

---

---

---

---

---

# We Call This Progress

by Arundhati Roy

*From a speech at the Earth at Risk conference on the misuses of democracy and the revolutionary power of exclusion.*

I don't know how far back in history to begin, so I'll lay the milestone down in the recent past. I'll start in the early 1990s, not long after capitalism won its war against Soviet Communism in the bleak mountains of Afghanistan. The Indian government, which was for many years one of the leaders of the non-aligned movement, suddenly became a completely aligned country and began to call itself the natural ally of the US and Israel.

It opened up its protected markets to global capital. Most people have been speaking about environmental battles, but in the real world it's quite hard to separate environmental battles from everything else: the war on terror, for example; the depleted uranium; the missiles; the fact that it was the military-industrial complex that actually pulled the US out of the Great Depression, and since then the economies of places like America, many countries in Europe, and certainly Israel, have had stakes in the manufacture of weapons. What good are weapons if they aren't going to be used in wars? Weapons are absolutely essential; it's not just for oil or natural resources, but for the military-industrial complex itself to keep going that we need weapons.

In the 1990s, when the markets of India opened, when all of the laws that protected labor were dismantled, when natural resources were privatized, when that whole process was set into motion, the Indian government opened two locks: one was the lock of the markets; the other was the lock of an old fourteenth-century mosque, which was a disputed site between Hindus and Muslims. The Hindus believed that it was the birthplace of Ram, and the Muslims, of course, use it as a mosque. By opening that lock, India set into motion a kind of conflict between the majority community and the minority community, a way of constantly dividing people. Finding ways to divide people is the main practice of anybody who is in power.

The opening of these two locks unleashed two kinds of totalitarianism in India: one was economic totalitarianism, and the other was Hindu fundamentalism. These processes manufactured what the government calls "terrorism." You had Islamist terrorists and you had what today the government calls "Maoists," which means anybody who is resisting the project of civilization, of progress, of development; anybody who is resisting the takeover of their lands or the destruction of rivers and forests, is today a Maoist. Maoists are the most militant end of a bandwidth of resistance movements, with Gandhists at the other end of the spectrum. The kind of strategy people adopt to resist the onslaught of global capital is quite often not an ideological choice, but a tactical

choice dependent on the landscape in which those battles are being fought.

Since 1947, ever since India became a sovereign republic, it has deployed its army against what it calls its own people. Now, gradually, those states where the troops were deployed are states of people who are fighting for self-determination. They are states that the decolonized Indian state immediately colonized. Now, those troops are actually defending the government's rights to build big dams, to build power projects, to carry out the processes of privatization. In the last 50 years, more than 30 million people have been displaced by big dams alone in India. Of course, most of those are Indigenous people or people who live off the land.

The result of 20 years of this kind of free market, and this bogey of terrorism, is the hollowing out of democracy. I notice a lot of people using the word democracy as a good word, but actually, if you think of it, democracy today is not what democracy used

---

---

**... since India became a sovereign republic, it has deployed its army against its own people.**

---

---

to be. There was a time when the American government was toppling democracies in Latin America and all over the place. Today, it's waging wars to install democracy. It has taken democracy into the workshop and hollowed it out.

In India, every institution, whether it's the courts, or the parliament, or the press—has been hollowed out and harnessed to the free market. There are empty rituals to mask what actually happens, which is that India continues to militarize, it continues to become a police state. In the last 20 years, after we embraced the free market, 250,000 farmers have committed suicide, because they have been driven into debt. This has never happened in human history before. Yet, obviously when the establishment has a choice between suicide farmers and suicide bombers, you know which ones they are going to encourage. They don't mind that statistic, because it helps them; they feel sorry, they make a few noises, but they keep doing what they are doing.

Today, India has more people than all the poorest countries of Africa put together. It has 80% of its population living on less than 20 rupees a day, which is less than 50 cents a day. That is the atmosphere in which the resistance movements are operating.

