



THE WRONG GODS

By **S. Shakthidharan**

Directed by

Hannah Goodwin & S. Shakthidharan

03 MAY - 01 JUN

THE WRONG GODS

BY S. SHAKTHIDHARAN | 3 MAY - 1 JUNE 2025

We are thrilled to introduce to you *The Wrong Gods*, a new play by S. Shakthidharan, directed by Hannah Goodwin.

In a valley in India, paintings on a cave wall bear testimony to the presence of people - and their gods - for fifty thousand years. Close by, Nirmala farms the soil as her ancestors did, but her daughter Isha wants something more - a city education, and the opportunity it promises. And there are outsiders in the valley now, bringing new crops, new technologies, new visions of the future. There are new gods loose in the valley. But they are asking Nirmala and her people to pay a heavy price. A gripping new play from S. Shakthidharan (*Counting and Cracking*, *The Jungle and the Sea*) co-directed by Hannah Goodwin (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *Never Closer*), *The Wrong Gods* melds mother-and-daughter struggle with the economics of progress, asking, what are we worshipping? And what price will we pay?

These Learning Resources feature 5x 1hr lesson sequences tailored for students and teachers studying Drama in NSW. Designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to enrich their experience of watching *The Wrong Gods* in 2025, these materials also help students hone their improvisation, playbuilding, and acting skills, aligning with the NSW syllabus requirements.

NSW DRAMA CURRICULUM LINKS

Belvoir St Theatre's production of *The Wrong Gods* is well-suited for students undertaking **Stage 5 and 6 Drama**. It also aligns strongly with Stage 6 (Preliminary) Geography for students studying 'People, Patterns, and Processes, Human-Environment Interactions'.

These **Learning Sequences** have been created by Belvoir Education to support teachers in their instruction of:

- **STAGE 5 DRAMA**

Outcomes: DR5-PER-01, DR5-PER-01, DR5-MAK-01 & DR5-MAK-02

- **STAGE 6 DRAMA**

Outcomes: P1.2, P1.3, P1.4, P1.6, P1.7, P2.3, P2.6

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WORKSHEETS

LEARNING SEQUENCE 1: THE PROGRESS TRAP

PRINT COPIES OF WORKSHEET 1.1

A) GROUP DISCUSSION (10 MINS)

To begin this unit of work, conduct a group discussion with your class by asking students the following questions:

- What are some of the biggest environmental challenges of the 21st century?
- What do you think our responsibility is toward the planet?
- Do we have any moral responsibility to help people in different countries and cultures?
- How important is progress?



IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTPS://THENARWHAL.CA/](https://thenarwhal.ca/)

B) READING - WORKSHEET 1.1 (10 MINS)

WHAT IS THE 'PROGRESS TRAP'?

Humanity's journey through history is marked by incredible achievements and advancements. From mastering fire to exploring distant galaxies, our capacity for innovation seems boundless. Yet, woven into this narrative of progress lies a cautionary tale — ***the progress trap***. It ensnares societies when advancements intended to enhance well-being inadvertently lead to unforeseen consequences. Consider:

- Harnessing **technological prowess for warfare**, only to **escalate conflict**.
- The **rapid communication** afforded by mobile phone technology now raises concerns over **privacy and social connectivity**.
- Our reliance on fossil fuels for **industry and transport** has exacerbated greenhouse emissions.

The term "progress trap" was popularized by Canadian historian and author Ronald Wright in 2004. Wright describes it as a situation where human innovations intended to solve problems lead to unintended, detrimental outcomes. Here is what Wright says about progress:

"Social complexity is a double-edged sword. The same drive that has enabled us to organize and build has also made possible our heedless destruction of nature and our own prospects."

"We are a runaway species, and our runaway appetites are now spilling into the world around us."

“The myth of progress has sometimes served us well – those of us seated at the best tables, anyway – and may continue to do so. But I shall argue in this book that it has also become dangerous. Progress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap. Take weapons for example. Ever since the Chinese invented gunpowder, there has been great progress in the making of bangs: from the firecracker to the cannon, from the petard to the high explosive shell. And just when high explosives were reaching a state of perfection, progress found the infinitely bigger bang in the atom. But when the bang we can make can blow up our world, we have made rather too much progress.”

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What does it mean to be a “runaway species”?
- Can you think of some examples of our “runaway appetites”?
- What is Wright suggesting when he says that the myth of progress has served “those of us seated at the best tables”?

B) WORKING AS AN ENSEMBLE - THE DIAMOND (10 MINS)

Flocking: This activity focuses on synchronised group movement and improvisation, providing a strong foundation for group devising/ensemble performance.

