

Advocacy of Global Diversity and Sustainable Development in Arundhati Roy's Writings

Anant Kumar

Research Scholar

Dept of English

Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India

Abstract

Arundhati Roy is a globally celebrated author and political activist involved in human rights and environmental causes. She is a social justice advocate and vehement critic of globalization and neo-imperialism. She has been voicing the concerns of millions of tribal people living in Bustar, villages in Orissa, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand. She has brought forth the other side of the Naxal narrative, the narrative of human rights and their violation in her book *Walking with the Comrades* and the mainstream media is silent about this on account of class or state interests.

Keywords- *Naxalism, Imperialism, Environment, Culture*

As a part of her involvement in the fight for cause of tribal people, she contributed to *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* which was published on 1 January 2009. The book explores the culture of peoples around the world, portraying their diversity and the threat to their existence. Roy, in her book, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* which is a collection of her speeches and essays spanning a period of several years, raises the issue of eviction of tribal people from their natural habitat and legalised loot of natural resources causing immense environmental damage. The book deals with the existing angst, frustration and the need for immediate action on the ordinary man's part – against the empire which actually signifies the establishment that is constituted by the matrix of the corrupt, self-serving government, the selfish and incorrigible political parties, avaricious bureaucracy and the extremely slow judiciary which often fails to deliver justice in the lifetime of the victim and more often than not lets the culprit walk away scot-free.

Roy's writings focus on the neglected lot, marginalised communities and the oppressed class without which the concept of global diversity is unthinkable. Roy, through her writings, speaks against the development at the cost of tribal lives. She speaks for the development which does not

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work on the theory of existence of 'One' through the elimination of the 'Other'. She advocates the idea of sustainable development which benefits and satisfies the majority without sidelining the interest of aboriginal people. She decries and denounces the development which lights few urban houses by darkening the entire village or a set of villages. She opposes the development which allows the inundation of a densely habitable place for the irrigation of a small tract of land. She is against any kind of development which rules out the prospect and progress of tribal people. No development is justifiable and acceptable at large if a particular community of people is deprived or kept deprived of the benefits of a particular development.

Roy in her nonfiction – *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* – castigates building of big dams since it is programmed to do a little right but a great wrong and if we go by Bassanio's words in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, "To do a great right do a little wrong" (Act IV, Sc.i) then we may be convinced of the appropriateness of building the big dams which will facilitate irrigation and power generation. But in this context the scene and situation is quite different from the scene and situation of the Shakespearean play in which the life of a decent and righteous man, Antonio (Bassanio's friend) was in jeopardy; so the little wrong could have been done to save that generous man (Antonio).

But here by building the dams, thousands of people's lives will be jeopardised which, of course by any stretch of imagination is not a little wrong. It's a huge and profoundly great wrong.

In view of Bassanio's words we may say that building of dam for irrigation and generating electricity may be a great right but carrying out such developmental project by causing displacement without rehabilitation to the thousands of Adivasi people is not a little wrong either. Asking some people to evacuate their dwelling place, their home by telling them that their place will be used for some greater cause is tantamount to asking some people to die voluntarily because their deaths are necessary for the lives of some greater number of people. Is this what we call natural law and natural justice? Which jurisprudence tells us that thousands of lives can be destroyed to develop some greater number of lives? Is this what we call democracy where even the last person standing in the queue is to be taken as important as the first? We talk of democracy where development and justice should reach out the last person in the society. We talk of democracy which rules out any kind of discrimination, deprivation and denial of life with dignity. But we have a different democracy in Madhya Pradesh as Roy points out.

The people in Madhya Pradesh were protesting against Madhya Pradesh Government's forcible eviction of more than 1000 Adivasi families to make way for the Maan Dam. Roy stands by

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NBA Narmada Bachao Aandoaln, the save the Narmada movement which was launched against building of dam. Roy writes in this regard:

The NBA believes that Big dams are obsolete. It believes there are more democratic, more economically viable and environmentally sustainable ways of generating electricity and managing water systems. It's demanding more modernity, not less. It's demanding more democracy, not less. (Roy:6)

Roy is not against the big dams as such if the construction of big dams is wholesome and has the potential to better the life of urban people without worsening the lot of the inhabitants of a countryside. It, by no stretch of imagination, is morally and socially palatable point that in order to give away the benefits of big dams to a certain minuscule number of people, the government should take away the livelihood of rather greater number of people. 'Giving away' should not be based on 'Take away' if the thousands of common people's lives and livelihood are imperiled in the process and even if the millions of lives are enriched by the process. Roy tells about the coercive method in which Adivasi people are ousted from their native land in the name of development. Roy writes:

In Madhya Pradesh, the police and administration entered Adivasi villages with bulldozers. They sealed handpumps, demolished schools buildings, and clear-felled trees in order to force people from their homes. They sealed handpumps. (Roy:7).

