeral pyre, you zealots! A curse on Sonja Gandhi and her ancestors.⁸

*The Sanyasi just shrugs and walks away. The women watch as he squats down in the distance, a hairless pink starved dog awaits the excrement.*⁹

The women avert their eyes.

Both women reflect...

Vandana Shiva: This Muslim woman walks five long kilometers each way each day to get water for her family. She walks over parched and stony land, a land previously rich with alluvial flats, baked salty dry when the river was diverted to the rich urban centers of India and tapped for bottled water. Her body is emaciated and stooped. She has eight malnourished children. She is not yet twenty five and the water she will get will probably be polluted.

*The bile rises in the womens' throats as they bitterly remember Urmilaben Patel's visit to this village.*¹⁰ *Who wouldn't?*

Urmilaben Patel: 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...¹¹

Gayatri Spivak: The problem is that this land was never hers and while her husband rots in an Indian prison for having the temerity to tug the forelock and ask for compensation for his land, it was never hers; never her daughters. At the very best it was just her husband's and his sons. Individual patriarchal ownership backed up by capitalist patriarchal force.

Vandana Shiva: The problem that I see in Marxist theory is that it tends to place a lot of emphasis on alienation and rightly so. Yet it deals less than directly with

⁶ Shen Shiva is the right wing Hindu extremist fundamentalist group. It has a large following in Mumbai and is blamed for organizing many anti Muslim riots.

⁷ O'Hanlon, R., (1994), [A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the critique of gender relations in colonial India](#), Oxford University Press, Madras, p 7.

⁸ http://www.uwmc.uwc.edu/geography/malthus/sen_NYR.htm Population: Delusion and Reality, (1994) Amartya Sen. Sen claims that over 8 million force sterilizations were conducted during the 1976 Emergency.

⁹ This is a deliberate intertextual reference to the work of 1999 Nobel prize winning author V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul highlighted in [An Area of Darkness: His Discovery of India](#) the lack of sanitation in India.

¹⁰ <http://www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html> Arundhati Roy's Article: The Greater Common Good. Urmilaben Patel, the wife of Gujarat Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel, visited Gujarat on behalf on her husband in an attempt to persuade local villagers to move.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

women's reproductive and sexual concerns. The other concern is obviously the lack of freedom. If freedom is to be valued at all then the lack of it must be seen as a social loss.¹² It is all very well to look at China as an example but what of its population's human rights? This is problematic.

Gayatri Spivak: I have publicly written that the subaltern female is very much in shadow even in post colonial times. But merely replacing the family is not going to break the patriarchal frame. The institution of the family underpins capitalism. An attack on capitalism will only be successful when it comes from sustained class action.

Vandana Shiva: And to which class do women belong? In a democracy there is room for voluntary choice and a collaborative solution both in regard to population control and water rights. The 1992 *Convention on Biological Diversity*¹³ argued convincingly that increasing women's status and achieving gender equity plays a pivotal role both in ensuring the sound management of natural resources and in decreasing fertility. If you ignore women you do so at the peril of the environment. They are the canaries of the ecocrisis.¹⁴

Gayatri Spivak: I agree. There is a direct correlation between the economic circumstances of women and the fertility rate. Increase the economic standing and education of women and the number of children they bear drops exponentially.

Vandana Shiva: In contrast, Marxist feminist analysis always seems so mono-dimensional – it attacks classism yet has little to do with sexism. As an academic environmental activist I cannot accept this. To do so is too court disaster.

Gayatri Spivak: Excuse the pun, heh? How ironic! Exactly how many writs, legal challenges and suits have you lodged attempting to stop the Narmada Valley Development Project from continuing. Exactly how many times have you sought compensation unsuccessfully for the millions of people dispossessed by the Dam project. And you failed! F-A-I-L-E-D. Your optimism, your attempts at democracy, at grassroots activism in the face of the capitalist juggernaut failed – failed miserably. An optimist, a boomster,¹⁵ in the second most populated and overcrowded place on this earth – how wonderfully refreshing; how naïve. Drink in the desolation of this valley – this waterless hell.

