

The CPI (Maoist): debate on Arundhati Roy's essay "Walking with the Comrades"

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Extracts from exchanges on Arundhati Roy's essay posted on Kafila website. For the full exchange, see :

<http://kafila.org/2010/03/22/response-to-arundhati-roy-jairus-banaji/>

For Arundhati Roy's essay, see on ESSF: [Walking With The Comrades](#)

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Response to Arundhati Roy: Jairus Banaji

Arundhati Roy's essay "Walking with the Comrades" [1] is a powerful indictment of the Indian state and its brutality but its political drawbacks are screamingly obvious. Arundhati clearly believes that the Indian state is such a bastion of oppression and unrelieved brutality that there is no alternative to violent struggle or 'protracted war'. In other words, democracy is a pure excrescence on a military apparatus that forms the true backbone of the Indian state. It is simply its 'benign façade'. If all you had in India were forest communities and corporate predators, tribals and paramilitary forces, the government and the Maoists, her espousal of the Maoists might just cut ice. But where does the rest of India fit in? What categories do we have for them? Or are we seriously supposed to believe that the extraordinary tide of insurrection will wash over the messy landscapes of urban India and over the millions of disorganised workers in our countryside without the emergence of a powerful social agency, a broad alliance of salaried and wage-earning strata, that can contest the stranglehold of capitalism? Without mass organisations, battles for democracy, struggles for the radicalisation of culture, etc., etc.? Does any of this matter for her?

In Arundhati's vision of politics the only agent of social change is a military force. There are no economic classes, no civil society, no mass organisations or conflicts which are not controlled by a party (or 'the' party). There is no history of the left that diverges from the romantic hagiographies of Naxalbari and its legacies, and there is, bizarrely, not even a passing reference to capitalism as the systemic source of the conversion of adivasis into wage-labourers, of the degradation of their forms of life and resources and of the dispossession of entire communities. In Arundhati, the vision of the Communist Manifesto is reversed. There Marx brings the Communists in not to prevent the expansion of capitalism but to fight it from the standpoint of a more advanced mode of production, one grounded in the ability of masses of workers to recover control of their lives and shape the

nature and meaning of production. The primitive communism in terms of which she sees and applauds the programme of the CPI (Maoist) recalls not this vision of the future but the debates around the possibility of the Russian mir (the peasant commune) forming the basis for a direct transition to communism. On that issue Marx was, as always, profoundly internationalist, speculating that 'if the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for the proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land [the mir] may serve as the starting point for a communist development'. That didn't happen, the revolution in Russia remained isolated, it was subverted internally by the grip of a leadership every bit as vanguardist as Kishenji, and if we don't learn from history, we cannot truly speak as the beacons of hope that Arundhati sees the Maoists as. It is not hope but false promises that will lie at the end of the revolutionary road, aside from the corpses of thousands of 'martyrs' and many more thousands of nameless civilians who of course had no control over 'the' party.

Responses to the Response

By: Sunalini on March 23, 201 at 3:39 PM

Strange and misplaced critique, Mr. Banaji. I am not for a moment arguing that Roy's article is above critique; there are certainly some things I am uncomfortable with, or want time to think about. But your peculiar, tendentious reading of Roy's article tells me more about your own history as a communist (I am assuming you have been one, or are still allied with the Left; please correct me if I am wrong), your inability to shake Marxist teleology regarding the mir and the urban proletariat, and the simultaneous fear and fantasy of adivasis being converted to wage labour through capitalism; than anything Roy has actually said in the article. I say fear and fantasy because its always double-edged isn't it, the response of Marxism to capitalist evolution...

Point is, not once does Roy claim to put forth a programmatic vision of politics for the entire country. Nowhere does she purport to answer questions about the ways in which the Maoist phenomenon links to the urban dispossessed, or to the future of India. What really puzzles me is, why are YOUR questions heading in that direction - of the future of revolution for the entire country? In other words, why does India loom large in your imagination? Because it certainly is absent except as an occupying force in the areas Roy is talking about. I can only understand your response as a concern over actually existing, or viable revolutionary strategies for the whole country. But that's not the terrain Roy's article, and she would want to convince us, the Maoists and their tribal supporters inhabit. Their terrain is one of desperate, at times blind, at other times clever guerrilla warfare deriving its force from local issues of land, displacement and dispossession. In my opinion, its a futile, if not slightly bizarre exercise to imagine the guerilla into constitutional existence at this moment, to ask what kind of government they would form. These are questions we debate amongst ourselves, within our locations, and rightly so. Would the Maoists be as corrupt and as violent as the Indian State if they came to power? In all likelihood, yes. Indeed, Roy herself points to it in her article.

So why do we push India's limited success with constitutional democracy in Roy's and the Maoists faces? Why do we push what we know as India into that experience at all? Because not only are many of us committed to imagining post-nationalist political states (not simply supra-national but also infra-national), but there is not even a passing family resemblance between us and them - those

in the heart of darkness. Remember the article recounts the curious, somewhat anxious questions about the outside world posed by the comrades to Roy? It seems to signal an attitude of cautious curiosity about urban India, nothing more than their experience of being on the run in the jungle allows them. They (and I am talking of everybody except the top Maoist leadership here, which I believe is a fair thing to talk about) haven't taken the task of theorising publicly for the country, not yet (when they do, they'll mutate into another animal, and we'll respond then). They certainly haven't located themselves in a teleology of *adviasi* to wage labour to revolutionary proletariat. Is it inconceivable, given the colossal history of dispossession in their region, that they simply couldn't care less about, as you put it, "the emergence of a powerful social agency, a broad alliance of salaried and wage-earning strata, mass organisations, battles for democracy, struggles for the radicalisation of culture?" Arundhati Roy reports that they perhaps don't care. Perhaps. We don't know enough from this article. If you are mad at her for ignoring the good radical work of the Left of all kinds in cities, among urban proletariat and other strata, by all means, be mad. But at the risk of repeating myself, nowhere is it apparent to me that she takes this task upon herself, of adjudicating between different revolutionary and leftist strategies, nationally and internationally. She tells the story as she sees it, in *Dandakaranya*, with her warts and moles and biases clearly visible. If we have to critique her article, critique it on the terms on which it is written.

Strange also that you indict Roy for not mentioning capitalism. In an article replete with references to mining companies and their blatant alliance with the State, and stinging indictment of the bogus idea of corporate social responsibility, is Roy's fault a school examination one - of not using the word 'capitalism'? I believe you suffer at her habit of not describing a capitalism you recognise - the one in which revolution follows the expansion of urban wage labour and the intensification of its contradictions. This primitive, rapacious bounty capitalism that Roy has done a sterling job of capturing so beautifully in all her work, fits nowhere in that teleology, or fits weirdly. So you assume mistakenly that Roy is arguing that peasant communes can jump into socialism or revolution. Its absurd, this assumption, this recalling of old communist debates. If Roy has expressed the hope of the tribals, its the desperate hope of a local army, with all its desperate violence, standing up to a force that has history on its side. Nothing more, nothing less. Violence itself is a strangely abstract word, obfuscating more than revealing about actual battles, but thats another story...