An example of ‘Flocking’ can be found here: **Youtube: Flocking**

1. Form groups of four and arrange yourselves in a diamond shape, ensuring everyone is facing the same direction with ample space around them.
2. The student at the front of the diamond will start by performing an action, setting the pace and direction for the group.
3. The rest of the group will follow the leader’s movements, mirroring their actions. It is helpful to keep actions slow, simple and achievable.
4. When the leader changes direction, the new front person takes over and leads the group.
5. Aim for seamless and fluid transitions between leaders to maintain the group’s unity in movement.
6. Once the groups have mastered the exercise, you may choose to underscore their diamond with these two pieces of music: ‘Running to the Loop’ and ‘The Robot’.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtS_aqJI8Pk
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VARkRTNEx6s>

Reflect: How did the music’s atmosphere influence the gestures you made as a group?

C) CREATING TABLEAUS (20 MINUTES)

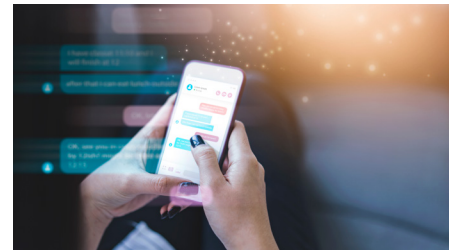
1. Form small groups of 4-6 members each.
2. Each group will select one of the following 'progress traps' to explore through tableaux (frozen images).



INNOVATION IN WARFARE



RESOURCE EXTRACTION



MOBILE COMMUNICATION



MASS PRODUCTION OF FOOD



FAST FASHION



FOSSIL FUELS FOR TRANSPORT

3. Groups will have 5 minutes to discuss how their selected topic evolved from a positive outcome of progress to a destructive force.
4. After the discussion, groups should create 3 tableaux that represent the story of their 'progress trap.' Encourage students to consider:
 - The use of levels and space to enhance their performance.
 - The use of symbols: Are the images literal or figurative?
 - Facial expressions and body language to convey emotions and themes.
 - Transitions between tableaux for a smooth, coherent narrative.
5. After 15 minutes of preparation, each group will present their tableaux to the class.
6. You may wish to add music to underscore the presentation and create atmosphere.

SUGGESTED MUSIC: A Ritual for Saying Goodbye by Jim Perkins (feat. Joanna Forbes LÉstrange)

REFLECTION: How did each group effectively use tableaux to communicate their progress trap?

LEARNING SEQUENCE 2: ARUNDHATI ROY

PRINT WORKSHEET 2.1

Arundhati Roy is an Indian author, activist, and political commentator, best known for her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* and her outspoken critiques of globalisation, environmental destruction, and social injustice.

Her essay “The Greater Common Good” was originally published in 1999. The essay is a scathing indictment of **large-scale dam projects in India**.

These projects, including the **Sardar Sarovar Dam**, were intended to provide hydroelectric power and irrigation water to millions of people, but they also faced **significant criticism and opposition from environmentalists, activists, and local communities**.

Roy’s essay critiques the **displacement of thousands of villagers and the destruction of ecosystems caused by the dams**. She argues that while the government promotes these projects as essential for development and progress, they often neglect the profound human and ecological costs involved.



IMAGE SOURCE: RENA EFFENDI FOR VOGUE 2017

“Big Dams started well, but have ended badly.”
- ARUNDHATI ROY

A) READING TASK (20-30 MINS)

On the following page, you will find extracts from Arundhati Roy’s 1999 essay ‘The Greater Common Good’, which was written in response to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in the Narmada Valley. This is the same region where Shaktiwaran sets his play, *The Wrong Gods*. After reading these extracts, conduct a group discussion using the following questions:

1. What are the issues associated with Big-Dam Projects?
2. What does Roy mean when she says, “The ethnic ‘otherness’ of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation Builders”?
3. Roy argues that “India’s poorest people are subsidizing the lifestyles of her richest.” In what other instances in human history has this dynamic occurred?

Big Dams started well, but have ended badly. There was a time when everybody loved them, everybody had them - the Communists, Capitalists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. There was a time when Big Dams moved men to poetry. Not any longer. All over the world there is a movement growing against Big Dams. In the First World they're being de-commissioned, blown up. The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big Dams are obsolete. They're uncool. They're undemocratic. They're a Government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They're a 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 gifting it to the rich. Their reservoirs displace huge populations of people, leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water-logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes.

Big Dams haven't really lived up to their role as the monuments of Modern Civilisation, emblems of Man's ascendancy over Nature. Monuments are supposed to be timeless, but dams have an all-too-finite lifetime. They last only as long as it takes Nature to fill them with silt. It's common knowledge now that Big Dams do the opposite of what their Publicity People say they do - the Local Pain for National Gain myth has been blown wide open.

For all these reasons, the dam-building industry in the First World is in trouble and out of work. So it's exported to the Third World in the name of Development Aid, along with their other waste like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers and banned pesticides.

...

