Eco-incarceration?
‘Walking with the Comrades’

ALPA SHAH

Whereas once the primitive was our savage other, today the native is the bearer of an alternative future. In the late 1980s the Kayapo Chief Raoni, with his spectacular feathered headdress, accompanied the pop star Sting on concert tours to enlighten western audiences of the ecological disaster in the Amazon that came hand-in-hand with human rights abuses. Soon after, Chief Pykati-re, with a similar headdress of plumage could be spotted with a “thumbs up” gesture on the walls of Body Shops promoting the late Anita Roodick’s controversial “trade not aid” vision all over the world. Though the Body Shop opened only more than a decade later in Delhi’s Khan Market and Mumbai’s Linking Road, perhaps it will not be too long before Bollywood produces an Indian avatar of James Cameron’s Hollywood blockbuster Avatar.

The story has the perfect setting. Planet India is attempting to solve its growth issues by mining a new mineral, let us call it “nahimillengeium”. This rare deposit is only to be found in a lush tropical forest in the heart of India with a giant entwining of two Edenic trees in the mountain? a sarna grove. This is the spiritual home of the planet’s aboriginal inhabitants – short, spindly, dark blue humanoids called the adivasi, with sloping foreheads, flat noses and pointed ears who eat red ants and can only count up to 20. The Indian army base has established itself there, getting ready to drive the natives off their land, to ease the way for the establishment of a British mining corporation owned by a non-resident Indian. There is talk of fighting “terror” with “terror” but also of infiltrating the adivasis, co-opting some and arming them to kill their brothers. The natural world has the power to heal us all. But the adivasis who have the key to unlock its secrets and are its only protectors are about to be decimated by the greed of the multinationals that rule the world and the government who supports them.

‘Us’ and ‘Them’

The curtains could open with the last paragraph of Arundhati Roy’s recent set of essays called the Broken Republic (later relabelled Walking with the Comrades).

The first step towards reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination – an imagination that is outside of capitalism as well as Communism. An imagination which has an altogether different understanding of what constitutes happiness and fulfillment. To gain this philosophical space, it is necessary to concede some physical space for the survival of those who may look like the keepers of our past but who may really be the guides to our future.

To do this, we have to ask our rulers: Can you leave the water in the rivers, the trees in the forest? Can you leave the bauxite (hear nahimillengeium) in the mountain?

The script reproduces well-worn stereotypes about indigeneity. The radical divide between them and us, the use of anachronism to connect us. On the one hand, there is “us”, the promoters of growth, progress, science, inequality and environmental destruction. On the other, “them”, the indigenous – here adivasi – as the bearers of our past and the holders of the secrets to a better future, repositories of community, equality, spirituality and worship of nature. The tropes are predictable but clearly appealing.

There is currently a popular audience for resurrecting the indigenous, not least in the camps on Wall Street in New York and by the London Stock Exchange who are searching for alternative futures. For them communism smells of the purges in Russia and the famine deaths in China but devoid of this political vision, the resistance of indigenous people can be made palatable. Eco-incarceration – the locking of indigenous people in the root- edness to their land and harmony with nature – is a useful tool. It radically simplifies the relationship between class struggle and indigenous activism. It strips the revolution in central India of its communist inspiration and direction – the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in this case – and popularises the resistance as that of indigenous people to save Planet Earth from the greed of capitalism. Arundhati Roy’s collection of three essays, which were first published by Outlook in 2010, and then as a book with the title Broken Republic and later with a different title, Walking with the Comrades, is an instructive example of this simplification.

The merits of Roy’s pen are important. Irony is put to good use to expose some rather damning connections between the interests of large corporations, the Indian government and police brutality. For instance, the observation that when the prime minister called the Maoists India’s single biggest internal security challenge, the share prices of many mining companies skyrocketed. Or the note that the union home minister responsible for Operation Green Hunt,
the war allegedly against India’s Maoists, was previously a lawyer representing mining corporations and, till he became finance minister in 2004, a non-executive director of the mining company Vedanta seeking to excavate bauxite in central and eastern India. Or the comment that the brutal counter-insurgency operations in Chhattisgarh called the Salwa Judum – purification hunt in Gondi – where tribals were armed as special police officers to kill their neighbours was inaugurated in 2005 just after a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Indian multinational Tata was signed. That a 2009 draft report of the Ministry of Rural Development on “State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task of Land Reform” even said that Tata and Essar Steel were the first financiers of Salwa Judum. And that in October 2009, 50 tribals were hired and brought from their Bastar villages by government jeeps to the mandatory public hearing for the Tata integrated steel plant in Lohandiguda, Dantewada to justify local desire for the plant. Or the rumour that the superintendent of police of Bijapur who gave instructions that villages which refused to surrender should be burnt, and journalists who want to cover the Maoists, shot on sight, was transferred to the State Human Rights Commission as punishment.