¹² http://www.uwmc.uwc.edu/geography/malthus/sen_NYR.htm Population: Delusion and Reality, (1994) Amartya Sen.

¹³ <http://www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html> Arundhati Roy's Article: The Greater Common Good

¹⁴ <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/vshiva3.html> Interview with Vandana Shiva (2002) Discussing "Water Wars."

¹⁵ Newbold, K.B., (2002), *Six Billion Plus: Population Issues in the Twenty-first Century*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham. Newbold argues persuasively "... The debate, currently defined by neo-Malthusians (accepting of the Malthusian position), distributionists, (Marxists), and economic optimists (those who believe that population growth stimulates economic development) has splintered, generating two lines of arguments, with one focusing on population – resource linkages (i.e., food, water, cropland) – and the other considering the potential connections between population and economic growth. Such a division creates an artificial divide within the population debate, when the reality is that resources, economic growth, and population are all tightly related."

Vandana Shiva: Remember Chipco?¹⁶ Remember Arundhati Roy?¹⁷ They have made the world stand up and notice.

Gayatri Spivak: Touche!

Vandana Shiva: Look, we are amid the *Water Wars* and we fight cowboy economics.¹⁸ But to analyse the problem only in terms of class – not gender or in India’s case, not religion, not caste, not economic circumstance – is foolhardy. India’s fertility rate is declining. Admittedly not as quickly as is desired nor uniformly across all the states of India but there is a downward trend. I disagree with Marxist feminist analysis: The proletariat does not have to sow the seeds of its own destruction.

Gayatri Spivak: Come on now – these people haven’t yet reached the heady heights of Marx’s proletariat. Are you suggesting that in India, of all places in the world, in the middle of the Narmada Valley, that democracy serves the Dalits, the Adivasis, the Tribals at all well? Women and tribals of India are Marx’s reserve army. You are playing with semantics.

Vandana Shiva: Democracy forces a space, a voice. It transcends class. It ekes out a place for these people’s basic human rights in the face of industrial capitalism. It allows a community to exist. To quote you, it allows the subaltern to speak. The problems of water and population growth can be solved by reasoned human action. That is what the People’s Earth Summit at St Stithians was all about.¹⁹ That is why the Marquis de Condorcet wrote in 1775 a rejoinder to Thomas Malthus’ classical liberalism. Education, especially female education, contributes significantly to a lowering of the birth rate. Population growth in particular is linked to justice for women. Gender equity may be the best way to save the environment.

Gayatri Spivak: Are you suggesting that women, this community or should I say this community which once was a community, this reserve army, has not had its environmental balls ripped off in the grossest, most brutal way; that the capitalist system has not debauched its occupants and debased their environment

¹⁶ “Chipco” is an environmental movement that originated in the Himalayas in the 1970s.

¹⁷ Arundhati Roy is a celebrated writer who wrote “[The Algebra of Infinite Justice](#)” a now famous polemic on the Narmada Dam Project. On May 29, 2004 Roy was also awarded the 2004 Sydney Peace Prize. Roy predicts “...Soviet-style communism failed, not because it was intrinsically evil, but because it was flawed. It allowed too few people to usurp too much power. Twenty-first century market capitalism, American style, will fail for the same reasons. Both are edifices constructed by human intelligence, undone by human nature...” (Sydney Morning Herald, 29-30 May, 2004, Weekend Edition, News)

¹⁸ <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/vshiva3.html> Shiva argues that “...cowboy economics is the mentality of, if you get somewhere first you have absolute rights to rape, plunder, pollute. You have no responsibility for neighbours, for those who came before you, the inhabitants who were there, or those who have to come after you...It is cowboy economics that is being brought back to the front with privatization. Cowboy economics was the basis of the water rights in the western United States. Whoever gets there first has absolute rights...”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

irretrievably? It is intergenerational and intragenerational rape both of its citizenry and their environment. Who remembers the Albanians I ask?