According to a detailed study of 54 Large Dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the average number of people displaced by a Large Dam is 44,182. Admittedly, 54 dams out of 3,300 is not a big enough sample. But since it's all we have, let's try and do some rough arithmetic. A first draft. To err on the side of caution, let's halve the number of people. Or, let's err on the side of abundant caution and take an average of just 10,000 people per Large Dam. It's an improbably low figure, I know, but ...never mind. Whip out your calculators. $3,300 \times 10,000 =$

33 million. That's what it works out to. Thirty-three million people. Displaced by big dams alone in the last fifty years. What about those that have been displaced by the thousands of other Development Projects? At a private lecture, N.C. Saxena, Secretary to the Planning Commission, said he thought the number was in the region of 50 million (of which 40 million were displaced by dams). We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It can't be, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. It can't be true. I barely have the courage to say it aloud. To run the risk of sounding like a 'sixties hippie dropping acid ("It's the System, man!"), or a paranoid schizophrenic with a persecution complex. But it is the System, man. What else can it be?

Fifty million people.

Go on, Government, quibble. Bargain. Beat it down. Say something.

I feel like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave.

...

Fifty million is more than the population of Gujarat. Almost three times the population of Australia. More than three times the number of refugees that Partition created in India. Ten times the number of Palestinian refugees. The Western world today is convulsed over the future of one million people who have fled from Kosovo.

A huge percentage of the displaced are tribal people (57.6 per cent in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Dam). Include Dalits and the figure becomes obscene. According to the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, it's about 60 per cent. If you consider that tribal people account for only eight per cent, and Dalits fifteen per cent, of India's population, it opens up a whole other dimension to the story. 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. India's poorest people are subsidising the lifestyles of her richest.

...

The millions of displaced people don't exist anymore. When history is written they won't be in it. Not even as statistics. Some of them have subsequently been displaced three and four times - a dam, an artillery proof range, another dam, a uranium mine, a power project. Once they start rolling, there's no resting place. The great majority is eventually absorbed into slums on the periphery of our great cities, where it coalesces into an immense pool of cheap construction labour (that builds more projects that displace more people). True, they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they re-define the meaning of liberty.

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war. And we, like the citizens of White America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condoning it by looking away. Why? Because we're told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it's being done in the name of Progress, in the name of National Interest (which, of course, is paramount). Therefore gladly, unquestioningly, almost gratefully, we believe what we're told. We believe that it benefits us to believe.

Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze. Do this, because it's important that you understand. If you find reason to disagree, by all means take the other side. But please don't ignore it, don't look away.

B) CREATING A CHORUS (30 MINS)

PRINT WORKSHEET 2.2

Performance Objective:

- In groups of 5-6, students will create a chorus performance using the provided text excerpt from Arundhati Roy's essay 'The Greater Common Good'.
- They may use the text in its entirety or edit the lines to suit their performance.
- **Students must aim to incorporate five or more of the following chorus techniques:**

UNISON: All group members speak together in harmony.

SOLO LINES: Each member speaks individually at different points.

CANON: Speak the same lines at staggered times to create a dramatic effect.

OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE: Have members speak simultaneously to create layers of dialogue.

REPETITION: Delivering the same line more than once.

PACE: Vary the speed at which lines are delivered for dramatic emphasis.

VOLUME: Adjust vocal dynamics to emphasize certain passages or create contrast.

SOUND EFFECTS: May utilize body percussion, claps, clicks, stomping, etc.

BODILY MOVEMENT: Integrate gestures and choreography to enhance expression.

TEXT EXTRACT:

We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It can't be, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. It can't be true. I barely have the courage to say it aloud...

Fifty million people.

Go on, Government, quibble. Bargain. Beat it down. Say something.

I feel like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave.

LEARNING SEQUENCE 3: SCRIPT WORK

PRINT WORKSHEET 3.1 & 3.2

A) TEXT ANALYSIS & REHEARSAL (1 HOUR)

This learning sequence provides students with the opportunity to rehearse a monologue from *The Wrong Gods*.

1. Read the monologue through as a class.
2. Monologues gain their greatest power when an actor approaches them as a series of interconnected, yet distinct, **thoughts**. This method allows for greater nuance and specificity in the performance. Encourage students to dissect the monologue by marking each **individual thought with a “/”**. For instance:

It's a fantasy Lakshmi. /A charade/ The whole thing is not possible./ It was never possible./ This “progress”./ It was never for everyone./

3. Another way to add nuance and power to a monologue is through **‘actions’**. If an objective is what a character wants, then their ‘actions’ are the tactics they use to try and achieve that objective. Using **Worksheet 3.2 – Actions List**, ask students to identify different actions for each line.
4. Allow students time to rehearse the monologue, potentially dividing this task across two lessons: one for rehearsal and the other for performing in front of the class.

DEVI

It's a fantasy, Lakshmi. A charade. The whole thing is not possible. It was never possible. This “progress.” It was never for everyone. If, say, tomorrow, everyone in Asia began to consume as much as people in the West do, the planet would be stripped bare. There would be nothing left, within a matter of months. Your “progress” would be over. We can't all have what the West has, Lakshmi. In fact, it was always the plan that the West would have it, and we would not. This planet, it has limits. Its resources are not infinite, as much as your imagination is. And these new technologies. What will go into them? What minerals? What chemicals? Where will those be found? Who will be the next wave of people to be disappeared for the next wave of progress? The new problem requires a new solution which creates new problems which requires new solutions and so it goes on forever! I am sick to death of this system which requires one community to be destroyed for another to benefit.