As for democracy being an excrescence on a military state, YES, thats exactly what it has been for those in the areas Roy has visited. Again, she isn't speaking for the whole of India, certainly not for us who have been fortunate to see its humane side. So lets make our India-wide revolutionary strategies and certainly lets learn from whatever bits of communist history may have direct relevance to us, but lets not so easily assume that the *Dandakaranya* forest is India. It is and has always been enemy territory - a self-fulfilling prophesy of colonial and postcolonial governments. Its not the job - yet - of the people in Roy's article to be answerable to our ideas of democracy and revolution; it seems their ambitions are modest in this regard for the moment. Ours, on the other hand, are suffused with national and international revolutionary goals. Its a question of scale, of what the world may seem like from that forest. The way in which international communism filters through into guerilla struggles worldwide is the subject of books and theses, but I can mention here Roy's description of the poster of Mao at *Bhumkal* - she indicates an ongoing local renegotiation of his legacy in the *naxals'* response.

If I take your response, Mr. Banaji, and Anirban's response also on *Kafila*, the storm seems to be hingeing on four things -

One, the question of violence vs. non violent methods. Long debate, but again, I don't think Roy is making an argument for violence per se. Clearly she opposes the violence of the state. She is trying to understand what the lifeworld of somebody who has accepted violence as legitimate means of revenge on a completely impervious regime appears to be. Does she sufficiently express the ethical

and moral dilemmas in this regard, of herself or those she writes about? No. Does that take away from the power of her description of that lifeworld? To me, no. About democratic methods succeeding in the world those in Dandakaranya inhabit, perhaps in a thousand years. Until then? I don't have answers, but in the meanwhile I am wholly unsurprised by this one. When the cycle of violence has already been inaugurated by the State decades ago, its going to take the State to really stop it – an offer the Maoists are waiting for.

Two, who has the right to represent 'them'? Roy's jumping in here, in her characteristic style – messianic to some, brash and self-promoting to others – has irked many. Perhaps I can understand that – she writes as if there is nothing else going on – just her and the Maoists in the jungle. And there is some self-celebration going on – when she mentions her interview being part of their collection of books and articles from the outside world. But its a writer's representation, at the end of the day. And mighty powerful, compared to others. Its propagandist, so lets critique that. But the gap between us and the world inside Maoist-controlled forests is so yawning that nothing short of poetic, propagandist writing may bridge it. I wonder, if the whole thing was written as a poem, what would our response be? Since she writes prose, in a mainstream magazine, she is automatically drawn into larger debates about the history of communism, violence as a political means, etc. I am not sure that's useful.

Three, is her portrayal of community romanticised? Maybe, although she does indicate tensions and rifts (between the women and men for instance, and here she minces no words, reporting that some tribal traditions were oppressive enough for women to join the Maoists as an escape, only to be disappointed at being denied equality here too). But is it equally possible that we simply have no access to a world of experience which is not alienated individually? We can only scoff at Roy's upper class romanticism, while still being unable to imagine forms of community other than our own very cynical, fragmented one (which we love, make no mistake, and wouldn't have any other way, since it has given us what we have come to think of as precious freedoms)?

Four, and related to point two above, Roy's relation to the Left, radical, progressive, still- invested-in-democracy sections among us, to the Maoist leadership, their press machinery, their urban counterparts. Maybe all this controversy tells us its time for a debate, but that's not the mandate of this article.

By: debabrata banerjee on March 24, 2010 at 9:34 AM

Sunalini is simply making use of some personal barbs and invective to badmouth a proposed level of debate. Sunalini is basically attempting to pre-empt the frame of reference by attacking the [Marxist teleology regarding the Mir and urban proletariat](#) because according to Sunalini the adivasis in the heart of darkness'' haven't taken the task of theorizing', that they haven't located themselves in a teleology of adivasi to wage labour to revolutionary proletariat'. Likewise Sunalini mentions how [beautifully](#) Arundhati Roy captures 'a primitive, rapacious, bounty capitalism', that the article is replete with references to mining industry, their alliance with the state' and her rubbishing of corporate social responsibility' for making the point that it fits nowhere in that teleology' according to which [peasant communes can jump into socialism and revolution](#)'. Sunalini presumably thinks it is absurd recalling 'an old communist debate'. It was not just a communist debate' but a debate on present and future of agrarian communes in which numerous shades of Russian populist' theorists like

Chernyshevskii, Lavrov, revolutionaries, activists, economists, journalist like Herzen, scientists, independent historians like Kovalevskii, Boris Nikolavskii, Bakunin inspired anarchists, social revolutionary party, The People's Will that included emotional revolutionaries, strong upholders of revolutionary ethics, and others who were involved had invested their mind and body. Marxists of Second International, Russian Marxists and the subsequent communist party tradition remained aloof from the entire debate and it was not till 1980's that the first comprehensive book on the subject, subtitled 'Marx and the peripheries of capitalism' [ed, T Shanin] was published in English. The debate is not old either, but made to look old by an ignoramus. Marx's involvement was very discontinuous to his earlier preoccupations with his work on Capital, a sharp departure from west European theatre of capital accumulation to entirely new areas of resistance and revolt against oppression, by north American Indians, Australian aborigines or the Russian commune. A reality not of the industrial proletariat became Marx's major preoccupation.

This shift clearly shows that it did not follow from anything close to linear evolutionism of ideas that Sunalini dresses up as 'teleology'. The succession of categories, as in the continuum – tribal-wage labour-industrial proletariat – does, by no means indicate teleology'. This is a continuum that typically exemplifies strong linear deterministic assumptions wrapped up in evolutionism, much like stages of historical development that used to be dished out by mechanical materialists and Stalinoids, from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism and so forth. The existential dread of 'fear and fantasy' about the adivasi converted to wage labour' is the property of Sunalini's own, unique property of consciousness that Sunalini imagines inhering in the adivasi 'life-world' but non translatable to any meaningful statement of political economy. Teleology deals with cognizing ends as immanent determination of nature and though not an invalid form of comprehension, the reason why teleology gets reproached is not due evolutionism but because it ends up in trifling things and triviality in its extramundane considerations, or it gets limited to a search for external ends and purposes only. That is why, a distinction of internal purpose is made, which opens up the concept of life as idea as with the individual pursuing universal ends implicit in genus' while also mediating the particularity of species existence. But this has nothing to do with any of the ways in which the term is bandied about by Sunalini.

By: Sunalini on March 24, 2010 at 12:24 PM

Banerjee bhaisahib, main un saari kitaabon aur vaad vivaadon se vakif hoon, jo aapne itne pyaar aur itminaan se hamein yaad dilaaye hain.

The question of my being an ignoramus and not matching up to the 'proposed level of debate' aside, please point out in exact quotes from my response where I have used 'personal barbs and invective to badmouth' Mr. Banaji. One thing Kafila is very clear about disallowing is personal barbs, and I follow the policy, so as I said, please do point it out. I don't know Mr. Banaji at all, maybe that's what irked you. The fact that it wasn't personal. Personally admiring. In fact, I found your response personal for the number of times you used my name and said things like 'ignoramus'...but nevermind.

About your comment, I will respond to just a couple of your points, because I feel we aren't on the same planet right now, leave alone the same page. One, I am well aware of the fact that 'communists' and the history of communism/communist debates are complex categories – I know of the populists, the narodniks, the Trotskyists, the Luxemburgians, the Bakunin-inspired anarchists; and have an idea who you mean when you use the rather vague term 'emotional revolutionaries'. I know of the long, tortuous but incredibly creative disagreements in the movement, the trajectory from Lenin to Stalin, the critique posed by Alexandra Kollontai, the revisiting of determinism and mode of production debates by the end of the 20th century with the Poulantzas-Miliband exchange, etc. etc. I am also aware of the difference between determinism and teleology, and used the word teleology consciously.

