

Book Review

**Arundhati Roy. *Walking with the Comrades*,
New York: Penguin Books, 2012. 220pp. (ISBN
014312059X)**

When Arundhati Roy's collection of essays *Walking with the Comrades* was published in 2011 it met with an angry tirade from almost all sections of the political right wing in India—politicians, the media, academics. The book was published in a political climate already charged and volatile because of the launch of Operation Green Hunt, a massive government sponsored drive to clear tribal lands for mining corporations. The operation required the deployment of military and paramilitary forces and an organization called the '*salwa judum*' or 'the people's militia', who went on a mad rampage killing, burning, destroying entire tribal communities in the deep mineral rich hills and forests of India. The operation met with strong resistance from the *adivasis*, tribals living in these areas, who joined forces with the banned Communist Party of India (Maoists, commonly referred to as CPIM) party to put up a brave fight against every organization, vigilante groups, military and paramilitary forces that tried to exterminate them. The Maoists believe that the inherent structural inequalities in the current "Democratic" order can be redressed through the violent overthrow of the Indian State. So the government calls them India's "biggest internal security threat".

The Indian government has been working in tandem with the Corporate Barons, and the mass media to create a demonic image of the insurgent groups - the angry, bloodthirsty turbaned guerilla with his AK-47 - in the remote interior of the country. every reported act of aggression becomes a war against the State, against the "body politic" which can then completely justify its project of displacement, extermination and violence in the remote tribal areas of India. Roy's book intervenes in this project and problematizes it. The urgency of listening to the story can hardly be overstated. During an interview with Anderson Tepper of *The Paris Review*, Arundhati Roy states

clearly that her reasons for going to the Dantewada region were to “deepen the story, to make it more human.”¹

The first essay “Mr.Chidambaram’s War” takes the readers right into the middle of the action—into the remote interior of India where a mammoth battle is underway between the biggest Mining corporations in the country and the *adivasis*—original inhabitants of the mineral-rich hills and forests of Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal. It is their primary means of livelihood, their basic means of sustenance and the only living symbol of their collective faith. Roy offers us a detailed and unapologetic account of this unequal war—“The antagonists in the forests are disparate and unequal in almost every way. On one side is a massive paramilitary force armed with the money, the firepower, the media, and the hubris of an emerging Superpower. On the other, ordinary villagers armed with traditional weapons, backed by a superbly organized, hugely motivated Maoist guerilla fighting force with an extraordinary and violent history of armed rebellion.”²

Over the past several years, the Government has been signing MoU’s—Memorandums of Understanding with various national and multinational companies who have invested billions of rupees in establishing mining industries in these mineral rich areas. The land that rightfully belongs to the tribal people has become a commodity of exchange between the Government and the private companies and corporate barons. Although the exact terms of these “understandings” are never revealed to the public, it is not unknown that “there’s an MoU on every mountain, river and forest glade”³, if these MoU’s came into effect, vast areas of forest cover along with their diverse flora and fauna will be utterly destroyed, and tribal populations amounting to thousands will be displaced and homeless.

¹ Anderson Tepper. “Arundhati Roy on Walking with the Comrades” *The Paris Review* 1 November 2011.
<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/11/01/arundhati-roy-on-walking-with-the-comrades/> (accessed. 2 March 2012)

² Arundhati Roy. *Walking with the Comrades* New York: Penguin Books, 2012, p.39.

³ Ibid, p. 25.

To feed the hunger for land which is the driving force behind these transactions, entire ecosystems, will be ruined. In the second essay “Walking with the Comrades”, Roy cites an example of the terms of this unequal exchange, from the Lokayukta Report for Karnataka, which says that “for every tonne of iron ore mined by a private company the government gets a royalty of 27 rupees and the mining company makes rupees 5000.”⁴ Roy thus exposes the empty rhetoric of compensation. It is sad to think that the rising middle classes of our “shining” India fail to see that the “people” who actually have jobs in the private sector constitute only around 10% of the millions who have been displaced, and these jobs amount to back-breaking labor at slave wages.⁵ Roy’s compelling account of this devastation makes the first chapter of the book a fitting prelude to the next where she provides an insider’s view of the vibrant life force at work within the dark depths of the Dandakaranya forest, where the drama of the book unfolds.

