

## ARUNDHATI ROY'S NON-FICTION 'MR.CHIDAMBARAM'S WAR' – A SUBALTERN NARRATIVE

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### ABSTRACT

### INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy is not just the writer of fiction alone, she is very well known for her social activism. Her commitment involves documenting the past and the continuing struggles of people, especially the underprivileged like tribal people, low caste people, women etc. in their historical perspective. If the characters that she has delineated in her fiction are directly drawn from her intimate knowledge of the ground realities, the voice that she has projected in her non-fiction is initiated by her survey of the problems faced by these marginalized groups. She tries to find solutions to the problems in her own way. Arundhati Roy says in one of her interviews (*Conversations with Arundhati Roy: The Shape of the Beast*), "Only the very young or the very naïve believe that injustice will disappear just as soon as it has been pointed out. But sometimes it helps to outline the shape of the beast in order to bring it down."(p.ix)

### A Subaltern Narrative in "Mr.Chidambaram's War"

Arundhati Roy's tone is more excoriating in one of her essays which she has penned in 2009 'Mr Chidambaram's War'. In this essay, Mrs. Roy projects the truth about pathetic state of the Dongria Kondh tribes who live in Orissa. The flat-top hills of south Orissa are in fact the homes of these tribal people. Unfortunately these hills were sold to Vedanta which was one of the biggest mining multinational corporations owned by Mr.Anil Agarwal. He was an Indian billionaire who lived in London. The hills were sold because of the bauxite they contained. Those tribal people considered the hills as their gods and felt as if the gods were sold. During the process of mining, Roy says if the hills were destroyed, many more natural resources connected with those hills like the forests which cover the hills, the streams and rivers which flow out of those hills, the plains below the hills which are irrigated through the water flow and finally the Dongria Kondh tribal people who are hundreds of thousands in number also would be totally destroyed.

Arundhati Roy projects the reaction of the urban people towards the so called developmental projects with ironical tone. She recalls how urban people talk very casually about the destruction of these tribal people and how they feel that somebody has to pay the price of progress and time has come for those tribal people to pay price and hence have to face it. She also criticizes the urban dwellers who justify their statement by taking the examples of the developed countries like US, Europe and Australia who also have their history full of such examples of people who would have paid their prices towards the development of their countries. When those people feel that if the developed countries have undergone the process of a few sacrifices for the sake of development, there is nothing wrong for us also to undergo such fate, it is very clear that they do not understand the plight of the tribal people who are displaced and have no future at all.

In this context, Mrs.Roy brings into the picture the decision of the government about Operation Green Hunt which is nothing but the war against Maoists whose headquarters was

in the jungles of central India. Though there were many more groups of people like the homeless, landless, dalit people, workers like peasants, weavers and others were also rebelling against the injustice meted out to them all over the country, the target of the government was the Maoists who were considered to be the main threat to the country. The Maoists were the ones who were raising their voices in support of the tribal people to get their fundamental rights to live but, they were considered as the naxal groups who are coming in the way of development of the country and hence it was felt that they needed to be squashed out which resulted in Operation Green Hunt.

She further discusses the reasons for the formation of Maoists' guerrilla army. She says this is the army of poor tribal people whose condition of hunger is unbearable and who are almost on the verge of famine and their famine condition is almost equivalent to that of the sub-Saharan Africa. She painfully says that even after several years of Indian independence, they have been denied any kind of access to education, health care units or the system of legal redress. These people have been perennially exploited by many people at different levels for decades. Women in their groups have been either by the forest department people or police as if it is their right to sexually abuse the women. So these Maoists have been fighting for their fundamental rights to live with dignity.

She further gives the reasons why those tribal people have taken up arms and become violent. She says that the government has left them no choice but to violently resist the so called development projects which falsely promise them to develop their area of living, develop the roads so that their children's education can be smooth etc. Those people want to save the last thing that they have, their land which would be snatched by the government in the name of development. She says that if they do not resist and fight for their lands, they would be crushed to death. And hence they had to arm themselves with weapons to safeguard their fundamental rights, protect their homes and also because they strongly believed that they deserved justice like anybody else in the country.

Arundhati Roy sarcastically comments that the Government is ready to have a negotiating talk even after 26/11 attacks in Mumbai with Pakistan and even with China but when it comes to poor people of its own country, it is not ready to have any negotiations, directly war is the strategy to crush them to the roots. She moves on to say that the government had given all the rights to the helicopters of the Indian Air Force to shoot people anytime as an act of self-defence. If the same self-defence thought entered the minds of the poor tribal people and acted accordingly, they were considered threats to the country.

As a result, special police forces like Greyhounds, Cobras and Scorpions, CRPF, BSF and Naga battalions had already entered the forest to attack those armed people called Maoists. This kind of licence to kill given by the government in turn resulted in many unjust killings, rapes and burning of the villages because of which more than 50,000 people had to be in the police camps on the road side and about 3,00,000 people had to be homeless and also to be on the run saving their lives. Further when the government planned to set up brigade headquarters in Bilaspur and an air base in Rajnandgaon, it would displace around nine villages in Bilaspur and seven villages in Rajnandgaon. The government only thought of the projects in the name of development which led to the displacement of many tribal poor people but never thought of anything about how to place those displaced people and never planned the relief measures for those needy people.