I am saying this not to show off (because I am sure there are much more learned people on the matter, so it would be a futile exercise) but because proving sufficient Marxist lineage seems to be a pre requisite to entering this debate, from your point of view. I won't defend that lineage any more except to say I am firmly on the Left. But please explain to me, how the movement from adivasi to wage labour to urban revolutionary consciousness is non teleological in the way Mr. Banaji expressed it.

Second, I never said that Marx's own ideas follow a linear evolution; I am again aware of his very intense rethinking of the dreaded 'Asiatic mode of production' formulation, and other brilliant journalistic writings on the national question. In fact, you pose his ideas as linear when you say "Marx's involvement was very discontinuous to his earlier preoccupations with his work on Capital, a sharp departure from west European theatre of capital accumulation to entirely new areas of resistance and revolt against oppression, by north American Indians, Australian aborigines or the Russian commune." Sure, but the tension in his work between seeing capitalism as lateral and discontinuous and non-linear; and seeing capitalism, even introduced through colonial rule to the natives as a liberatory force that would eventually lead to socialism remains in a bulk of his work, from start to end. As you would expect from any thinker of his range and complexity.

My point is not to deify or demonise Marx, but to force us all, in the early twenty first century, to specify which Marx we are working with, when we think about the Naxals. And further, to dare to suggest that working with Marx and Marxist debates does not exhaust the field of understanding as far as the war in Dantewada is concerned.

Third, about political economy. Roy's understanding of the adivasis is explicitly political-economical, and is located in (if you want to work with Marxist categories) the idea of primitive accumulation. And the reason it makes no sense to invoke urban revolution or social alliances here is because we are dealing with a situation in which the adivasi goes from being adivasi to beggar/homeless/criminal on the streets of Raipur, not wage labour. The trajectory followed by hundreds of Narmada adivasis. Which Marxist category used by Mr. Banaji can accommodate this trajectory? I don't know, you are more learned, so do educate us. Plus, the fine distinction between teleology of external purposes and internal ends, and species and genus. I am a little lost.

To sum up, I don't believe it is 'amiss and deplorable' to invoke old communist debates (these aren't words I used). I believe it is absurd to use it in this particular manner, of seeing it in pre-prepared categories of (to use Banaji's language) – primitive communism, more advanced mode of production, conversion of adivasis into wage labour and so on and so forth.

Can't resist adding – Mr. Banaji's sentence to condemn Roy – that she sees democracy as mere excrescence on a military state – nothing could be more Marxist than such a view.

By: Manash on March 24, 2010 at 12:25 PM

Debabrata has made a critical intervention against Sunalini's response to Banaji. My humble provocations -

The relative autonomy of certain moments/levels in the history of capital should allow us to distinguish between the larger process of capitalism's continuities on the one hand and the specific, fragmentary interventions on the other. How else can we be able to map the precise situation about what is at stake in the confrontation between capital and labour's "life-world"?! The point here isn't simply one of re-cognizing the duality of the historical scheme of things, but about what produces the rupture between the general and the specific in the first place. The question is, what forced Marx to pay attention to the question of agrarian communes at a later period. I think the question is no longer situated within the purview of capital accumulation alone or at least how it was understood earlier. The technologization of life-worlds and of the economic process, where certain industrial logic has been rammed into economies which have lived "side-by-side" along with urban, developmental economic trajectories, has to be taken into account. This has been Arundhati's concern as well, though her language and emphasis may not lie within the theoretical concerns as discussed here. The question of linearity or the lack of it regarding Marxist "teleology" isn't the issue. There is an underlying attempt here by Debabrata, of RE-COGNIZING the current economic (and political) situation of the tribals into his own theoretical assumptions regarding the "fate" of certain economies. So his accusation against Sunalini's manner of cognizing is a defensive strategy. And now comes the real problem of Debrata's formulation, utterly incapable of going beyond its own, rigid structure -

The moment any "cognizing" of a historical moment of rupture vis-a-vis the larger discourse of capitalism and state takes place - how easily it is plugged into the rhetoric of infantility. Indeed, a stark exposure of the limits of the discourse of reason. The manipulation of the "real encounter" with economies and concerns which threaten one's historical knowledge of things, begins by such infantile accusations of infantility. The effect here is one aimed at producing "existentialist" worries in the name of "fear" and "fantasy" - but being unable to control the betrayal of oneself being subjectively impervious of all cognitive biases and assuming a more OBJECTIVE position for oneself. I think a post-Deluzian world would laugh at this. But also be equally terrified of its violence. The lack in your re-cognizing your own fantasy is our fear.

By: Manash on March 24, 2010 at 4:08 PM

A late clarification. Sunalini had indeed used the terms 'fear' and 'fantasy' in her critique of Banaji, and these words were thrown back at her by Debabrata in this manner:

"The existential dread of **fear and fantasy**' about the adivasi converted to wage labour' is the property of Sunalini's own, unique property of consciousness that Sunalini imagines inhering in the adivasi life-world' but non translatable to any meaningful statement of political economy" My response was to this formulation of Debabrata's. The point I wanted to make is, Sunalini spoke about the fear and fantasy as "double edged" in terms of "the response of Marxism to capitalist evolution". This is a provocative point and has no subjective accusations against Banaji's thinking. While Debabrata gives the existential twist to point it against Sunalini's "consciousness". So we are faced with a Sartrean

accusation of "bad faith" here! This is what I found problematic – To individualize the accusation of 'fear and 'fantasy' and make it existentialist when one is debating certain political phenomena is to deliberately play, both a psychological as well as an ideological game – induce the element of guilt in the other person and de-legitimize the political importance of the argument. To cut it short: As if Sunalini speaks at the level of consciousness and Debabrata speaks at the level of being (and of political economy). The structure of being has had its years. Time for understanding the consciousness which exceeds being and is stranger to it. Back to the history of the future – and the postponement of it by the present crop of intellectual thinking.

{By: Jairus on March 24, 2010 at 6:20 PM}} Sunalini, to clear up a misconception first, "Inability to shake Marxist teleology"; I take it you're not a Marxist, don't see yourself as one, so that teleology for you seems to be intrinsic to all forms of Marxism and is dragged in as a sign of their sheer debility. In Marx's vision of history, the only teleology at work is the worldwide creation of a working-class by capitalism that can take over from capital once the basis exists, again worldwide, for that kind of momentous transition. You can always scoff at the idea and dismiss it as 'teleology' but frankly no better vision has been offered of human emancipation from the suffocating grip of capital. You can't possibly believe that I believe that the debate about the mir has any concrete meaning today. It was brought in to illustrate the extent to which the vision of maoist politics Arundhati offers is irrelevant. 'Fear and fantasy'; hardly either. The vast majority of the subcontinent's population had been converted into wage-labourers by the closing decades of colonial rule. The forms in which they lived their condition of utter dispossession and forced survival varied of course, but only in the fantasies of some of the left, the maoists included, could this be reversed by transforming them all back into a class of small property-owners. ('Today, Comrade Venu says, there are no landless peasants in Dandakaranya'. The breathtaking naivety of this statement shows how even a brilliant writer of fiction can churn out pulp fiction if she lacks any grasp of the issues.) 'Why does India loom large in your imagination?' Because I live in it, Arundhati does, so do you and so do all the millions of adivasis she writes about, however much you want to construct a Chinese wall between them and the rest of the country. Dispossession and the shattering of communities is not peculiar to the tribal parts of India, even if it takes starker more visible forms there. Nor is state violence, nor is oppression, nor is patriarchy, etc, etc. Arundhati at least has a wider frame of reference, calls in Kashmir, communalism, the nature of the Indian state, and so on, but you are less compromising. It is absurd to imagine that the forest areas are governed by different laws of political evolution, even if forests and mountains everywhere 'resist the march of history', as Braudel told us, 'or they accept it only with reluctance'. You say, 'It's not the job – yet – of the people in Roy's article to be answerable to our ideas of democracy and revolution'. And Kandhamal? Is that also exempt from the norms that seem, to you, natural for the rest of India? Were the tribal aggressors there simply childish hapless victims of the conspiracies of others? 'They (and I'm talking about everybody except the top maoist leadership here...)' . So what are we talking about? Communities, masses of ordinary people who never in their wildest

