

Invisible Citizens: Tribal Displacement and Social Exclusion in Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades*

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Abstract

Tribal communities in India have been living in a paradoxical position as both children of the soil and invisible citizens. They experience the two sides of life, considering the forest as their own land and dispossession from the same land too. Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* is a testimony of displacement, state violence, and social exclusion faced by tribals in the regions of central India. This paper studies how Arundhati Roy discusses the lived experiences of tribal communities as "invisible citizens" and the challenges they face like corporate-driven development, militarisation and cultural eraser. From the narrative of Arundhati Roy's firsthand experience, the study examines the intersection of displacement, gendered violence, social exclusion and the understanding between the State and private corporate companies. This paper argues that Roy exposes the other side of the State, marginalising the citizens and justifying the abduction of land in the name of development. *Walking with the Comrades* documents the silenced voices and erased histories. It becomes a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant narration of nationalism, progress and security.

Key Words: Development, State violence, Adivasi identity, Dispossession, Militarisation

Introduction

India's history is often narrated as a successful one, includes democracy and development. However, this narrative seems fake when it is narrated from the perspective of the tribal communities. In *Walking with the Comrades*, Arundhati Roy explores the life of tribals by undertaking a dangerous journey into the deep forest Dandakaranya and she documents the everyday realities of tribal's life. Her experience with them reveals the other side of State in which they lack the productions of citizenship, law and dignity.

Social exclusion is a process by which individual or group of people have been excluded from the mainstream society. According to Sen, Amartya (1998) “Social Exclusion, emphasizes the role of relational features in deprivation”. Tribes struggle to access their daily needs. Roy’s text picturises the displacement and social exclusion of tribals. It is because of the State and the MNCs. By showcasing the burned villages, abandoned schools, militarized landscapes, Roy reveals how the State governs tribal regions by force rather than consent. Tribes were forced to change their lifestyle due to the armed forces by the State and the greed of corporate companies.

Objective

1. To evaluate how *Walking with the Comrades* portrays tribal displacement and social exclusion.
2. To analyse the role of the State and the Corporate companies in marginalizing tribal communities.
3. To explore the gendered violence and resistance.
4. To understand the text as a counter-narrative to the dominant narration.

Constitutional Betrayal and the Criminalisation of Tribal Life

Arundhati Roy speaks in the voice of the tribals. According to them, after the implementation of the constitution, they have lost all their rights over the forest in which they lived for many years. From that day onwards, the government started to take control over the forests.

This legacy of rebellion has left behind a furious people who have been deliberately isolated and marginalised by the Indian government. The Indian Constitution, the moral underpinning of Indian democracy, was adopted by Parliament in 1950. It was a tragic day for tribal people. The Constitution ratified colonial policy and made the State custodian of tribal homelands. Overnight, it turned the entire tribal population into squatters on their own land. It denied them their traditional rights to forest produce; it criminalised a whole way of life. In exchange for the right to vote, it snatched away their right to livelihood and dignity. (*Walking with the Comrades* 3)

The tribals felt that they are homeless and nationless. They got right to vote but lost their right to livelihood and dignity. So, they struggled lot for their survival and some opposed the State. By doing so they were branded as Rebels.

Development, Displacement, and Corporate Invasion

The tribals fight with the State not because that they have lost their land but it opens the ways to the Corporate Companies to loot raw materials and destroy the natures. They believe that there is an understanding between the State and the corporate companies.

Over the past five years or so, the governments of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal have signed hundreds of MoUs with corporate houses, worth several billion dollars, all of them secret, for steel plants, sponge-iron factories, power plants, aluminium refineries, dams and mines. In order for the MoUs to translate into real money, tribal people must be moved. (*Walking with the Comrades* 3)

Roy documents that governments in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal signed secret Memoranda of Understanding with multinational corporate companies for mining, dams, steel plants and power projects. In order to execute these plans, the tribals should be removed from the forest.