Vandana Shiva: But to not struggle, to give up, is to accept the futility of life, to suggest that the value of life of those in the south is worth less than those in the north. I reject that notion. Development is another form of colonialism – it is what I call maldevelopment.²⁰ The Navdanya, a grassroots conservation movement in India, and the Narmada Bichao Andolan²¹ stands distinct from this. It fights with the only things it has available to it – and sometimes that is the bodies of its villagers.

Gayatri Spivak: I too am appalled at the many reincarnations of The Tragedy of the Commons thinking. But it is not new. *Thomas Malthus's Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798 espoused the belief that famine and poverty were natural outcomes of population growth. Paul Erlich just resurrected it in *The Population Bomb* in 1960. We both know that the premise of these arguments is flawed. Water is a community resource that can be shared equally and population growth can be curbed.

Vandana Shiva: I know.

Gayatri Spivak: The root cause of the deprivations people suffer are not related to population growth and water shortages. People starve on the streets while grains are stored in huge granaries only a few kilometers away. Coca-Cola goes deep into the earth and taps into the river bed until rivers that have supplied communities for centuries run dry. The discourse of imperialism is invidious. This discourse informs the policy of the south. Garrett Hardin's views are nothing more than bloated insolent capitalist ignorance.

Gayatri Spivak: Kerbing population growth will not occur without structural change. Thirst can be satiated. Water is not a finite resource outside of an ecological paradigm. We appear to differ on the means of how we achieve the necessary changes. For me, a full communist manifesto is required; a revolution. The dire lessons that this Valley is testament to, screams for it.

Vandana Shiva: Look around you. We're in the Namada. You must agree in contrast that when you function in an ecological paradigm you value water but you don't price it. Because it is, in fact, priceless. In a market paradigm you price water but you don't value it.

Gayatri Spivak: And the same for women, heh?

Vandana Shiva: Yes.

²⁰ Shiva, V. (2003), *Development as a New Project of Western Patriarchy*, in Van De Veer D., and Christine Pearce, (2003), *The environmental ethics and policy book: philosophy, ecology an economics*, Wadsworth, Belmont. Shiva argues "...Maldevelopment militates against this equality in diversity, and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders..."

²¹ The NBA became a massive grassroots environmental organisation in the 1980s.

Act 2

A group of young Australian backpackers survey the enormity of the Narmada Dam. The conversation is light hearted. Their guide is a writer for The Lonely Planet.²²

The Guide: The Narmada Valley Project involves the construction of 3,200 dams. Thirty will be major dams, 135 medium and the rest small. This one is the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Conservative estimates are that 30 million people have been displaced since the dam project began in 1947. Very few of the inhabitants have been compensated. There have been many pyrrhic victories but the war is over ...

Their attention is diverted...

Australian Backpacker: Look at the kids standing on the top of their roofs. They're flying those coloured balloons like kites. Look!

The Guide smiles laughing: They're not balloons mate. They're the condoms distributed by family planning. They either melt off the silicon coating and sell the latex or use them as balloons at kid's birthday parties. You'll also probably find one on the radiator of our car.

Australian Backpacker: No wonder there's 1 billion Indians, heh?

The Guide: In 1976 Rajiv Gandhi introduced forced sterilizations – eight million. It brought down the government. It was a gross violation of people's civil rights. It caused massive social uproar. Voluntary birth control was enforced through either legal or economic coercion. It gave family planning a bad name. No politician will touch it now.

Australian Backpacker: Geez mate, it's hot. Any chance of getting some water?

The Guide laughs: No mate, not here. What water is left is just for the locals and it is as polluted as. We'll stop on the way back and see if we can get a beer at one of the Monsanto hotels.

Australian Backpacker: I thought India was dry?

The Guide: Look mate Monsanto would sell you anything. It's trying to privatise all the water in India. Monsanto sees the ecological crisis as a great business opportunity – scarce resource, maximum profit. It's Monsanto's view of sustainable development. Word is there is an in principle agreement between Monsanto and The Indian Government already. Then these poor buggers will get nothing. It's over for them. We're dropping this tour next year – We're off to China. The Yangtze Dam project is all the go now. Come on, who's for a beer?

²² Singh. S (Ed.), (2003), Lonely Planet: India, Lonely Planet Publications, Melbourne.

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