Of course, it has a media—I don't know any other country with so many news channels, all of them sponsored or directly owned by corporations, including mining corporations and infrastructure corporations. The vast majority of all news is funded by corporate advertising, so you can imagine what's going on with that. The prime minister of the world's largest democracy, Manmohan Singh, who was more or less installed by the IMF, has never won an election in his life. He stood for one election and lost, but after that he was just placed there. He's the person who, when he was

finance minister, actually dismantled all the laws and allowed global capital into India.

In 2005, which was the first term of the present government, the Indian government signed hundreds of Memorandums of Understanding, or MOUs, with mining companies, infrastructure companies, and so on, to develop a huge swath of forestland in Central India. India has up to an estimated one hundred million Indigenous people, and if you look at a map of India, the minerals, the forests, and the indigenous people are all stacked up, one on top of the other. Many of these Memorandums of Understanding were signed with these mining companies in 2005. At the time, in the state of Chhattisgarh, which is where this great civil war is unfolding now, the government raised a tribal militia, which was funded by these corporations, to basically go through the forest to try and clear it of people so that the MOUs could be actualized. The media started to call this whole swath of forest the "Maoist Corridor." Some of us used to call it the "MOUist Corridor." Around that time, they announced a war called "Operation Green Hunt." Two hundred thousand paramilitary began to move into the forests, along with the tribal militia, to clear it of what the government called Maoists.

The Maoist movement, in various avatars, has existed in India since 1967, which was the first time there was an uprising. It took place in a village in West Bengal called Naxalbari, so the Maoists are sometimes called Naxalites. Of course it's an underground, banned party. It now has a People's Liberation Guerrilla Army. Thousands of people have been killed in this conflict. Today, there are thousands of people in prison, and all of them are called Maoists, though not all of them are really Maoists, because as I said, anybody who resists today is called a terrorist. Poverty and terrorism have been conflated. In the Northeastern states we have laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which allows soldiers to kill on suspicion. In all of India we have the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, which basically makes even thinking an anti-government thought a criminal offense, for which you can be jailed for more than seven years. The supreme court of India actually gave a judgment saying you cannot possibly accuse a corporation of malpractice.

If you look at the history of the struggle for

---

---

**...the American government has taken democracy into the workshop and hollowed it out.**

---

---

land in India, what is really sad is that after India became independent, land reform was one of the biggest things on the agenda of the new government. This was of course subverted by the politicians, who were upper-class people, landowners. They put so many caveats in the legal system that absolutely no redistribution happened. Then, in the 1970s, shortly after the Naxalite movement started, when the first people rose up, it was about the redistribution of

land. The movement was saying land to the tiller. It was crushed; the army was called out. The Indian government, which calls itself democratic, never hesitates to call out the army. Today, people have completely forgotten the idea of redistribution. Now, they are fighting just to hold on to what little they have. We call that "progress." The home minister allegedly says he wants 70% of India to live in cities, meaning he wants 500 to 600 million people to move. How do you make that happen, unless you become a military state? How do you do that, unless you build big dams and big thermal projects and have nuclear power?

In so many ways, we have regressed. Even the most radical politics are practiced by people who are privileged enough to have land. There are millions and millions of people who don't have land, who now just live as pools of underpaid wage labor on the edges of these huge megalopolises that make up India now. The politics of land in one way is radical, but in another way it has left out the poorest people, because they are out of the equation. We don't talk about justice anymore. None of us do; we just talk about human rights or survival. We don't talk about redistribution. In America, 400 people own more wealth than half of the American population. We should not be saying tax the rich, but instead we should be saying take their money and redistribute it, take their property and redistribute it.

Today, one of the biggest battles being fought in India is over the extraction of bauxite, the ore that makes aluminum, which is at the center of the military-industrial complex. There's something like 4 trillion dollars' worth of bauxite in the mountains of Orissa and Chhattisgarh. Bauxite mountains are beautiful; they are flat-top mountains. Bauxite is a porous rock, and when it rains the mountains absorb the water; they are like water tanks. They let the water out through their toes, and they irrigate the plains. Mining companies, who have bought the bauxite for a small royalty to the Indian government, have already traded it on the futures market. For local people, the bauxite in the mountain is the source of their life and their future, their religion and everything. For the aluminum company, the mountain is just a cheap storage facility.