dreams hoped for the war of liberation they now have to live with, or the hardened leadership and middle-rank cadre of a well-honed war machine that emerges from the fissured history of the Indian left, fragments a hundred times over before it regroups into Kishenji's brand of party? If you're a party sympathiser, the distinction scarcely matters, it is ethereal because the party is the people, the relationship of representation is one of immediacy and faith, the way the Tigers 'were' the Tamils of Sri Lanka even when they went around slaughtering every other Tamil group. Arundhati, you want to say, is only interested in the former, in the people themselves, and the totalising brutalities of capital and state and the way these are destroying them. Fair enough, that is why I began my comment with a reference to her 'powerful indictment of the Indian state and its brutality'. One British sympathiser, a trotskyist to boot, writes that her essay is a 'call to civil society' to halt the impending terrors of 'Operation green hunt'. But it is a strange essay, to say the least, if that is its sole drift. Why exalt Charu Mazumdar as a 'visionary' when she herself finds his more famous statements 'spine chilling' and 'almost genocidal'? And why do that if you're trying to win the support of much wider sections of civil society against an impending holocaust? Why shuffle between tribals and maoists as if they were the same amphibious creature, as if no independent organisations and movements and struggles of adivasis exist that are not controlled by Kishenji's party, that have even publicly denounced infiltration by them, and that the governments can easily brand 'Naxalite' to murder their leaders and activists in cold blood? A good demonstration of the difference between the maoist elements and the people's movement is the piece that Sumit and Tanika Sarkar wrote in EPW on Lalgahar (<http://www.sacw.net/article996.html>): "They (the maoists) come into an already strong and open mass movement, they engage in a killing spree, discrediting the movement, and then they leave, after giving the state authorities a splendid excuse for crushing it. One wonders how and why the so-called leader Bikas could arrange the entire media – press, state and national TV channels – to gather around him as he claimed to represent the Janasadharaan Samiti and not have any state forces to be around as he spoke." Arundhati can't take this on board, witness her recent interview on Democracy Now where she tells her audience 'Actually, the Maoists are tribals, you know, and the tribals themselves have had a history of resistance and rebellion that predates Mao by centuries, you know? And so, I think it's just a name, in a way. It's just a name. And yet, without that organization, the tribal people could not have put up this resistance. You know, so it is complicated.' It certainly is, if that's the kind of clarity with which you're going to think about these issues! Would you want to respond to this by saying, clarity doesn't matter, only description does? 'It's a writer's representation, at the end of the day'. And does the writer's representation include the prerogative of telling us that our apprehensions about an authoritarian future shouldn't 'immobilise us in the present'? The CPI (Maoist) are not isolated from the rest of India, even if you'd like to think the adivasis are. They are part of a struggle for state power. They emerged from a wider left movement that spoke initially in terms of 'agrarian revolution', 'new democracy', etc., so many meaningless abstractions that have lost all relevance to the desperate struggles in terms of which they now seek to survive. If Arundhati ends up wielding her mesmerising prose to give political backing to those ideas, that could well

be a counterfinality, something she never intended. But her interventions flow into a public domain where they are received and used precisely in that way, to bolster the bizarre illusion that 'protracted war' can mutate into some wider transformation of India during which, presumably, millions of other people will be galvanised by, what? something she herself describes as the 'stiff unbending' rhetoric of the ideologues? Isn't that ludicrous? And isn't that why you have to try and construct a sort of rigorous exceptionalism for these parts of India? Aren't you simply saying, this is it, this is the best you can hope for in the tribal areas, given that democracy is never going to come there, not in a 'thousand years'. No one is asking the maoists in Dandakaranya to be accountable to anyone except the tribals who Arundhati sees them 'representing' in some pervasive way. They have built what looks like a formidable war machine and their form of accumulation, of survival or expansion, needs the incessant flow of young tribal recruits whose political level is so abysmal that they have no hope in hell of ever raising issues about 'the' party, the leadership, programmatic concepts, etc. etc. They are simply cannon fodder. Finally, who says 'we' are "unable to imagine forms of community other than our own very cynical, fragmented one (which we love, make no mistake, and wouldn't have any other way...)"? Who exactly is the 'we' here? The urban elite that Arundhati comes from and mixes with? That you belong to? I literally have no idea who you are talking about and lumping together in this way. I have worked with workers and unions in Bombay and they certainly had notions of community that are very different from the 'we' you posit. Those were not 'cynical' and 'fragmented', they were rooted in astonishing solidarity and self-sacrifice. It is those workers who will create a new India, it is from their struggles and experiences that a new social model will emerge which is less obsessed with power (the 'seizure' of power, the 'capture' of power, the wielding of authority and control over others, the hideous culture of violence) and capable instead of undermining capitalism through the sheer weight of numbers, through wide-ranging solidarity, through powerful and creative solutions, in short, everything that Marx called 'control over production'. ----- {{By: Satya on March 24, 2010 at 8:07 PM}}

If the Kafila moderator could ensure that, apart from not using personal insults, those writing on this page could use simple, straightforward English to convey their points? Whatever other problems there may be with Arundhati's article she manages to communicate all she has to say in clear, sparkling prose- and that too straight from the flaming fields. While obviously she is a master at such things those critiquing or discussing her can help their cause by not dropping names like 'Marx, Lenin, Russian, Kollontai, Sartre, Camus' or undefinable, quasi-religious terms like 'capitalism, socialism, communism'. In fact the more problematic parts of Arundhati's own piece are where she uses mysterious concepts like 'Party, Revolution' and stops describing what she sees and hears around her. The Indian Republic and for that matter the people of the world have suffered enough from the endless theological discourses such loaded words have spawned whereas all they want is to hear about much simpler and direct concepts like nutrition, health, drinking water, shelter, jobs, individual rights and plain human decency and who is going to do what about these needs. Again, on another note, while the tribals of central India are certainly among the most deprived people of this country one does not have to go to such exotic

locations all the time to discover misery either. Just looking out of urban windows onto the street outside is sufficient. Question again is a practical one- what is anyone doing or going to do about such misery- apart from giving long, learned lectures that is? ----- {{By: ajay on March 24, 2010 at 9:22 PM}}