The second chapter of the book “Walking with the Comrades” brings the readers face to face with what has been represented in the rhetoric of the popular media as “India’s biggest security challenge”. The author’s journey takes her into the very heart of the Dandakaranya forest where she is supposed to meet members of the dreaded Communist Party of India (Maoist). A significant part of Roy’s project is to explain to a largely ignorant and misguided readership, who the “Maoists” really are. Tracing the origins of the party back to the Naxalite Movement, Roy offers a historiography of armed rebellion that is both compelling and awe-inspiring. “Dandakaranya was full of people” she writes “who had many names and fluid identities. It was like balm to me, the idea”.⁶ According to the author, the term “Maoist” itself is fluid and nebulous like the identities of the forest people. It is casually applied to whoever resists the land-grab project. It is the most perfect excuse that the government can have, to mercilessly exterminate the poor. To resist

⁴ Quoted in Roy, p. 48.

⁵ Ibid, p. 26

⁶ Ibid, p. 89

police atrocities, land-grab and displacement, and torture of women, these people have formed multiple organizations within themselves.

As the author travels around the forest listening to their incredible stories of survival, she also navigates what is a rhizomatic but highly sophisticated and motivated super-organization. She meets members of the KAMS—Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan, the PCAPA—People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities, the PLGA—People’s Liberation Guerilla Army, the PWG—People’s War Group, and the Janatana Sarkar—a multifaceted, multidimensional government in itself having nine different departments of its own—responsible for every aspect of life in the Dandakaranya forest. These organizations are peopled almost entirely by tribals, farmers, weavers and Dalits, all/many of whom have lost their lands, their homes, their women and their basic means of livelihood. It is a vibrant and dynamic democracy by itself, and what strikes the author is that this is an entirely voluntary army.

The author provides excerpts of the stories that she collects and introduces her readers to some of the members of the Maoist guerilla organization. They are mostly young adults working under the instruction of a few chosen, experienced leaders, many of whom are women who have faced violent sexual crimes inflicted by either paramilitary or vigilante organizations or were simply resisting the entrenched patriarchy of traditional tribal communities. Roy mentions her surprise on finding that in fact almost half of the Guerilla army was women. During her journey Roy comes to know some of them quite well, and shares their inspiring stories. They have been witnesses to the most violent atrocities committed by the *Salwa Judum*, who have carried out massacres, burned down entire villages, raped women, and violently displaced thousands of people to clear vast tracts of land for the mining corporations. As Roy contends in the third chapter “Trickledown Revolution” even a child in the Dantewada forest knows that “the police works for the ‘companies’ and that Operation Green Hunt isn’t a war against Maoists. It is a war against the poor.”⁷

In an almost emotional response to Arundhati Roy’s Anuradha Ghandy Memorial lecture, writer Bernard D’Mello calls her

⁷ Ibid, p. 192.

a romantic Marxist, “From *The God of Small Things* to *Broken Republic*, Arundhati Roy is through-and-through a romantic, anti-capitalist writer.”⁸ It may not be up to us to judge her particular brand of Marxism, but certainly there is a strong humanitarianism in her writing that makes “Walking with the Comrades” much more than an anti-capitalist project. The colors and smells of the Bhumkal Celebrations, the picture of a smiling Comrade Kamla, and the vivid waiting among people who seem to be from another planet all makes this work truly unique, and truly one of its kind.

Reviewed by

Sreya Chatterjee

Department of English, West Virginia University

⁸ Bernard D’Mello. “Arundhati Roy, Anuradha Ghandy and ‘Romantic Marxism’”
MRZine 25 January 2012.
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2012/dmello250112.html> (accessed 2
March 2012).