By referring to the Adivasis of Kerala, Roy unearths another story of devastation of thousands of lives in the name of development which goes against the concept of diversity in all forms. Roy writes:

.....when the people fired on the Adivasis which 'encroached' on the wildlife sanctuary in Mathunga, Kerala, environmentalists did not come to their defence because they were outraged that the Adivasis had dared to encroach on a wildlife sanctuary. In actual fact the 'sanctuary' was a eucalyptus plantation. Years ago, old-growth forest had been clear-felled by the government to plant eucalyptus for the Birla's Grasim Rayon Factory, set up in 1958. A huge mass of incriminating data accuses the Factory of devastating the bamboo forests in the region, polluting the Chaliyar River, emitting toxins into the air, and causing a great deal of suffering to a great number of people (Roy:110).

Here, Roy narrates the story of the business world in nexus with the government which despoils environment and natural resources in an organised and legitimized way by showing the candy-floss of development or lollipop of progress to the Adivasis, the natural owners as well as the caretakers of those trees in the dense forest. Roy tells how the corporate world with the help of

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governmental support and assistance exploits the Nature and its dependants on the pretext of development which is in fact the beginning of devastation or we may say the slow and sweet poison which kills and ruins everyone in the end. The natural habitat of the Adivasis is exploited to such an extent that the exploiters find nothing to exploit further and then starts hunting down the next site and spot to plunder in the name of raising the living standard of the people of that particular place. The process goes on as long as there is an obnoxious nexus between the corporate industrialists and the democratically elected government and the casualties of this nexus are the naïve and innocent people living primitive life who fail see through the sinister design of this nexus. Roy writes further in this regard:

In the name of employing 3000 people, it (Birlas's Grasim Rayon Factory) destroyed the livelihood of what has been estimated to be about 300,000 bamboo workers, sand miners and fisherfolk. The state government did nothing to control the pollution or the destruction of forests and rivers. There were no police firing at the owners or managers of Grasim. But then, they had not committed the crime of being poor, being Adivasi, or being on the brink of starvation. When the natural resources ran out, the factory closed down. The workers were abandoned (Roy:110-111).

Thus we find that the whole performance of development and the propaganda of progress turns out to be what we proverbially call 'A nine days wonder'. The union of profiteering capitalists and power-seeking politicians go hand-in-hand to any extent to strengthen their symbiotic relationship and weaken the common people. The sinister symbiosis between the corporations and the governments is bane of Indian democracy. The common people are decoyed by the merchants of development and are left disillusioned and deceived at the end of this drama. They, thereafter, get crushed and ground in the grinding mill of the business houses and the governments. Commenting on the inter-dependent relation between the business world and the government, Roy writes, "...corporations on the prowl for sweetheart deals need repressive government to quell the mutinies in servants' quarters. And government of course, need corporations" (Roy:92).

Roy is resentful of the corporate globalization which not only has destroyed the demographic and socio-cultural diversity of India but also vitiated and defiled the democratic system of India. Every democratic institution has been turned into a commodity by the forces of corporate globalization. Roy writes in this regard, "the project of corporate globalization has cracked the code. Free elections, a free press, and an independent judiciary mean little when the free market has reduced them to commodities available on sale to the highest bidder" (Roy :91).

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There seem to be no democracy as such in the age of corporate globalization which has done more wrongs to the common people than the rights which it always claims to have done in order to prove its legitimacy and utility.

Roy clearly hints at this infected democracy when she writes, “to control a democracy; it is becoming more and more vital to this the media. The principal media outlets in America are owned by six major companies. The six largest cable companies have 80 percent cable television subscribers. Even internet websites are being colonized by giant media corporations.” (Roy:91-92).

The similar kind of media is active in India too, which presents the issue of NBA as an argument between those who consider it to be pro-development and those who call it anti-development. And interestingly such media succeeds in proving that NBA is anti- electricity and anti-irrigation and above all anti-Gujarat. This is an over simplified deception.

As a matter of fact, NBA stands for the belief in the safety of Nature and its resources for the survival of the people at large who are the primary beneficiaries of this Nature and its resources. NBA stands for ecological balance and sustainable development. It speaks for reconcilable survival of everyone without excluding anyone. It is much more democratic and inclusive in nature than the democratic system of India. It is against the construction of big dams because it knows that over the fifty years in India alone big dams have displaced more than thirty three million people. It’s extremely uncanny to understand how the apex court of India ordered construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam to proceed even though it is aware that it violates the fundamental rights to life and livelihood of the citizens of India

Thus we find that Roy does not spare even the Supreme Court of India. She takes exception to the unquestionable supremacy and credibility of the Indian Supreme Court. She critiques:

In India, the institution that is least scrutinized, and least accountable takes every major political, cultural and executive decision today. The Indian Supreme Court is one of the most powerful courts in the world. It decides whether dams should be built or not --- Its orders affect the lives of millions of people (Roy : 107)

Roy, by dissecting the Indian democracy, questions the highest judicial body of India. She writes:

In a democracy you have checks and balances not hierarchies. And yet because of the contempt of court law, we cannot criticize the Supreme Court or call it to account. How can you have an undemocratic institution in a democratic society (Roy:107)

Roy rubbishes any such concept of development which permits, perpetrates and perpetuates the victimisation of plebian section of society. Victimisation does not only mean the killing and

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incarceration. It means the displacement of the people. It also means dispossessing the people of their land and means of livelihood which eventually results into starvation and death. Millions of lives go extinct in the tornado of development because the extinction of these lives is necessitated by neoliberal capitalism which talks aloud about generating employment and alleviating poverty by establishing factory or industry but deviously keeps mum about the hazardous impact of this factory or industry on human lives. If people protest against such development, they are dubbed as anti- social or naxalite. Roy writes in her book- *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, "Millions of people have been dispossessed by 'development' project. In the post fifty-five years Big dams alone have displaced between thirty-three and fifty-five million people in India. They have no recourse to justice," (Roy:199-200).

Roy further tells us how the protectors of the forest are projected as encroachers. Roy writes: "When it comes to the poor, and in particular Dalit and Adivasi communities, they get killed for encroaching on forest land, and killed when they are trying to protect forest land from encroachments-by dams, mines, steel plants and other 'development' project" (Roy:200)

Roy cautions and warns humanity against the imminent natural holocaust and pleads that there is enough on this earth to satisfy one's need but definitely not one's greed. There is enough on this earth to satisfy one's appetite but not one's avarice. The advocates and agents of corporate globalization will have to understand this fact. They will have to understand that if this planet has to ensure safe and sound life to its inhabitants then let there be biodiversity, socio-cultural diversity, demographic diversity, ethnic diversity, infrastructural diversity.

Let there be darkness in the forest if light is affordable at the expense of the forest itself. Let there be primitive life in the jungle if civilized life is guaranteed at the loss of life – sustaining natural greenery and various beautiful creatures whose habitat is Nature in its crude and naked form. Let there be simple natural life in the villages if sophisticated life means self-aggrandizement and brushing aside other's concern

Roy deprecates corporate globalization because it takes away what people have had since their birth and gives away very little in return to die with. It takes a lot but offers very little in return.

Roy sums up the deteriorating living conditions on this life-supporting planet in a very metaphorical language but not in uncertain terms. She writes:

But we continue sailing on our Titanic as it tilts slowly into the darkened sea. The deckhands panic. Those with cheaper tickets have begun to be washed away. But in the banquet halls, the music plays on. The only signs of trouble are slightly slanting waiters, kebabs and canapés sliding to one side of their sliver trays, the somewhat

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exaggerated sloshing of the wine in the crystal wine glasses. The rich are comforted by the knowledge that the lifeboats on the deck are reserved for club-glass passengers. The tragedy is that they are probably right (Roy:112).

In views of these profound words of Roy, we can say that forms of neo-liberal development and environment are antithetical to each other. Both of them can't co-exist. In others words, development and environmental erosion are synonymous with each other. Development means the relentless and indiscriminate cutting down of trees for the sake of erecting some condominium, flyover, dam or setting up of industrial factories which causes pollution. The working class people have started succumbing to death caused by pollution in its different forms.

The phrase "Those with cheaper tickets" refers to the poor and penurious people. "They have begun to be washed away" simply means that a great number of destitute and resourceless people have started losing their lives due to lung cancer, liver cancer and a series of health problems and majority of them are the byproducts of pollution, which as a matter of fact is the byproduct of so called 'development'. This is just the ripple effect of environmental degradation.

The sentence "The rich are comforted by the knowledge that the lifeboats on the deck are reserved for club-glass passengers" suggests that the rich and resourceful people can afford the community against the forces of extinction that they and their class have released to gain greater access to earth and one imminent danger to which one common people are subject. The have-nots have no choice except inhaling the smoke and dust of industries and factories; drinking the water supplied by the public tap. The earth is presented as the Titanic, a mammoth vessel that sank and submerged thousand of lives on it. '*Our Titanic, that is tilting slowly into the darkened sea*'. It simply means that the earth has started moving towards the ditch of darkness for lack of the warmth and care that it expected form its inhabitants.

When this Titanic (that is our earth) will sink, all will drown and die except those for whom the lifeboats on the deck are kept reserved. But their lifeboats will not take them ashore since there will be no shore left after the entire planet gets submerged. Eventually they will also die and almost in the same fashion but little later.

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