LEARNING SEQUENCE 4: DEVISING PHYSICAL THEATRE

“THE IDEA THAT WE DON’T HAVE ANY GODS IS RUBBISH. WE JUST WORSHIP AT A DIFFERENT ALTAR...WE PRAY TO THE WRONG GODS.”

- S. Shakthidharan

A) CLASS DISCUSSION (10-15 MINS)

- Playwright S. Shakthidharan say that as a modern society, “we worship at a different altar.” What does he mean by this?
- What are some of the ‘gods’ we worship in 2025?

B) DEVISING PHYSICAL THEATRE (45 MINS)

This exercise is inspired by the work of Movement Director at the National Theatre, Aline David. An example of this exercise in action can be found **here:**



INSTRUCTIONS:

- Divide the students into groups of 5-6.
- Ask each group to position themselves on stage. Group members may vary their positions (e.g., some sitting, others standing, facing different directions).
- Instruct each performer to create four simple gestures that explore the nature of **idolatory in 2025**. Encourage simplicity and achievability in the gestures.
- Once each student has created their four gestures, have them practice these movements to the beat of a 50 BPM metronome. A recording of this metronome beat can be found **HERE**.
- After refining their individual gestures, ask each group to create two gestures they will perform together as a group on beats **6 and 7**. Beats 5 and 8 are a chance to reset into a neutral position.
- The sequence of actions should be as follows:
 - 1 - Individual gesture**
 - 2 - Individual gesture**
 - 3 - Individual gesture**
 - 4 - Individual gesture**
 - 5 - Neutral**
 - 6 - Group unison gesture*
 - 7 - Group unison gesture*
 - 8 - Neutral**

EXTENSION: For advanced classes, extend this exercise by having one group member deliver text from Learning Sequence 3 - Devi’s monologue - while the rest of the group perform their gestures.

LEARNING SEQUENCE 5: CASE STUDY

PRINT WORKSHEET 5.1

This learning sequence examines Australia's involvement in the Panguna mine in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. It encourages students to draw insightful connections between the Big Dam Project in India, the writings of Arundhati Roy, and the mining operations in Bougainville, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of "progress" and its consequences.

TOPIC OVERVIEW:

The Bougainville mining project, also known as the Panguna mine, was a large-scale copper and gold mining operation in Bougainville, formerly a part of Papua New Guinea. It was initiated in the 1970s by Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL), a subsidiary of the Australian company Rio Tinto. Australia's involvement was central, as it owned the company and provided political and financial backing.

While the mine generated substantial revenue for the PNG government and foreign shareholders, it caused severe environmental damage, including deforestation and water pollution. Limited benefits for local communities and Australia's perceived role in resource exploitation fueled tensions, contributing to the Bougainville Civil War (1988-1998). The mine's closure left lasting environmental and social impacts.



Contaminated water due to mine waste in the region of Bougainville. Source: www.ips.net

A) WATCH (10 MINS)



As a class, watch this 7-minute video from the ABC about the legacy of the Panguna mines for the local communities of Bougainville. Watch and then discuss:

- *What is wrong with the water that runs through Bougainville?*
- *What has happened to the forests and wet lands?*

B) RESEARCH - 'AFTER THE MINE' (15 MINS)

On the following page is a summary of a document created by the **Human Rights Law Centre**, assessing the impact of the Panguna mine on the environment and communities in Bougainville.

Ask students to read this document independently, highlighting or noting important ideas and images that stand out to them.

A copy of the full document can be found [HERE](#).

‘AFTER THE MINE’: LIVING WITH RIO TINTO’S DEADLY LEGACY

From *Human Rights Law Centre*

In December 2019, the people of the small Pacific island of Bougainville voted overwhelmingly to become the world’s newest nation. The referendum on the island’s independence from Papua New Guinea was a peaceful, joyous affair, accompanied in many places by singing and dancing in the streets.

‘Bougainville is on the verge of freedom!’ declared the President of the region’s autonomous government, Dr John Momis. *‘We are on a mission, and our mission is to liberate Bougainville and enable the people to be free to decide and manage their own affairs’.*

Bougainville’s future, however, remains overshadowed by the disastrous legacy of an Australian mining project.

Between 1972 and 1989, the Panguna mine, developed and majority-owned by Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, was one of the world’s largest copper and gold mines. During this period, the company’s subsidiary, Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) discharged over a billion tonnes of mine waste into local river systems, devastating the environment and the health and livelihoods of local communities.

Anger over these practices and the unequal distribution of the mine’s profits ultimately led to an insurrection by local people in 1989 which forced the mine’s closure and triggered a brutal, decade-long civil war which cost the lives of up to 15,000 people.

In 2016, Rio Tinto divested from the mine and walked away without having contributed to clean-up or rehabilitation.

