

Getting Indian Democracy Right

Tuesday 13 April 2010, by [HENSMAN Rohini](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2010).

'Far away, in that other fake democracy called India': so said Arundhati Roy in a passing reference to India when she began her talk at the finale of the Left Forum 2010 in New York in the middle of March. Fake democracy? Yet in the same month her long essay 'Walking With the Comrades,' supporting the struggle of the CPI (Maoist) in the tribal areas, was published by a mainstream, corporate-controlled Indian magazine, *Outlook*. [1] How would that be possible if India were just a 'fake' democracy? By way of a comparison, across the border in Sri Lanka, the March issue of *Himal Southasian* was seized by customs on account of an article of mine, despite the fact that I have always been sharply critical of the insurgencies of the LTTE and JVP, and cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as sympathetic to terrorism or violence. Earlier editions of *Himal* with articles by writers critical of both the government and the LTTE have suffered the same fate. My articles have been turned down by one newspaper after another in Sri Lanka, and I do not blame their editors and owners: so many journalists, editors and owners who have been critical of the regime in power have been jailed, killed or disappeared, even if they, too, had been critical of the LTTE.

Indeed, Arundhati herself had mentioned the plight of journalists in Sri Lanka in an article she wrote around a year ago, warning that 'genocide waits to happen'. [2] She wrote eloquently about the civilians trapped in the war zone being bombed and shelled indiscriminately by government forces, but failed to mention that the LTTE was holding these same civilians hostage and shooting them if they tried to escape, using them as human shields from behind which they fired at government forces, forcing civilians to build bunds under enemy fire, putting guns into the hands of children and sending them to the front line. 'Genocide' has a precise legal meaning that revolves crucially around intent (Article 6 of the Rome Statute of the ICC states, 'For the purpose of this Statute, "genocide" means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group', etc.), and it was not on the agenda in Sri Lanka. What both sides were perpetrating were heinous war crimes, and if those of us who were anguished about that situation had been able to prevail on both sides to stop committing those crimes, thousands of civilian lives could have been saved. But making exaggerated and one-sided claims did not help.

Similarly, if India is already a 'fake democracy', what would we call it if Arundhati and the editors and owners of *Outlook* were arrested and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for twenty years for publishing that article? No one can seriously deny that India's democracy is terribly flawed. Not only are existing legal and constitutional rights of citizens constantly violated, but draconian laws like AFSPA, against which Irom Sharmila has waged a heroic ten-year fast, actually provide legal sanction for such crimes. They are cancerous tumours on the body politic, and unless and until they are excised, it is impossible to talk of a healthy democracy. And yet, characterising India's democracy as 'fake' belittles the efforts of millions of grassroots activists using constitutional means to struggle for the rights of women, children, workers, dalits, adivasis and minority communities, to fight for justice without killing or wounding anyone. It demeans the efforts of Arundhati's former comrades in the NBA. And it misunderstands democracy as a gift of the ruling class, whereas it can only be won by unremitting struggle.

If writing off Indian democracy as fake is intended to legitimise armed struggle against the state, that has dangerous potential to strengthen authoritarianism. Take the tactic of enforcing election

boycotts by armed movements. There is no obligation to vote, so people who do not think it is worth supporting any candidate have the option of not voting, or spoiling their ballot papers if they want to register a stronger protest. But enforcing a boycott with threats of violence takes away yet one more small liberty, and results in a setback for any struggle for rights. It can also result in counter-finality for the agent enforcing the boycott. In the 2005 presidential election in Sri Lanka, the LTTE leadership enforced an election boycott in the areas they controlled, leading to the victory of Mahinda Rajapaksa who then proceeded to wipe them out. Between 1994 and 2005, a war-weary Sri Lankan population under a relatively democratic government had been willing to concede the democratic rights and freedoms demanded by Tamils, but the LTTE leadership held out for a separate totalitarian Tamil state. Along with the crimes against Tamil civilians mentioned above and many others, it was their own acts which led to their destruction.

Enforcing bandhs [3] by threatening violence is another tactic that takes away the rights of working people rather than expanding them. In a report sympathetic to the CPI (Maoist), Gautam Navlakha tells us that the Maoists beheaded CITU trade union leader Thomas Munda of Kulta Iron Works for defying their bandh call [4]. And this is not the only instance of the CPI (Maoist)'s authoritarian methods (see the interview with a former Maoist area commander in Tehelka [5]Ø). Beheading trade unionists and killing dissident tribals is surely not the way to build a genuine as opposed to fake democracy!

In order to justify describing India as a 'fake democracy', two things would be required. One is to show that all or most of the thousands of struggles for democratic rights taking place every day and involving lakhs [6] of people (including adivasis) have failed. But this is simply not true. Many battles fail, but many succeed. That is the nature of the struggle for democracy: you win some battles, lose others, learn from your failures and carry on. The other requirement would be to explain what is meant by 'genuine democracy'. Is it the regime in the areas controlled by the CPI (Maoist), where all mass organisations are dominated by the party and dissidents are eliminated? Or the repressive and profoundly authoritarian regimes that were installed by the revolutions of the 20th century? Can Arundhati point to any 'genuine democracy', and if not, what does it mean to call Indian democracy 'fake'? Again, this exaggerates the failure of democracy in India and fails to tell the other side of the story: the failure of violent revolutions to establish anything better.

The God of Small Things is a brilliant novel that well deserved the Booker Prize, but non-fiction writing demands something different. The fiction writer creates a world in her head, whereas the non-fiction writer has to relate to the world outside her head, and do a considerable amount of background research in order to get it right. In a moment of candour, during an interview in 2007, Arundhati admitted that she finds this irksome: "I feel very imprisoned by facts, by having to get it right," she said. But unless socialists are willing to 'look reality in the face', that is, take 'facts' more seriously, they will be building a movement founded on myths.

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P.S.

ll activities* From Kafil:

<http://kafila.org/2010/04/10/getting-indian-democracy-right-rohini-hensman/>

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF: Arundhati Roy, [Walking With The Comrades](#)

[2] See on ESSF: Arundhati Roy, [The silent horror of the war in Sri Lanka](#)

[3] Band, from a Hindi word meaning 'closed', is a general "territorial strike", where all economic activities are stoped in a community often lasting one day as a protest.

[4] See on ESSF: [India: Days and Nights in the Heartland of Rebellion](#)

[5] Available on ESSF: [India: 'Our Fight Is For Adivasi Identity'](#)

[6] A *lakh* or lac is a widely used (including in Indian English) unit in the Indian numbering system equal to one hundred thousand (100,000).