This debate is fascinating, and necessary. For a long time we have been caught up in the binary opposites of all kinds within the left, where despite the concrete situation existing the left has always shied away from articulating a clear voice on at least certain issues that are fundamental. I agree with Jairus that the vision of Marx has not been bettered. However i think the point Arundhati tries to make is simple, democracy as is obtained in this country does work only for the priveleged, who are the gravy train or are latched on to it. It does not work outside of it. It will not work because it is part of the larger process of this capitalist system which has in the name of 'democracy' subsumed all. So for those for whom it does not work today have rallied around those who have worked with them. They happened to be the Maoist, they could have been anybody. For those of us in the comforts of our institutional spaces and drawing rooms the idea of democracy works. And therein lies the problem. Jairus, Arundhati is not a marxist ideologue, she is a sensitive person, a writer and a women. So she writes from heart and with passion, something that marx did when he wrote the Manifesto. Let us not train our ideological hair splitiing affect our larger sentiment! However in this globalised world the struggles too would be global and there cannot now be another Yenan, point noted. Arundhati writes from heart, academics from head, the choice is ours! ----- {{By: Sunalini on March 24, 2010 at 9:50 PM}}

Jairus, thanks for your wonderfully clear response, and staying with the issues, which has been difficult in such posts. I really mean that. First, I am actually a Marxist, as I clarified to Debabrata above. Not your kind maybe, but that should be ok with both of us I think. Second, about teleology, I already specified that I am well aware that Marxism and teleology are not co-terminus, but your mode of description is in fact teleological, and if you are willing to defend it, great. But what I see around me is not, in your words, "the worldwide creation of a working-class by capitalism that can take over from capital once the basis exists, again worldwide, for that kind of momentous transition." What I see is far more messy, fragmented and chaotic, the phenomenal rise of individual crime, especially crimes against property, ethnic and religious based movements, terrorism...in short revolution through other means, most of which have only a fragile relationship to international proletarianisation, in any Marxist revolutionary sense of the term. About the mir, I believe you are reading that history into Roy's account – the future in her account looks shaky, uncertain, not a confident reversal of the adivasis into small property holders, Venu's statement notwithstanding. There's a sense of impending doom as well as hope in her piece, but I am not sure she speaks as if she really can see the contours of the future. Why on earth would I argue that 'dispossession and shattering of communities' is unique to the adivasis? You yourself accept that it takes starker forms there, but say no Chinese walls can be drawn. Ok, would you make the same argument for parts of the North East or Kashmir? I would say all of these are outside the 'India' that we normally inhabit, that we need an exceptionalist account to capture the extent of police and state brutality there. Simply because I haven't

mentioned Kashmir is no reason to assume that its not part of my frame; but the frame is of exceptionalism, you correctly infer. Compared to the dispensability of the adivasis and the Kashmiris, large sections of the urban poor for instance seem positively privileged. As for conversion of the vast majority of the subcontinent into wage labourers by the end of colonial rule, I am wondering – wasn't 70% of this country's population still rural till very recently? A population that lived to a huge extent in family owned farms? The rural peasantry or landowner class is not wage labour in any neat way, in my humble understanding. Ok, even if I accept that you are right, what is our response for the remaining sections – those that still subsist below the wage labourer class, would those not experience an exceptionalist form of exploitation by your own linear/teleological account? You accept Braudel's statement that forests and mountains everywhere resist the march of history; I would add James Scott's thesis about why states and civilisations have found it difficult to climb hills. But you say its absurd to imagine that forests would escape the "laws of political evolution". Please spell out the laws for me, because I would again make the mistake of assuming this is teleological. I just want to place those words before you again – fragmented, chaotic, messy. I don't know what political evolution means for the regime that the adivasis live under. Mentioning Kandhamal here is so problematic I don't know how to respond – what's the point? That under the wrong political leadership, the adivasis will become murderers? Sure, but that's true of anybody right? Or are you suggesting that left to themselves, they will turn murderers, because that would be indefensible according to me, and to you, from what I know of your politics. In any case, how does this help our debate? Maybe you think I am arguing for a pure state of innocence for adivasis; let me clarify that such a condescending view would be anathema to me.

I completely agree with you that Sumit and Tanika's work is of crucial importance, but I think it can be counterposed to Roy's in a diametrically opposed way only in this particular reading of Roy, where she appears to be suggesting an India-wide revolutionary relevance for the Maoists and indeed a monopoly on revolutionary activity. Unlike those like you who see Roy's article as failing for its shaky political manifesto, I see it as having a much more limited mandate – to describe to an urban audience what the hell could be going on in the mind of the average adivasi Maoist (again, let me clarify I don't think these two are the same always, but they are the same in hundreds, even thousands of cases, which is the realm of the article) who takes up arms. Why does this have to push out critique of the Maoists from public debate is beyond me. That critique has been made and should continue to be made. If in your words, public debate is constituted in a way that allows "her interventions to be received and used...to bolster the bizarre illusion that 'protracted war' can mutate into some wider transformation of India during which, presumably, millions of other people will be galvanised by...something she herself describes as the 'stiff unbending' rhetoric of the ideologues"; then at whose door do we lay the blame? Not clear to me at all that it should be Roy. The trajectory by which our media and public space came to be dominated by celebrities is a long and sad one, but is that Roy's fault? As I said in my first response, Roy is not above critique. She seems definitely to be getting enamoured of the Maoist solution; and that can be challenged publicly. But as I said, on different terms from those here, of foisting a coherent political programme on her

writing, of assuming she has a plan for the whole country. I agree with Satya above when he says that in fact the political parts of her writing are the weakest. But the rest of it is powerful, as you yourself suggest. The best parts of her writing are the voice of the madman-poet, capturing the desperation, the apparent and ongoing tragedies of those who have chosen to kill and die, and hope but also fear of the future. I see a deep ambivalence towards revolution, or at least a tension in Roy's writing. Its nowhere apparent she has a Plan.

Also, Mr. Banaji if you seriously think I am callous enough to suggest that the adivasis should just rot under this protracted battle because that's the best they can hope for, I can't even begin to counter it. But for the sake of others who may read this, I was only saying I was wholly unsurprised at their picking up of arms, since they don't see even the 'd' of democracy where they live. Your point about Maoists being a country-wide phenomenon, and other Left organisations having worked in the adivasi areas is very well taken, but I don't think my comments on exceptionalism rule out acknowledging this. Last, about the 'we' that can imagine or not imagine as the case may be, other forms of community, I meant the readers and commentators on Kafila, and particularly Debabrata who I was arguing with at that point. I am very glad you have interacted with those who can imagine other forms of community; its exactly what I was saying is possible, but I didn't find that voice on this debate. There are several other points you have raised of course, but for now I feel the planetary gap between us too much. Until later, then, and I thank you again for your clarity.

----- {{By: debabrata banerjee on March 24, 2010 at 11:21 PM}} Manash is of course most free to conjure anything from my response to Sunalini even though I have said nothing of the kind that he thinks I am saying, implying, holding back, playing with and so on. I did not see the response as 'acritical intervention' since I know the difference between that and a 'critical response' where I have tried to be as brief as I could. In my two posts I have said that Jairus Banaji's response to Arundhati's article has the merit of demarcating/clarifying and raising the subject, namely the current offensive of state-capital-ruling elite combine in 'tribal forest' regions in central India and Maoist politics of armed struggle about which Arundhati Roy has written in the context of the concerns of citizens, politics and institutions of civil society. The political drawback which strikes as obvious' is her belief that there is no alternative to violent struggle and protracted war. I have also talked about the politics of spectacle in the early post which is the alienated political space of civil society, which all socialized, non-cynical [human] segments and organs of civil society should confront. I have referred to the debate on agrarian communes as both a valid and relevant level where the subject of tribal communities could be discussed, though that is not the only level. I have not been too mistaken about that either as subsequent responses show such as Sunalini's further response disclaiming ignorance though here I should say that it was not the universe of Marxist debates and discourse that I was talking about but one in which the predominant participants were basically non-Marxists, i.e., shades of Russian populists and other tendencies in which Marx actively participated. Later Marxist tradition actually ignored this debate – here bringing up Asiatic mode of production is irrelevant, given that during those years Marx did not use that category even once even while talking about destruction of Indian communities. Actually that is precisely my point. The discontinuity I refer to is the shift in the subject, from the