As a result, Panguna continues to gape like an open wound in the centre of the island. Polluted water from the mine pit flows unabated into local rivers, turning the riverbed and surrounding rocks an unnatural blue. The Jaba-Kawerong river valley downstream of the mine resembles a moonscape, with vast mounds of grey tailings waste and rock stretching almost 40km downstream to the coast.

An estimated 12-14,000 people live downstream of the mine along the Jaba-Kawerong river valley.

This report examines the ongoing impacts of the mine on the human rights of these communities that Rio Tinto has left behind. The report is based on site visits to 38 villages and 60 in-depth interviews undertaken by the Human Rights Law Centre and local research partners from the Panguna area between September 2019 and February 2020. It also draws on the research and findings of over 300 interviews of mine-affected residents conducted under a research project initiated by the Catholic Diocese of Bougainville between 2017 and 2019, and an extensive desktop review of primary and secondary sources.

Our research concludes that the impacts of the mine and Rio Tinto’s failure to address them have devastated communities and left them in a deteriorating, increasingly dangerous situation.

The contamination of the Kawerong and Jaba rivers by mine waste has severely limited peoples’ access to clean water. Most communities have to pipe drinking water over long distances or rely on rainwater water tanks or creeks which frequently dry up during the dry season. Many families have no option but to continue to use the polluted rivers for bathing and washing, or to cross them to tend crops or go to school. Those interviewed reported serious health impacts as a consequence, including sores and skin diseases, diarrhoea, respiratory problems and pregnancy complications.

The chemical contamination of the rivers is compounded by ongoing erosion from the vast mounds of tailings waste dumped by the company in the Jaba river valley. With each heavy rainfall, huge volumes of tailings sand is washed into the rivers, flooding large tracts of land downstream with polluted mud – displacing villages, contaminating water sources and destroying new areas of forest and agricultural land essential to peoples’ livelihoods.

At such times, river crossings become perilous, with constantly shifting channels and large areas of quicksand. Human Rights Law Centre researchers were told of multiple incidents in which community members, including children, had drowned or sustained serious injuries while attempting to cross the rivers due to the treacherous conditions.



The massive problems left by the mine's operation are now being exacerbated by its crumbling infrastructure. Levees constructed in the 1980s to contain the tailings and divert the rivers are crumbling, hastening erosion into the rivers and raising the prospect of catastrophic collapse. In one area visited, the levee was being undermined by the river, posing a serious risk to nearby villages.

The impacts of the mine continue to infringe nearly all the economic, social and cultural rights of local communities, including their fundamental rights to food, water, health, housing and an adequate standard of living.

Loss of arable and forested land through flooding and tailings deposits has created food shortages and deprived communities of traditional building materials for their homes. Sacred sites fundamental to communities' connections with the spirits of their ancestors have been destroyed.

Some communities have been displaced entirely and are now living in overcrowded conditions on land belonging to others.

In a bitter twist of irony, the impoverishment caused by the mine's impacts is driving many residents back into the polluted rivers to pan for gold to support themselves and their families, further heightening the risks to their health.

Communities interviewed stressed the need for urgent assistance to help them deal with these overwhelming problems, but neither the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) nor the Government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) alone have the resources or technology to manage the impacts of the mine's tailings or clean up the site. Indeed, post referendum, the ABG and at least some landowner groups see re-opening the mine as one of the only options for funding their future independence from Papua New Guinea.

Rio Tinto holds itself out as a global corporate leader on human rights and the environment and claims to pay particular attention to communities' rights to land, water and cultural heritage. Unless it addresses its legacy at Panguna, however, and contributes to remedying the massive problems it has created, the company will remain in serious violation of its human rights and environmental obligations.



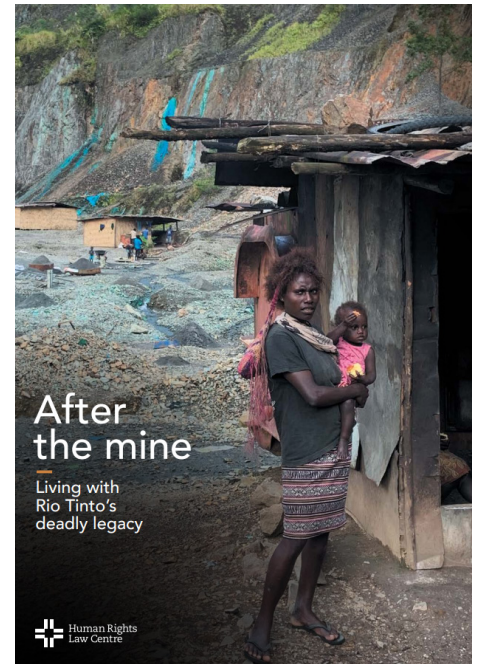
A map of Bougainville in relation to Australia

SOURCE: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50009912>

B) DISCUSSION - 'AFTER THE MINE' (15 MINS)

After reading the summary from “After the Mine,” lead students in a discussion that connects this case study to concepts they’ve explored in previous learning sequences:

- How might the Panguna Mine be considered a ‘progress trap’?
- In Devi’s monologue from *The Wrong Gods*, she says, “I am sick to death of this system which requires one community to be destroyed for another to benefit.” How do you see this dynamic affecting the people of Bougainville?
- In her essay *The Greater Common Good*, Arundhati Roy argued, “India’s poorest people are subsidizing the lifestyles of her richest.” Are there any parallels between India’s Big Dam Project and the Panguna Mines?