The condition is still worse when the police cannot even surely say whether the person who is running with the weapon is a Maoist or an ordinary man who is terrified. Still they fire at anybody who is running helter-skelter in the jungle. Sometimes, even the adivasis who

carried bow and arrow were counted as Maoists and killed. Arundhati Roy mentions an example of how people were identified as Maoists. When she was in Dantewada, the police superintendent had shown the photos 19 Maoists who were killed by his police. When she had asked how they were identified as Maoists, the answer given was that those 19 people carried malaria medicines and Dettol bottles from outside the jungle and so they were suspected to be Maoists. Arundhati Roy was shocked to hear about such a fate of people living in the jungles. In the name of war, a lot of weapons would be bought and sold by the security forces or the Maoists. But nobody realises or even mentally affected by the fact that the poorest people had to die in the war of rich people and have always been at the receiving end. And also they are for sure pushed to the edge of existence.

Roy talks about one more incidence where people from Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa who had come from the war places expressed their opinions about the exploitation, the killings, the rapes, the corruption that takes place by the police which was unbelievable. Those people from war zones told that the police took the direct orders from the people of mining companies and whoever raised their voices against the development programs were considered Maoists and arrested. They felt that many poor people who were fighting in just way for justice were forced to take up arms to protect themselves.

Roy also says that those same people from the war field had many questions in their mind for which nobody dared to answer. Those people wanted to know how government was capable of finding a big piece of land to be given to the rich industrialists when it was unable to resettle even a few people out of fifty million displaced people (due to development projects). They even went to the extent of questioning the practice of the Supreme Court when it denied to contribute to the benefit of the public though the government was going against the Land Acquisition Act by acquiring the land forcibly from the poor people to be given to the private corporation in the name of public interest. Roy opines that when the Supreme Court itself had closed its eyes towards the injustice happening to the have-nots by the haves no one can do anything about justice for the common people.

Arundhati Roy projects the sad plight of those people living in the forest and the mountain when she says that the people from the corporation have strongly decided that if the bauxite does not come peacefully from the mountains, it has to be snatched using violence against those who dissent. She says if this is the story of bauxite in Orissa, there are many more instances of loot of the precious mineral resources like limestone, uranium, diamond, gold, copper etc. And several development projects like dams, highways, cement factories, power plants and many more infrastructure projects are taken into consideration, one can clearly get the picture of the number of people who would have been displaced and never given any alternate liveable place. All this has been the result of MoUs of the corporation with the government from which the government and the corporations would benefit economically.

Moving ahead, Roy gives a very interesting and a sarcastic meaning for the entire process of MoUs that are carried out in the country in the name of development. Dandakaranya forest starts from West Bengal and stretches through Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and a few parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. This forest has been the prime dwelling place for the majority of the India's tribal groups. But media has given a different name altogether for this stretch as Red corridor or otherwise called Maoist corridor. Here Roy says that it is not wrong if this corridor can be called MoUist corridor instead of Maoist corridor in a very ironic tone. This shows that the country is interested in the MoUists which apparently lead to the exploitation of the tribal people and the Moists who raise their voices and resist these MoUs are targeted through Operation Green Hunt.

Mrs. Roy moves on to say that the Fifth Schedule of the constitution which says that it provides protection to tribal people and also which prohibits the estrangement of their land is only for the name sake but in reality the big mining corporations are looting the country by snatching the homelands of the tribal people for their own benefit and never for the development of the country. She goes one step ahead and mentions the names of those mining companies who have been appropriating the lands of the Adivasi people- Mittals, Tata, Jindal, Vedanta and others. She says that the media is also not interested in this part of the story where loot takes place but interested only in the stories of Maoist violence which is only half the story.

She further raises a few straight hitting-on-the-face questions like what do we understand about the fact that P.Chidambaram, the Union home minister who was the CEO of Operation Green Hunt has in fact represented many mining corporations in his career as a lawyer? And What do we really understand about the fact that when the activists of Orissa had filed a case in the Supreme Court against the Bauxite mining company Vedanta for violating the government guidelines, they were not supported even by Justice Kapadia but instead supported the company in spite of the report from the expert committee of the court which said that the permission should not be granted as the process of mining would totally destroy the natural resources like forest, water, environment and also the source of living for the thousands of Adivasi people living in those areas?

The answers to the questions are loud and clear that the mining companies were desperate for the war against Maoists hoping that this kind of violence would throw out the people who were resisting the attempts made by the government in the eviction of the adivasi people. She says either the government or the mining corporations would not have realized the serious consequences of this war which according to them is a necessity for the growth of the country through the so called development projects. Roy painfully says that the society and environment at large are paying a huge price in this process. Due to mining, rivers have been drying up, forests have been disappearing the underground water table has been receding. And as many people had started realizing their fate, they started denying to give their lands and resources and also started refusing to trust the government whenever it made false promises. As a result, there had been turbulence all over the country.

For this reason Roy says that P.Chidambaram was fixed in his mind that the country has to become a police state and the government has to militarize where Maoists are the targets. Roy says that the country seemed to come to the condition of emergency and imagines about how many thousands of soldiers the government has to deploy to control the intensifying fury of millions of people around the country. She also feels that it is better to have a talk with the Maoist leaders rather than war against them. She concludes the essay suggesting a better option than the two mentioned above – the person who would be going to the Climate Change Conference which would be held in Copenhagen should suggest that bauxite should be left in the mountains instead of taking it out through mining which would definitely solve many problems.

## **CONCLUSION**

Arundhati Roy also believes that unless the exploited ones take the initiative to fight and involve in the resistance movements through which there can be a step towards their development, nothing can happen. She also urges the responsible people in the centre to understand the helplessness of the marginal group and its desperateness to be considered as human beings at least, to join hands in their struggle for survival and give them a strong support in their meaningful resistance movements.

Arundhati Roy finally says that if the government thinks that the Maoists had to be rendered headless, the discipline of the armed struggle of the Maoists can easily turn into criminalized violence which had already started where the proof of beheading a police officer by the Maoists was right in front of the government. And there will be only violence which will spread and intensify without any negotiations. Finally, one day the government will have nobody to talk to.

## REFERENCES

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