working-class of the first International to agrarian communes, as a real historical one and not out of non-linearity's which obtains in Marx's method. The discontinuous moment was made possible by the working-class that had proclaimed the Paris commune, having smashed the alienated political sphere for the social one, which the commune embodied. The specificity' that Manash refers to as the rupture' with the universal or capital in general [I assume I am right in figuring out what is said] makes no sense in the context of Mir, precisely because it did not live in isolation, was contemporaneous with capitalist production, without undergoing its frightening vicissitudes', nor falling prey to conquests. There was no rupture' while the social system of the rural commune stood intact in the face of the conflicts, antagonisms and disasters of capitalism. The question, what forced Marx to pay attention to the question of agrarian communes at a later period' has its answer in the historical specificity of the Russian commune which did not meet the fates of all other forms of communal organization. There was a positive element in the dualism of the Russian commune - where the private, individual was freed of primordial ties of kinship and blood and its social organization and communal ownership of land allowed it to transform fragmented, individualistic agriculture into collective agriculture, jointly owned meadows, co-operative labour suitable to large scale mechanized cultivation. Nothing forced' Marx to pay attention' as the question has it as much as the specificity of the Mir presented the possibility of a humane, socialized, non-barbaric alternative path before humanity where the individual already had a free basis to flourish, in which socialization could not only incorporate advanced science and technological achievements of humanity unlike capital that is in conflict with them and uses them in a subordinate, ideological way but could also be the mode for appropriating the alienated political sphere. There is no point standing on judgment over some polemical and critical exchanges, and at any rate I am not character-armoured'. The point is whether the polemic is carrying or driving any point home. The latter post by Manash makes no sense. If at all anyone is interested in scaling arguments then I am speaking at the level of the concept that has subsumed being and existence as its past moments.

By: Rohini on March 27, 2010 at 7:55 PM

A few points of clarification in this debate:

Many of the interventions above seem to want to contest a political reading of Arundhati's essay as opposed to what the last discussant calls 'an extremely sensitive ethnography of adivasi Maoist cadres in Dandakaranya'. If this were true, I for one would have no quarrel with it. The descriptive parts of her essay are certainly powerful and revealing. However, the essay has more than just description in it. In particular when she says, 'Charu Mazumdar was a visionary in much of what he wrote and said. The party he founded...has kept the dream of revolution real and present in India,' this is not just description, it is propaganda. Someone who writes like this should expect to be cross-examined about what kind of revolution exactly that dream refers to. We get one answer from Ganapathy's interview with Jan Myrdal, which took place at roughly the same time as Arundhati's walk with the comrades. (Ganapathy is General Secretary of the CPI (Maoist)). When Ganapathy says that 'at present our condition is different from that of China in mid 1930s in which CPC formed an anti-imperialist united front against Japan imperialism' you can't help breathing a sigh of relief that he's willing to acknowledge that India is not under Japanese occupation! Because in every other respect, the formulas are the same. But isn't it seriously misleading to project an image of India's

capitalist class today as a purely dependent and peripheral formation, such as the term 'comprador' suggests, when its ambitions are driving it into international markets and it sees itself having a substantial stake in a future military-industrial complex? And who are the small capitalists who are supposed to be part of Ganapathy's revolutionary class bloc? Aren't they among the worst exploiters of the poor? Ganapathy himself explains they are the traders and contractors from whom the CPI(Maoist) exacts protection money. And this, by the way, is not a vision just for the forest belt, but for the whole of India!

If we fast-forward to the present, we can see that the Chinese revolution has finally resulted in replacing imperialist domination and pre-capitalist social relations with a powerful capitalist state. But in India in 2010, when we already have a powerful capitalist state, what sense does it make to think in terms of any kind of Maoist political programme? Arundhati also implies, and states more explicitly in her Democracy Now interview, that there is no distinction between the CPI(Maoist) and the tribals. This, too is propaganda, given that there are numerous other political tendencies - including other Maoist tendencies and those who have split away from the CPI(Maoist) - while the majority of adivasis in the forest belt are unaffiliated to any political party. It is also notable that the leadership of the CPI(Maoist) does not include any adivasis. Adivasis are only the foot-soldiers, the cannon-fodder. 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die'.

A second line of argument is that even if the strategy of armed struggle is inappropriate for India as a whole, in the specific context of the forest belt it can serve as self-defence against state brutality and an effective mode of asserting adivasi control over their own habitat and resources. Again, if this were really true, I would have no objections. Yet the very opposite seems to be the case. In Lalgah, a non-violent popular mass movement kept the police and state security forces at bay for seven months, but that resistance collapsed when the CPI(Maoist) stepped in. All the significant gains, like the passing of the Forest Rights Act, have been made by popular unarmed struggles. Even the announcement by the Ministry of Environment and Forests that the MoUs between Vedanta and Posco and the state government of Orissa had been put on hold because they failed to comply with constitutional and legal requirements to obtain the consent of local adivasis was the result of mass struggles.

The assumption underlying this feeling that armed struggle may be the solution in Jangalmahal, even if it is not the way forward in the rest of India, is, according to Sunalini, that there is 'not even a passing resemblance between us and them - those in the heart of darkness', and therefore 'It's not the job - yet - of the people in Roy's article to be answerable to our ideas of democracy and revolution'. Fine. But is it not their job to be answerable to the adivasis' ideas of democracy and revolution?? The interview with an activist in Sumit and Tanika Sarkar's article, 'Notes on a Dying People,' (which, incidentally, is written with the same passion as Arundhati's essay), revealed the existence of an amazing system of grassroots democracy in Lalgah prior to the takeover by the CPI(Maoist), reminiscent of historical examples like workers' councils and soviets. The hierarchical organisation of the Maoists is a great leap backwards from these advanced forms of organisation.

This assumption of a great gulf between 'us' and 'them' should surely be discarded. Arundhati herself describes the struggle over the price of tendu leaves between the adivasis and the traders who employ them. This is a form of wage-labour in which the employers - like the employers of the women homeworkers who roll those tendu leaves into beedis - try to pass off their employees as self-employed in order to evade any responsibility for them. These workers could, like some of the women homeworkers, unionise and fight not only for higher wages but also other benefits and facilities due to them as workers. The National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers, which fought for the Forest Rights Act and continues to fight for its implementation, is affiliated to the New Trade Union Initiative, a federation of independent unions which includes urban and rural, formal and informal workers. Organising solidarity between unions is not easy in a climate where the

adivasis are only the most oppressed section of the labouring poor, and so many others are also struggling for survival from one day to the next. But it is absolutely necessary in the present context.

On the other side, the traders and contractors from whom the CPI(Maoist) extract protection-money are linked either to the state or to various companies, including predatory ones like Vedanta and Essar. The arms they buy with that money are linked to the military-industrial complex. In Lalgarh, in the words of Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, 'State terror and Maoist terror seem to be strangely interdependent, both working for the same results: the brutal end to a popular democratic struggle'.