A local woman from Bougainville points to the abandoned Panguna Mine.
SOURCE: HUMAN RIGHTS LAW CENTRE

LEARNING SEQUENCE 6: DEVISING FROM RESEARCH

PRINT WORKSHEET 6.1

This learning sequence encourages students to experientially recognise the central role of **research in the devising process**.

A) DEVISING THEATRE (1 HOUR)

- Using the document from 'After the Mine' (Learning Sequence 4), along with four stimulus images and two quotations (Worksheet 5.1) students given one hour to create a 1-2 minute ensemble performance that explores the **contrasting experiences of the people of Bougainville and the shareholders of Rio Tinto**.
- Students can experiment with myriad forms in creating their performance. They may choose to create a piece of **physical theatre, incorporate choral techniques, tableaux, write short scenes or vignettes**, or use **music, props**, and other creative elements.
- Once they have rehearsed their piece of devised theatre, they are invited to perform in front of their peers.

The stimulus images they are welcome to work with are as follows:



Source: <https://im-mining.com/>



Source: nit.com.au



Source: <https://abc.net.au>



Source: <https://abc.net.au>

The two quotations they may choose to incorporate are:

“Land is our life. Land is our physical life – food and sustenance. Land is our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact, it is our only world. When you [the Administration] take away our land, you cut away the very heart of our existence.... For us to be completely landless is a nightmare which no dollar in the pocket or dollar in the bank will allay: we are a threatened people.”

- Extracted from a letter composed by three Bougainville students the Australian Administration in 1974. As quoted in 'Mining Bitterness' by J Dove, T Miriung and M Togolo

“To pioneer progress for a better future.”

- Rio Tinto's mission statement

WORKSHEETS

Humanity's journey through history is marked by incredible achievements and advancements. From mastering fire to exploring distant galaxies, our capacity for innovation seems boundless. Yet, woven into this narrative of progress lies a cautionary tale — *the progress trap*. It ensnares societies when advancements intended to enhance well-being inadvertently lead to unforeseen consequences.

CONSIDER:

- Harnessing **technological prowess** for **warfare**, only to **escalate conflict**.
- The **rapid communication** afforded by mobile phone technology now raises concerns over **privacy and social connectivity**.
- Our reliance on fossil fuels for **industry and transport** has exacerbated greenhouse emissions.



IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTPS://THENARWHAL.CA/](https://thenarwhal.ca/)

The term “progress trap” was popularized by Canadian historian and author Ronald Wright in 2004. Wright describes it as a situation where human innovations intended to solve problems lead to unintended, detrimental outcomes. Here is what Wright says about progress:

“Social complexity is a double-edged sword. The same drive that has enabled us to organize and build has also made possible our heedless destruction of nature and our own prospects.”

“We are a runaway species, and our runaway appetites are now spilling into the world around us.”

“The myth of progress has sometimes served us well – those of us seated at the best tables, anyway – and may continue to do so. But I shall argue in this book that it has also become dangerous. Progress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap. Take weapons for example. Ever since the Chinese invented gunpowder, there has been great progress in the making of bangs: from the firecracker to the cannon, from the petard to the high explosive shell. And just when high explosives were reaching a state of perfection, progress found the infinitely bigger bang in the atom. But when the bang we can make can blow up our world, we have made rather too much progress.”

Big Dams started well, but have ended badly. There was a time when everybody loved them, everybody had them - the Communists, Capitalists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. There was a time when Big Dams moved men to poetry. Not any longer. All over the world there is a movement growing against Big Dams. In the First World they're being de-commissioned, blown up. The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big Dams are obsolete. They're uncool. They're undemocratic. They're a Government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They're a 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 gifting it to the rich. Their reservoirs displace huge populations of people, leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water-logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes.

Big Dams haven't really lived up to their role as the monuments of Modern Civilisation, emblems of Man's ascendancy over Nature. Monuments are supposed to be timeless, but dams have an all-too-finite lifetime. They last only as long as it takes Nature to fill them with silt. It's common knowledge now that Big Dams do the opposite of what their Publicity People say they do - the Local Pain for National Gain myth has been blown wide open.

For all these reasons, the dam-building industry in the First World is in trouble and out of work. So it's exported to the Third World in the name of Development Aid, along with their other waste like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers and banned pesticides.

...

