

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Re-exploring the New *Homo Sacers*: Arundhati Roy and her “Broken Republic”

Sankha Maji

Ph. D. Scholar, Sidho Kanho Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

The present paper probes into the marginalized positions of the tribals and adivasis in today's India, as reflected in Arundhati Roy's book Broken Republic. In this book comprising three essays, Roy makes a thorough research on the tribal plight, state coercion and hegemony, and the subaltern resistance that ultimately metamorphosed into Maoist insurgency. The colonial policy of appropriation and exploitation is pervasive in the post-independence era through myriad forms of coercive strategies and oppressive tools. Tribal lands and resources have been usurped in the name of development. People have been rendered 'Homo Sacers' in the words of Giorgio Agamben or bare human beings bereft of the basic demands of existence. When these subalterns try to speak the language of protest, they are silenced by various hegemonic forces. This unequal battle still continues. Roy lays bare the naked reality of the largest democracy of the world and unmasks its lies and hypocrisies. In the light of Roy's book this paper attempts an unbiased evaluation of the tribal resistance and offers to examine the drawbacks of neoliberalism, capitalism, state absolutism and the question of power and justice.

Keywords: *Coercion, hegemony, subaltern, appropriation, neoliberalism*

This paper would engage with Arundhati Roy's book *Broken Republic* that comprises of three essays, “Mr. Chidambaram's War”, “Walking with the Comrades” and “Trickledown Revolution”. All these three essays focus on the postcolonial issues of state, power, discourse, subalternity, and resistance. India achieved its long cherished freedom the British clutches almost seven decades back. It is now a democratic nation. But the sheer irony of this statement is that actual freedom and democracy have been an ever eluding mirage for the majority of Indian population. The last few decades have been really significant in India's perspective. On the one hand the country has ushered in an era of development in various fields, on the other a vast section of people are being plunged into the filth of undreamt misery. The post independent India witnessed the marginalization of the already marginalized people. People have been relegated to the brink of existence. In the name of development project the resources and homelands of the tribal people have been usurped by the government. This saga of denial and deprivation do not find due space in the debates of public domain, media, literature, and other mainstream cultural forms. Arundhati Roy is one of the very few writers who have attempted to bring the issues of the dalit and tribals to the wider world. Her disgust at the seductive narrative of democracy is manifest when she says in “Walking with the Comrades”,

“The Indian Constitution, the moral underpinning of Indian democracy, was adopted by Parliament in 1950. It was a tragic day for tribal people. The constitution ratified colonial policy and made the state custodian of tribal homelands.....In exchange for the right to vote it snatched away their right to livelihood and dignity.”

The hills of the south Orissa have been abode to the Niyam Raja, the God of Universal law, worshipped by the Dongria Kondh. But as these hills contain bauxite these areas were sold to Vedanta, a multinational corporation. In the essay “Mr Chidambarams War”, Arundhati Roy writes,

“If the flat-topped hills are destroyed, the forests that clothe them will be destroyed too. So will the rivers and streams that flow out of them and irrigate the plains below. So will the hundreds of thousands of tribal people who live in the forested heart of India, whose homeland is similarly under attack”.

The homelands of the tribals are now dreamlands to the corporate world. But that never bothers the policy makers. They would feel no qualms to turn the original owners of the soil into the denizens of the past of the nation, as they know that ‘...any developed country, Europe, the United States, Australia- they all have a “past”.’ (p.2, Roy, *Broken Republic*)’ Such appropriation of tribal lands and resources is happening in various parts of the country stretching from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh to Andhra Pradesh. The mining companies try to justify their act of usurpation by saying that they would ratchet up the rate of GDP growth, and provide employment to the displaced people. But the truth is that a very meager percentage of the displaced get jobs with low wages and that too involving back-breaking work. The government colluding with the corporate people in the loot of public resources shows utter negligence towards the deplorable plight of the tribal people. But the irony is that these tribal and dalit people who are “pitted against a juggernaut of injustices” (p3.Roy) are branded as “the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country”. (p 3. Roy) Their fight for the survival triggers off the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists are basically the deprived tribal people living in such chronic hunger that reminds one of the famines of the sub-Saharan Africa. They are the people who have been exploited in every

possible way. If they have taken up arms this is because they believe that the “innate, structural inequality of Indian society can only be redressed by the violent overthrow of the Indian State.”(p 6. Roy). In 2008 a report by the Planning Commission called “Development Challenges in Extreme Affected Areas” said,

“The Naxalite (Maoist) movement has to be recognized as a political movement with a strong landless and poor peasantry and Adivasis. Its emergence and growth need to be contextualized in the social conditions and experience of people who form a part of it. The huge gap between state policy and performance is a feature of these conditions. Though its professed long-term ideology is capturing state power by force, in its day to day manifestation, it is to be looked upon as basically a fight for social justice, equality, protection, security and local development.”