What practical conclusions can we draw? Certainly, solidarity with the adivasis is imperative, but not in the form that Arundhati seems to be advocating. Some of us have already appealed to civil society to put pressure on the government to initiate talks with representatives of all struggling popular adivasi organisations, to treat their grievances with the utmost seriousness, and address them with immediate effect. This does not mean that the government should close the option of talking to the CPI(Maoist). It means that it should not treat this party as the sole representative of the adivasis (as Arundhati seems to do), but should also initiate immediate negotiations with other mass organisations and movements of the adivasis, whose demands are not only achievable within the framework of the Indian constitution, but actually call upon it to deliver on its promises.

By: Sunalini on March 28, 2010 at 9:19 PM

I've been reading and learning, and thought initially I wouldn't come back with more comments because the discussion has been so rich I didn't think I had much more to add. In the past three or four days I also went back to previous debates on this issue on Kafilā and elsewhere. So let me just respond to a few things, taking Rohini's very helpful critique as a point of departure. I think the thing we are struggling with, fundamentally and even viscerally, are the related questions of what is the political (as Manash has been pointing to), and the question of political subjectivity, of the Adivasis, but also of ourselves. First off, can I say here that the mud-slinging about each other being urban, bourgeois intellectuals/radicals is terribly unhelpful? As I wrote on Anirban's post on Kafilā too, by material, political-economic standards, very few of us can escape that charge. I am not arguing that our class positions are unimportant; on the contrary I am arguing that our class positions are crucial, and further that we are in fact a class – those who have access to particular technologies of knowledge production and dissemination (big media, other media, universities, libraries) and the leisure to process these and respond. I think here the distinction between the democratic and ultra-radical left becomes specially problematic – the democratic left may accuse the ultra-left of playing out their revolutionary fantasies through half-baked dreams of revolution in which somebody else (the adivasi, the landless, the dalit) always has to die; or conversely, the ultra-left may accuse the democratic left of being content to write about democracy when somebody else (the adivasi, the landless, the dalit) is dying. How does this help; as far as I can tell, if we are able to type on our computers, we are not dead or wounded by the state/big capital. This may be sounding facile, but my point is really about representation. It's inescapable; the task of representation, if we are to write/comment at all, but it's also extremely fraught. A way out is to be absolutely, relentlessly forthright about our own subject positions, and our degrees of distance or proximity to the subject we write about. This is also easier said than done, because while Gayatri Spivak's declaration of the subaltern's inability to speak may have launched a thousand journal articles and discussions, we are, truth be told, nowhere close to a resolution or even a partial solution yet.

I also believe that our modes of writing, speaking, debating (public or less public) are not always up

the task of 'outing' what is always going to be mediated representation. This is where I think Roy's article draws me in, as a reader. Not because she somehow manages to tread that very fine line of neutrality, but because as I hinted earlier, she indicates her distance from her subject quite rigorously, and repeatedly. All along, we know the view is of somebody (clearly elite – she has never hidden this) from our world who has gone into the forest, for a few days, during which she struggles to keep up literally (when she is unable to walk anymore) and politically (when she listens to their accounts) with her Maoists informants. By the end when she falters, slips off the path of her narrative and starts making more explicitly political assessments (most clearly her sudden discovery of the value of Charu Majumdar, which has dismayed many here), it is still clear to me she is an outsider. Not once do I feel she is speaking for everybody there, so the subjectivity of the actual subaltern there (the Maoist adivasi cadre) is nowhere subsumed under hers. And this is why I am saying 'explicitly political assessments' because, contrary to the emerging dichotomy between ethnographic/writerly and political, Roy's article is in fact, political. Not political in the sense of programmatic, solution oriented politics...For somebody of Roy's location, who has access to a big chunk of the public sphere including debates and learned theses on Maoism (even if she hasn't read all of it), it seems to me to be a political choice to even tell the story the way she does – first person narrative. A narrative that I think slices right into the heart of the media hysteria about the 'Maoist' menace. I've been arguing, it does nothing more, but also nothing less than that.

As for the question of whether the adivasi and Maoist are interchangeable terms, clearly not, as I have already clarified. But do they overlap in hundreds, even thousands of cases? More confusingly, is there a continuum between Adivasi and Maoist as seems to be emerging even from anti-Maoist sources like mainstream journalists and government reports that despair at the local support that Maoists enjoy? It seems to me that there is a range of positions (as Aditya's recent post of Kafila also seems to be arguing) between adivasi as 'cannon fodder' and 100% committed Maoist. There are supporters, sympathisers, pro-Maoist informants, distant observers (I agree this is a position that may become more difficult to sustain as Maoists gain strength). Even more disturbingly, we may have to admit that even reactionary outfits like the Salwa Judum have committed adivasi supporters. I just find this idea of the adivasi as having an abysmal political level deeply problematic; are we willing to extend this denial of agency to, say, the suicide bomber in Palestine? I think Roy's article for all its flaws shows us a glimpse of adivasi-Maoist agency – if that's a form of politics we disagree with, we have every right to say so, but to confidently assert that it doesn't exist – agency – I don't believe we have enough access to make such a statement. A comment on Anirban's post about the adivasis using the Maoists as much as the Maoists using the adivasis comes to mind. If the Maoists have sustained themselves for as long as they have, the adivasi has to be seen as more than cannon fodder. Would the adivasis be better off without the Maoists? Many of them, undoubtedly so. For many others, the Maoists offer a means to live and even die with a dignity not afforded by any other power at this moment. Does their dying make us uncomfortable? It should, and I am glad it does. But do we have enough access to their subjective assessment of the risk of death that the Maoist movement offers them to condemn it unequivocally? I don't believe so. Do the Maoists run a violent, extortion-racket based revolutionary movement? Yes. Does that give me an authoritative position to criticise the adivasi joining them? No.

Here I must state one more provocation – if the argument against Maoists is made on the ground that the State and Maoists seem to depend on each other for their very existence, can the same not be said about the State and human rights activists, NGOs, democratic Left and so on? I am not being oversmart here; I am saying that if the Maoists seem to feed off the violence of the State, we (non-Maoists) feed off the benign largesse of the State that is nevertheless sustained by the bureaucratic-military-industrial apparatus. And the State requires our existence to appear democratic; it occasionally treats us as allies (even if that's not what we want) and occasionally as irritants (Chidambaram's short-lived ballast against intellectuals) but its a largely symbiotic relationship.

Nothing wrong with that; not as if we can magically wish these larger dynamics away, but it would be disingenuous to forget them even for a moment. How would I negotiate this in my politics? It boils down to the degree of cynicism about the State; mine happens to be extreme. Rohini's call to appeal to civil society and put pressure on government to provide constitutional protection for the Adivasis is unimpeachable, if not for that cynicism. Can I be student-like and ask for a list of successful popular agitations against the recent, brutally determined round of capitalist accumulation? Lalgargh, ok.

Anti-Posco and Vedanta? Call me hopeless, but the MOUs are only temporarily on hold; they will be brought back in (possibly through micro-regulations rather than large, politically problematic behemoths) when our attention is diverted, and villagers have been divided through differential compensation. Plachimada? The coca-cola company refuses to even recognise the authority of the nine-member expert panel recommending compensation, and is probably going to challenge it in court. May go the way of Bhopal. The Forest Rights Act - as Rohini and others here would already know, the Act diluted the original Bill and significantly short-changed the interests of the adivasis by clubbing them with non-advansi forest dwellers, providing no redressal for adivasis charged under cases of accessing minor produce and so on. Plus, how much energy is civil society going to expend in implementation of the Act, which will be slow and tortuous? What about the issue of major forest produce, including minerals? Pen, Raigad - there was a recent report on the training of adivasi girls to be airhostesses as part of the multi-pronged social justice/compensation scheme there for poor families - government brainchild. The girls have been sitting at home because airlines said they lack the physical attributes of airhostesses, and cannot shake off their strange accents.