According to a detailed study of 54 Large Dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the average number of people displaced by a Large Dam is 44,182. Admittedly, 54 dams out of 3,300 is not a big enough sample. But since it's all we have, let's try and do some rough arithmetic. A first draft. To err on the side of caution, let's halve the number of people. Or, let's err on the side of abundant caution and take an average of just 10,000 people per Large Dam. It's an improbably low figure, I know, but ...never mind. Whip out your calculators. $3,300 \times 10,000 =$

33 million. That's what it works out to. Thirty-three million people. Displaced by big dams alone in the last fifty years. What about those that have been displaced by the thousands of other Development Projects? At a private lecture, N.C. Saxena, Secretary to the Planning Commission, said he thought the number was in the region of 50 million (of which 40 million were displaced by dams). We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It can't be, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. It can't be true. I barely have the courage to say it aloud. To run the risk of sounding like a 'sixties hippie dropping acid ("It's the System, man!"), or a paranoid schizophrenic with a persecution complex. But it is the System, man. What else can it be?

Fifty million people.

Go on, Government, quibble. Bargain. Beat it down. Say something.

I feel like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave.

...

Fifty million is more than the population of Gujarat. Almost three times the population of Australia. More than three times the number of refugees that Partition created in India. Ten times the number of Palestinian refugees. The Western world today is convulsed over the future of one million people who have fled from Kosovo.

A huge percentage of the displaced are tribal people (57.6 per cent in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Dam). Include Dalits and the figure becomes obscene. According to the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, it's about 60 per cent. If you consider that tribal people account for only eight per cent, and Dalits fifteen per cent, of India's population, it opens up a whole other dimension to the story. 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. India's poorest people are subsidising the lifestyles of her richest.

...

The millions of displaced people don't exist anymore. When history is written they won't be in it. Not even as statistics. Some of them have subsequently been displaced three and four times - a dam, an artillery proof range, another dam, a uranium mine, a power project. Once they start rolling, there's no resting place. The great majority is eventually absorbed into slums on the periphery of our great cities, where it coalesces into an immense pool of cheap construction labour (that builds more projects that displace more people). True, they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they re-define the meaning of liberty.

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war. And we, like the citizens of White America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condoning it by looking away. Why? Because we're told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it's being done in the name of Progress, in the name of National Interest (which, of course, is paramount). Therefore gladly, unquestioningly, almost gratefully, we believe what we're told. We believe that it benefits us to believe.

Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze. Do this, because it's important that you understand. If you find reason to disagree, by all means take the other side. But please don't ignore it, don't look away.



TEXT EXTRACT:

We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It can't be, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. It can't be true. I barely have the courage to say it aloud...

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DEVI

It's a fantasy, Lakshmi. A charade. The whole thing is not possible. It was never possible. This "progress." It was never for everyone. If, say, tomorrow, everyone in Asia began to consume as much as people in the West do, the planet would be stripped bare. There would be nothing left, within a matter of months. Your "progress" would be over. We can't all have what the West has, Lakshmi. In fact, it was always the plan that the West would have it, and we would not. This planet, it has limits. Its resources are not infinite, as much as your imagination is. And these new technologies. What will go into them? What minerals? What chemicals? Where will those be found? Who will be the next wave of people to be disappeared for the next wave of progress? The new problem requires a new solution which creates new problems which requires new solutions and so it goes on forever! I am sick to death of this system which requires one community to be destroyed for another to benefit.

WORKSHEET 3.2

To accuse	To dismiss	To primp
To admire	To distract	To probe
To admonish	To embrace	To protect
To adore	To entertain	To put down
To amuse	To entice	To question
To annoy	To erupt	To reject`
To apologize	To escape	To rescue
To applaud	To examine	To retreat
To attack	To explode	To ridicule
To bask	To exult	To savour
To beg	To flatter	To scold
To belittle	To flaunt	To scrutinize
To bestow	To flee	To search
To boast	To flirt	To seduce
To brag	To gloat	To shock
To brood	To grieve	To show off
To brush off	To hide	To sneak
To buddy up	To idolize	To soothe
To caress	To ignore	To stalk
To celebrate	To impress	To startle
To challenge	To incite	To strut
To charm	To inspect	To surrender
To check out	To instruct	To tantalize
To coax	To invade	To taunt
To comfort	To invite	To teach
To command	To lure	To tease
To confess	To mock	To tempt
To confide	To mother	To test
To confront	To mourn	To threaten
To congratulate	To ogle	To trump
To cuddle	To patronize	To ward off
To defend	To perform	To warn
To deify	To pester	To welcome
To demand	To pleas	To withdraw
To destroy	To ponder	To worship
To dis	To pounce	To yearn
To discard	To preen	
To discover	To prepare	

In December 2019, the people of the small Pacific island of Bougainville voted overwhelmingly to become the world's newest nation. The referendum on the island's independence from Papua New Guinea was a peaceful, joyous affair, accompanied in many places by singing and dancing in the streets.

'Bougainville is on the verge of freedom!' declared the President of the region's autonomous government, Dr John Momis. *'We are on a mission, and our mission is to liberate Bougainville and enable the people to be free to decide and manage their own affairs.'*

Bougainville's future, however, remains overshadowed by the disastrous legacy of an Australian mining project.