Roy’s rage is also powerful in documenting story after story of police brutality that is eclipsed by the media frenzy for red terrorism, and arguing how the structural violence of the state is not the same as the violence of armed resistance. The bulldozing of the Gandhian ashram of Himanshu Kumar in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, where journalists, writers and activists on fact-finding missions who wanted to visit Maoist zones stayed. The ground clearing operations of the Salwa Judum to move 60,000 people out of villages in Maoist strongholds and into roadside camps in a form of “strategic hamlets” that would allow for anyone who refused to leave their homes to be labelled terrorist. The subsequent eruption of police camps and the occupation of schools and hostels as barracks in the remote villages of central and eastern India. The exponential escalation of troops and resources to wage a war against a malnourished and poorly-clad population. The stories that are fed to the media – rumours are common weapons of war – in this case of cows being hammered to death by the Maoists and passenger trains derailed. The use of the Maoist label to silence any form of dissent, the two-year incarceration of the medical doctor and human rights activist Binayak Sen on the flimsy charges of being a courier for the Maoists setting an example.

Much of this has also been documented by other writers, journalists and fact-finding missions. Roy’s significant contribution in this respect is the fluency of her prose punctuated by moving firsthand stories of those who have suffered police brutality. Picture the mother running in vain behind the police who, after having killed her son, attached his body to a pole like an animal in order to drag it back as evidence to the police station, even leaving it by the roadside for a tea and biscuit stop on the way. Or the comrade who lost two husbands in encounters. The first in a real one, the second in a “fake” encounter – arrested in the city and then killed in the forests of Warangal and presented as killed in battle. Hearing the poignant stories of those who have joined the Maoists in the forests of Dantewada ridicules the vicious images that are painted of them as “terrorist”, the hysteria of the internal security threat and the war machinery it has justified.

Identity Politics
The stories are seductive, the writing is powerful but media hysteria is too often replaced with another kind of truncation. The shortfalls of Roy’s analysis need consideration. The terrorist is humanised but at the same time usurped for Roy’s romanticism. The biggest problem is the equation of the Maoist movement as an adivasi movement and the theoretical, analytical and political implications. This is a move that involves the amalgamation of a range of people’s resistance with very different histories, shapes and forms across the country and producing them as adivasi uprisings. Moreover, this move rests on stripping away the history, ideology and leadership of a movement which is highly organised in a top-down party structure and which attempts to restructure the relationships between the different castes and classes involved. Produced instead is a spontaneous uprising of India’s last original inhabitants – a unified pristine egalitarian community – who have no course of action left but to take up arms to fight for their land in order to prevent their own annihilation.

In the collapsing of adivasi and Maoist resistance, Roy has even suggested that we can argue whether this is an adivasi or a Maoist movement: the movement is 99.9% adivasi. Roy makes her case by differentiating between an outdated leadership and the more authentic adivasi rank and file who would rather keep the bauxite in the ground. However, the Maoists are far from solely an adivasi movement – there are important sections of dalits, middle castes and higher castes that also form its rank and file and are represented at various different levels within the hierarchy. Moreover, as Roy herself knows well, the Maoists have firmly stated in several interviews that they are not against mining per se but against the current unequal terms by which the means of production is controlled and its fruits shared. The ecpopulism of presenting the Maoists as an adivasi movement relegates a class struggle, aimed at forming a united front of class alliances, where distinctions of class or caste should not matter, to a movement of identity politics.

Class Differentiation
In fact, the 84 million people who are termed adivasis are very different groups with diverse histories, often in conflict with each other. Many would not have recognised themselves as adivasis until very recently (adivasi itself being a term promoted only in some parts of India in the 1930s by Christian missionaries). Today, most are no forest dwellers protecting some age-old civilisation, but simply struggling to survive by an extraordinary mix of livelihood strategies in which farming is supplemented with non-agrarian work – usually as manual labour in the construction
and state sector (often in faraway places), forest product collection and sale, and sometimes small businesses like renting a jeep, or opening a tea stall. They are part of the masses that make up almost 90% of the labour force in India which is informal and unorganised, based on different degrees of employment and self-employment ordered by different levels of remuneration, protection and powerlessness. They are easily susceptible to exploitation through exchange on several markets: property, raw materials, money, apart from the classic one of labour for wage work. Importantly, seasonal casual labour migration in the informal sector has been prevalent in most adivasi areas for at least the last 40 years or so, and has an earlier history in colonial times as well.