They've already sold it, so the bauxite has to come out, either peacefully or violently.

Now, the Indian government—the largest democracy in the world—is planning to call out the army in Central India, to fight the poorest people in the world.

A lot of the Indian government's violence and repression is outsourced to the mob; it's not always acting as a state. Often, academics or journalists or these moronic anchors in TV studios will initiate a



debate based on the question, is violence moral or immoral? (SMS your answer to the studio now.)

Of course, people don't necessarily function like that. You can be a Maoist in the forest and a Gandhian on the street. You can change identities based on what suits you tactically; it's not like you

---



---

### **The supreme court of India actually gave a judgment saying you cannot possibly accuse a corporation of malpractice.**

---



---

have to swear to be this thing or that thing or the other thing. Some people do, some don't. I think what happens in India is that there is something false about this debate, because it's infused with a kind of false morality. After all, if people from the middle class were to support that fight—which is an oxymoron; they won't—then I can understand saying we should all get together and go on a hunger strike. But, if you're going to distance yourself from that village that has been surrounded by a hundred policemen and is being burned, then it's immoral to try and lecture to those people how they should protect themselves.

For many years, I have been writing and following resistance movements and the new economic policy. I've always found that the chances of coming upon despair are much greater in middle-class households, than on the ground where people are actually fighting. Middle-class people have the choice between

hope and despair, just like they have the choice between shampoo for dry hair and oily hair; they have the choice between doing politics and interior design. People who are fighting don't have a choice; they are fighting and they are focused and they know what they are doing. They are arguing with each other a lot, of course, but that's all right.

---



---

**...the minerals, the forests, and the indigenous people are all stacked up, one on top of the other.**

---



---

When I landed in New York, one of the first things I did was to go to the Wall Street occupation, because I wanted to see who they were, what it was about, and how it connected to the things that we've been fighting and writing about. There is clearly a connection between what is going on in the Occupy movement and what is going on in India. That connection is that of exclusion. These are people who are excluded. They are clearly not the 400 families who own more wealth than half of Americans. They are not the hundred people in India who own 25% of India's GDP.

While many of us believe in revolution, and believe that the system must be brought down, right now, the least we can ask for to begin with is a cap on all of this. I'm a cappist and a liddite. We do need to say a few things: one is that no individual can have an unlimited amount of wealth. No corporation can have an unlimited amount of wealth. This sort of cross-ownership of businesses really has to stop.

In India, the Tatas are the biggest company. They own iron ore mines, steel manufacturing plants, iodized salt, and television providers. They manufacture trucks, they fund activists, they do everything. There's an iron ore and steel company called Jindal. They have iron ore mines, steel-making plants. The CEO is a member of Parliament. He

also started the National Flag Foundation, because he won the right to fly the national flag on his house. They run a global law school just outside Delhi, which is like a Stanford campus in the midst of the most unbelievable squalor you can imagine. They have faculty flown in from all over the world paid huge salaries. They fund and promote cutting-edge artists who work in stainless steel. They recently had a protest workshop where they flew in activists to this unbelievably posh campus and then had protest poetry and protest slogans. They own everything; they own the resistance, the mines, the Parliament, the flag, the newspapers. They don't let anything go. These are some simple things that have to stop. Berlusconi indirectly controls 90% of the media in Italy; so

what if he's not the prime minister?

It's a kind of insanity that could have some simple solutions, too. For example, perhaps children shouldn't inherit the wealth their parents amass. We can all find some simple solutions like this that would point us in the right directions.

Described by the *New York Times* as the most impassioned critic of globalization and American influence, Arundhati Roy is a novelist, political essayist and social justice activist. She won the Booker prize in 1997 for her first novel, *The God of Small Things*. Some of her non-fiction books include, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, and *Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers*.

---

---

**You can be a Maoist in the forest  
and a Gandhian on the street.**

---

---