Between 1972 and 1989, the Panguna mine, developed and majority-owned by Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, was one of the world's largest copper and gold mines. During this period, the company's subsidiary, Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) discharged over a billion tonnes of mine waste into local river systems, devastating the environment and the health and livelihoods of local communities.

Anger over these practices and the unequal distribution of the mine's profits ultimately led to an insurrection by local people in 1989 which forced the mine's closure and triggered a brutal, decade-long civil war which cost the lives of up to 15,000 people.

In 2016, Rio Tinto divested from the mine and walked away without having contributed to clean-up or rehabilitation.

As a result, Panguna continues to gape like an open wound in the centre of the island. Polluted water from the mine pit flows unabated into local rivers, turning the riverbed and surrounding rocks an unnatural blue. The Jaba-Kawerong river valley downstream of the mine resembles a moonscape, with vast mounds of grey tailings waste and rock stretching almost 40km downstream to the coast.

An estimated 12-14,000 people live downstream of the mine along the Jaba-Kawerong river valley.

This report examines the ongoing impacts of the mine on the human rights of these

communities that Rio Tinto has left behind. The report is based on site visits to 38 villages and 60 in-depth interviews undertaken by the Human Rights Law Centre and local research partners from the Panguna area between September 2019 and February 2020. It also draws on the research and findings of over 300 interviews of mine-affected residents conducted under a research project initiated by the Catholic Diocese of Bougainville between 2017 and 2019, and an extensive desktop review of primary and secondary sources.

Our research concludes that the impacts of the mine and Rio Tinto's failure to address them have devastated communities and left them in a deteriorating, increasingly dangerous situation.

The contamination of the Kawerong and Jaba rivers by mine waste has severely limited peoples' access to clean water. Most communities have to pipe drinking water over long distances or rely on rainwater water tanks or creeks which frequently dry up during the dry season. Many families have no option but to continue to use the polluted rivers for bathing and washing, or to cross them to tend crops or go to school. Those interviewed reported serious health impacts as a consequence, including sores and skin diseases, diarrhoea, respiratory problems and pregnancy complications.

The chemical contamination of the rivers is compounded by ongoing erosion from the vast mounds of tailings waste dumped by the company in the Jaba river valley. With each heavy rainfall, huge volumes of tailings sand is washed into the rivers, flooding large tracts of land downstream with polluted mud – displacing villages, contaminating water sources and destroying new areas of forest and agricultural land essential to peoples' livelihoods.

At such times, river crossings become perilous, with constantly shifting channels and large areas of quicksand. Human Rights Law Centre researchers were told of multiple incidents in which community members, including children, had drowned or sustained serious injuries while attempting to cross the rivers due to the treacherous conditions.

The massive problems left by the mine's operation are now being exacerbated by its crumbling infrastructure. Levees constructed in the 1980s to contain the tailings and divert the rivers are crumbling, hastening erosion into the rivers and raising the prospect of catastrophic collapse. In one area visited, the levee was being undermined by the river, posing a serious risk to nearby villages.

The impacts of the mine continue to infringe nearly all the economic, social and cultural rights of local communities, including their fundamental rights to food, water, health, housing and an adequate standard of living.

Loss of arable and forested land through flooding and tailings deposits has created food shortages and deprived communities of traditional building materials for their homes. Sacred sites fundamental to communities' connections with the spirits of their ancestors have been destroyed.

Some communities have been displaced entirely and are now living in overcrowded conditions on land belonging to others.

In a bitter twist of irony, the impoverishment caused by the mine's impacts is driving many residents back into the polluted rivers to pan for gold to support themselves and their families, further heightening the risks to their health.

Communities interviewed stressed the need for urgent assistance to help them deal with these overwhelming problems, but neither the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) nor the Government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) alone have the resources or technology to manage the impacts of the mine's tailings or clean up the site. Indeed, post referendum, the ABG and at least some landowner groups see re-opening the mine as one of the only options for funding their future independence from Papua New Guinea.

Rio Tinto holds itself out as a global corporate leader on human rights and the environment and claims to pay particular attention to communities' rights to land, water and cultural heritage. Unless it addresses its legacy at Panguna, however, and contributes to remedying the massive problems it has created, the company will remain in serious violation of its human rights and environmental obligations.



A map of Bougainville in relation to Australia

SOURCE: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50009912>

WORKSHEET 6.1



Source: <https://im-mining.com/>



Source: nit.com.au



Source: <https://abc.net.au>



Source: <https://abc.net.au>

QUOTATION STIMULUS:

“Land is our life. Land is our physical life – food and sustenance. Land is our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact, it is our only world. When you [the Administration] take away our land, you cut away the very heart of our existence.... For us to be completely landless is a nightmare which no dollar in the pocket or dollar in the bank will allay: we are a threatened people.”

- Extracted from a letter composed by three Bougainville students the Australian Administration in 1974. As quoted in ‘Mining Bitterness’ by J Dove, T Miriung and M Togolo

“To pioneer progress for a better future.”

- Rio Tinto’s mission statement

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