Such a complex mix of livelihood strategies has equally complicated struggles of employment, self-employment and subsistence which really do not match the activism around “pure” forms of livelihoods attached to the land and forests. Moreover, class differentiation is not a new phenomenon in many adivasi-dominated areas. Many have converted to Christianity or various right-wing Hindu sects; a few have benefited from Indian government policies of affirmative action and have jobs in the state sector. And just as the Kayapo joined hands with timber companies when granted their autonomous territory within Brazil, India has seen adivasi who have signed mous allowing the entry of multinational companies to claim land.

The cultural symbols of identity politics – in particular those of worship of nature and attachment to land – have become, on the one hand, commoditised and, on the other, defied. To even raise a sympathetic critique of the political repercussions of the imagery makes one vulnerable to becoming an apologist for neo-liberal expansion and its travesties faced by poor and oppressed communities. But the notion of the forest dwelling, nature loving, land-worshipping pristine adivasi that Roy constructs is a well critiqued desire for keeping the tribal in a zoo, that has tempted state officials, missionaries and development specialists throughout the history of India – whether it be colonial administrators or today’s incarnation of the Primitive People’s Fund in Survival International. Too often the simplistic eco-symbolism is resurrected without any deeper analysis of the persistence or production of alternative values (how, why and what) – whether it be systems of labour exchange or different forms of state-society relations – which may enable us to think through the political economy of difference and the possibilities of alternative futures.

Nevertheless, as also perceived by those who have spent any time walking with the comrades (the very same tracks that had been traversed by Gautam Navlakha and Jan Myrdal a few weeks before Roy, and by the French journalist Vanessa Dougnac at least five years before and then again a year before), there is something alluring about the values that are developed through praxis in the underground struggle. These values have clearly captured Roy’s imagination “What keeps them all going, despite all they have endured?” she asks. “Their faith and hope – and love – for the Party”, she answers noting that, “I encounter it again and again, in the deepest, most personal ways”. But what is this Party? Is it merely some abstraction? Is it the embodiment of the formation of new kinds of social relations between people? Clearly the values promoted within the Party are to a certain extent different from those outside. We are told that many adivasi women have joined because of male control over them in the villages, for instance. But we may infer that the same village men are also likely to join.

Class Struggle and Indigenous Rights

The point is that social relations are being restructured within the movement not merely as a consequence of some fundamental adivasi values but through a dialectical relationship between people in the areas of mobilisation and a leadership steeped in the ideology of class struggle. Another example, people frequently change names in the party in keeping with the security needs of the underground movement but also because a conscious effort is made to eliminate people’s caste and class identities in the process of the rebirth of a comrade. They do not change names, as Roy desires, because “it is lovely not to be stuck with yourself, to become someone else for a while”. Despite the merits of Roy’s pen, sometimes we learn more about her romanticism than the complexities of life in the forests – the significant social transformations that are taking shape and the contradictions and conflicts which result.

While the expositions of the brutal collisions of neo-liberal multinational interests and the Indian state are very important, Roy’s essays also radically simplify one form of activism (based on class struggle) for the service of another imagined one (around indigeneity). This eco-incarceration leads Roy to unnecessarily suggest that most adivasis cannot count beyond 20. The relationship between class struggle and indigenous rights is in fact complicated and contentious. There are serious issues to consider which need sustained long-term reflection. What are the social transformations that are taking place in remote parts of India under the influence of the Maoists? What is the relationship between the changing ways of life of the different groups of adivasis who live in the areas of Maoist presence, with that of other groups who are also present in the region, and with the values promoted by the Maoists? What kinds of convergences but also conflicts are emerging from these relationships? How then should we analyse the dialectical relationship between indigeneity and class struggle? What forms should it take? What are the possibilities for different futures produced through this juncture?

**NOTES**

1. Avatar (2010) broke Titanic’s (1997) record $1.8 billion mark as the highest grossing income movie of all time.
2. For instance, in the discussion after a reading from her book at the Friends Meeting House in London, 12 June 2011.