I am completely in agreement with those above who have argued that its absurd to see the Maoist appeal merely as a 'lack of development' issue. Its a too-much development issue in most cases; if by development you don't mean good schools, hospitals, local government and a high degree of autonomy over local decisions. Its also about dignity, and rage, and denial of history, and the narrowing of choices in every area of their lives. While parties of all kinds including the Maoists will continue to frame all this in India-wide terms (and in progressive movements, that can be a wonderful thing), I think there's a specificity and untranslatability to many subaltern experiences, including experiences of exploitation that many of us don't always have a grip on. Those of us who have some grip have every right to demand as Rohini does that the government should be speaking to many groups, not just to the Maoists. I don't believe any of us including Roy would be inclined to oppose that. I'll end by saying, but the government will talk when it wants, how it wants, and to whom it wants, especially when the stakes are so high. And I won't be surprised if the best-meaning words of civil society and democratic left organisations float freely out of context, evacuated of their force and content and redeployed to serve capital. Happy to be wrong.

By: Sunalini on March 28, 2010 at 10:42 PM

And Debabrata, since we are now irresistibly linked by the polemic between us (!), I can't help responding to your latest comment about Kant. You say Kant was as radical as one could have been in the 18th century. I say sure, if you are a famously reclusive, white-skinned university lecturer and writer in the tiny town of Konigsberg (then in Prussia); indeed, you would be the beacon of the Enlightenment. What if you were an African slave in Kant's household? I am asking because we are not talking about Kant's radicalism per se. We are asking how he helps us to understand the issues at hand. For a quick primer on Kant's delightful racism on non-Europeans (which I am afraid, read rather teleologically in the sense that he believes we natives haven't 'developed' to the level of the Europeans yet), please skim through some nuggets of his available on Nivedita Menon's reply to Zizek (on Kafila).

By: andreling on March 30, 2010 at 5:31 PM

Sorry, I may be missing the point here. It seems to me, however, that the Maoist phenomenon is not anywhere as near as simple as many make it out to be. Part of this, I think, stems from the very heavy weight of the non-violence philosophy. In a sense, for anyone to suggest that under certain circumstances organised armed resistance may be required, is to make a moral blunder in the eyes of the progressive urban intellectuals who live in 'secure' compounds and whose lives are founded on the consumption of the very minerals that lie at the heart of the conflict. It is this lack of understanding revealed by so many who write here that I find so shocking. Am I against violence? Yes of course! I don't want a world with violence in it! But that doesn't mean that I will simply condemn violence willy-nilly.

Perhaps there is a need for more unified thinking about what these struggles for justice are really about. So many of those writing here have taken binary logics to the same kind of extreme as Arundhati Roy is accused of doing: it's either 'democracy' or 'guns', etc. This IS NOT the point. This is also NOT THE POINT of her writing. Those of you so tangled up in these movements have become blind to the bigger struggle and appear more concerned with condemning, proving your rightness, etc. than actually seeking to understand. There is a need to take a step back.

If we look at civil society today, we will see that there is a great deal going on. All manner of organisations and movements and political formations have sprung up and all are clamouring for something. What are they clamouring for? Are you listening? Or can you only hear your own voice?

Under different contexts, struggle, resistance, whatever you want to call it, will take different forms. Can we acknowledge this? There are situations in which writing a letter may be appropriate. Others may demand making use of a court of law. Some may be resolved through peaceful dialogue while others may demand armed resistance. The question is: what are you doing about it besides waxing eloquent. Do you understand what is at stake? Do you understand the logics of the system and what it means? Do you understand why the Maoists have gained the stronghold (some may see it as a stranglehold) that they have? Just the other day 14 tribals were killed in a non-violent protest against a Tata Steel factory in Kalinga Nagar, Orissa, countless others have been arrested and even beaten by militarised police forces who are trying to quash the tribal resistance movement to the dispossession of their lands and lives. If this is not an invitation for the Maoists then please tell me what is.

The fact that in this situation, the Maoists could actually help the tribals strengthen their resistance, doesn't seem to be one that anyone is bothered by. What displacement means for tribal people is also something that is barely considered or discussed anywhere in any of the media. But does the fact that I or anyone for that matter can acknowledge that in some situations non-violent resistance will not work mean that there is no place for non-violent struggles in other places and on other platforms? Of course not! And Arundhati most certainly isn't saying that we should all just jump into a violent struggle. Those who read this in her words are lost. There is a huge task at hand and it is by no means an easy one: to bring justice to a corrupt and dysfunctional system (not just India, by the way, the Indian problem is actually a global one). But please, please stop being absolutist. If you were squashed in corner wouldn't you kick and bite and pull hair and scratch to break free? If you're not sure about this, why don't you try getting beaten into a corner somewhere?

By: Sunalini on March 31, 2010 at 4:01 PM

Thank you, Aditya, let me clarify – I’m not equipped to evaluate the long-term prospects of Maoism as a large-scale revolutionary movement (too many unknowns), but in general, my cynicism extends to large revolutionary projects too. That is the reason I used the words messy, chaotic and fragmented above (replying to Jairus) to describe the world; this includes the revolutionary universe as much. I also repeatedly used the words ‘desperate’ and ‘local’ in my comments to describe the adivasis involvement; so my intention could not have been to glorify their struggle in optimistic programmatic terms, in any demonstrable capacity to carry out “a takeover of state power”. In fact I have been saying that Roy’s article appears to me to be similarly tentative, even modest in the business of political prescription, except for some sentences where she seems to sway (which I have pointed to). Furthermore, I was saying that her style of writing is valuable, because it allows me to distinguish her voice from her subjects, even while providing what is an ‘embedded’, close account.

If you can come to trust that I am not seeing the localised armed struggle by the adivasis as shining political Utopia, but as brutal war that has local, sometimes untranslatable dynamics, then perhaps you wouldn’t read my statement on Pen the way you have. I offered the airhostess example as an ironic comment on one, the utter absurdity of well-meaning NGO intervention among adivasis in this area; and two, the indignity and marginality of a position (adivasi) whence both the intervention and its subsequent failure flowed ‘from above’, entirely out of the hands of the adivasis. That is why, if you see my comment above, I spoke in the next sentence about how I don’t think the adivasi issue is just a development issue, its more fundamentally about dispossession, indignity and rage.

You will rightly respond that the Maoist intervention also ‘flows from above’ and I will say absolutely. But its an intervention that, for now, expresses the anger and desperation of at least a section of the adivasis. My sense is that rather than evaluating the nation-wide success or failure of these forces, adivasis seem to be making a locally-determined choice to take up arms in order to reclaim some dignity and protect their lives and habitats in desperate circumstances; and Roy gives us a glimpse of the human beings making that choice. I was arguing that for that reason alone, it would be misplaced to read Roy’s article in terms of long-term programmatic success of either the State or the Left of all shades including the Maoists.

Since I really do believe my task is of learning, I am going to say no further on the issue.

P.S.

* From Kafil:

<http://kafila.org/2010/03/22/response-to-arundhati-roy-jairus-banaji/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF; [Walking With The Comrades](#)