In her essay “Walking with the Comrades” Arundhati Roy writes about her first hand experience with the Maoist rebels in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh. Roy describes Dantewada as an ‘oxymoron’. “It’s an upside-down, inside-out town”. (p 38, Roy). She writes, “In Dantewada the police wear plain clothes and the rebels wear uniforms. The jail superintendent is in jail. The prisoners are free (three hundred of them escaped from the old town jail two years ago). Women who have been raped are in police custody. The rapists give speeches in the bazaar.” (p 38. Roy)

Here the enemy is the people. Roy met with the members of the People’s Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA). Through her eyes one can see the innocence of the tribal people who have been forced to take up arms. Comrade Kamala is a seventeen year old girl with a smile on her face. Comrade Venu who has calm, manner and a gentle voice asks Roy, “Have you ever eaten ant chutney?”(p 72, Roy). They narrated to Roy how Salwa Judam, the organization notorious for its atrocities to the tribal people, wrecked havoc in these areas. The forest officials also were a curse in their lives. They would prevent people from working in their fields, grazing their cattle, collecting leaves and firewood. People were arrested, tortured without rhyme or reason. Women were sexually molested. From the forests departments’ view-points the villagers were illegal people involved in unconstitutional activities. Eventually the people rose against the forest officials. Many officials were captured and beaten by the villagers. Now Dandakaranya is governed by Janata Sarkars(people’s governments).

The war between the Maoists and the government seems to be never ending. As the number of tribal uprisings was increasing the government was under extreme pressure. Instead of pondering over the grievances of the dalits and adivasi people the government has adopted brutal methods to eliminate them. Every kind of dissent, even the non-violent protest is termed as crime. People are labeled as Maoists under draconian, undemocratic laws. The uprisings are confronted with military operation. Acts like ‘Armed Forces Special Powers’ ACT that gives the army legal authority to kill on suspicion are employed. Military forces are engaged to eliminate such ‘threat’. In Chhattisgarh Salwa Judam, a military organization was launched to counter the Naxalite violence in 2005 just days after the MoU with the Tatas was signed. The militia comprising of the local youth had been trained by the Chhattisgarh government. Salwa Judam operated in hundreds of villages in Bijapur and Bhairamgarh blocks near Bailadila, where Essar Steel’s new plant was proposed. Arundhati Roy writes in “Walking with the comrades”, “Between June and December in 2005, it burned, killed and raped and looted its way through hundreds of villages of south Dantewada.” She also writes, “Hundreds of people were killed in the most brutal ways. About 60000 people moved into the camps, some voluntarily, others out of terror.” But ironically the National Human Rights Commission of India (NHRS) appointed by the Supreme Court of India declared that the Salwa Judam was a spontaneous reaction of the local people against the Maoist atrocities and all the allegations against them were rejected. After the Maoist attack at Rani Bodli Kanya Ashram, a girls’ hostel, that killed fifty-five policemen and SPOs, the influence of the Salwa Judam began to decrease. Then the State came up with a new ploy in the form of Operation Green Hunt. The Salwa Judam SPOs are now called Koya Commandos. Chhattisgarh Armed Force, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, the Central Industrial Security Force, Greyhounds; Scorpions- were deployed in this operation. Similarly, in Bihar a group was formed by the Bhumihar and Rajput landlords to curb the Naxalites and other Dalits and tribal people. The group known for its brutal massacres against the dalit civilians was called Ranvir Sena and it was patronized by the state. Many paramilitary groups like Fear Vikas, Green Tigers, Red Tigers, Kakatiya cobras, Kranti Sena emerged in Andhra Pradesh. In West Bengal the Government sought assistance from the Central Government. Arundhati Roy writes,

“To get the bauxite out of the flat-topped hills, to get iron ore out from under the forest floor, to get 85 per cent of India’s people off their land and into the cities (which is what Mr. Chidambaram says he’d like to see), India has to become a police state. The government has to militarize. To justify that militarization, it needs an enemy. The Maoists are that enemy.”(p. 34, Roy) In May 2006 Planning Commission appointed an expert committee headed by D. Bandopadhyay. In its report the committee made a forceful plea to deviate from the usual ways of dealing the Naxalite issues and suggested to address the development related issues to achieve a long term solution to the problem. But on contrary to this through numerous manipulative ways the dissenting subalterns have been victimized by a massive powerful force of the state.

Roy feels the state things should change now. Towards the end of the essay “Trickledown Revolution” she talks about reimagining a world that has gone terribly wrong. An alternative world would emerge from the imagination of those who have resisted the hegemonic impulse of capitalism and imperialism. India has a surviving tribal population of around 100 million. The nation cannot march forward when this huge population dwelling in the periphery is lagging behind. The policy makers need to wake up from the consumerist dream and “stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination-an imagination that is outside of capitalism as well as Communism” (p 214, Roy). Roy asks the custodians of our democracy, “Can you leave the water in the rivers, the trees in the forest? Can you leave the bauxite in the mountain?”(214). If they do so and concede some physical space, then we can arrive at a new philosophical space.

References

- i. Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Strandford University Press, 1998.
- ii. *Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas*, Report of an Expert Group to Planning Commission (New Delhi; Government of India, 2008), 59-60
- iii. Press Trust of India, 'Naxalism Biggest Internal Security Challenge: PM', 13 April 2006, [www.hindustantimes.com/Naxalism-Biggest –Challenge-PM/Article-86531.aspx](http://www.hindustantimes.com/Naxalism-Biggest-Challenge-PM/Article-86531.aspx).
- iv. Purakayastha, Anindya Sekhar, Das, SS. "Absolutist Democracy and the Homo Sacer", *History and Sociology of South Asia*, Sage, Vol 2, 2011
- v. Roy, Arundhati, *Broken Republic*, Penguin Group, New Delhi, 2011.
- vi. Roy, Arundhati, *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, (New Delhi: Viking, Penguin India, 2008, pp.225-30.