Built in 1955 by the government of West Bengal on the river Mayurakshi, the Masanjore project was planned as a multi-purpose scheme with objectives of power generation (4 MW), irrigation, flood control and industrial use. While the project displaced 144 villages in Dumka district, spread over 19,000 acres of land, 5,000 of which was 'baihar' or lowlands used for paddy cultivation, the major benefits of the project went to West Bengal. Some people lost all their land and had to physically move to a new location, while others stayed on in their villages, only part of their land submerged. (Nithya Rao, 2005)

Nithya Rao also registered how the Masanjore dam project in West Bengal displaced 144 villages in Dumka district. In the name of development, progress and helping the people the State has displaced tribals. Roy also reveals the other side of Corporate Social Responsibility that they help to construct hospitals and universities and the other side they abolish the forest livelihood and cultures.

Anuja Ameri gives the data of the displacement of tribals in the work *Tribal Communities and Social Change*. He also registered that due to the mega development projects like dams, mining and industries, tribals are forced to send out of the forest.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs in its Draft National Policy on the Tribals sated that nearly 85.39 lakh tribals have been displaced until 1990 on account of mega developmental projects like dams, mining, industries and conservation of nature etc. Tens of thousands of tribals have been displaced from 1990 onwards without proper rehabilitation. Yet, no study has been conducted in regard to displacement and rehabilitation of tribals in the country. (Anuja Ameri 4)

Ameri expresses his concern that proper study has not been conducted on the displacement of tribals. By doing so, people will get the clear picture of the Tribals' struggles. They should be given compensation or proper rehabilitation.

Militarisation and the Politics of Fear

Roy accounts how development projects are enforced through militarisation. Schools are misused as police camps. The villages are controlled by the forest officials and the police. Based upon their moods, the officials enter into the villages of the tribals and stop them in involving the daily routine life. They used to take away the daily needs and burned the houses of the tribes. The opposed people have to face the consequence.

Every morning, forest officials, even the most junior of them, would appear in villages like a bad dream, preventing people from ploughing their fields, collecting firewood, plucking leaves, picking fruit, grazing their cattle, from *living*. They brought elephants to overrun fields and scattered babool seeds to destroy the soil as they passed by. People would be beaten, arrested, humiliated, their crops destroyed. Of course, from the forest department's point of view, these were illegal people engaged in unconstitutional activity, and the department was only implementing the Rule of Law. (Their sexual exploitation of women was just an added perk in a hardship posting.) (*Walking with the Comrades* 10)

The Salwa Judam a state-sponsored vigilant movement is the root cause for all the violence. People are afraid to live in their own villages.

In the first category, we may place the police and the forest guards. These two groups have sold themselves out to the landlords of the area and oppress the tribals brutally and mercilessly. They participate in the beating up of the tribals. They help in escape of culprits in kidnapping and rape cases. They themselves extract illegal tributes from the tribals and help the landlords to do so. (S.R.Sharma 100)

SR Sharma in his *Process of Social Change Among Tribes* shares how tribals are tortured in the hands of military, police and the officials. They used to beat tribes and help the culprits to escape. They always support the land lords who are the rich and dominant force in the area.

Gendered Violence and Women's Resistance

Among the tribals, women face many difficulties. Roy has brought out that the very cruellest torture upon women is the sexual violence. In spite of all the difficulties, they too take part in the battle against the State for their survival. Tribals have different wings in their organisation. One among them is Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS). Women, associated with this organisation are mostly targeted for sexual violence.

Comrade Sushila, a senior office-bearer of KAMS talks about the Salwa Judum's rage against KAMS women. She says one of their slogans was *Hum do bibi layenge! Layenge!* (We will have two wives! We will!). A lot of the rape and bestial sexual mutilation was directed at members of KAMS. Many young women who witnessed the savagery then joined the PLGA and now women make up 45 per cent of its cadre. (*Walking with the Comrades* 16)

From the sharing of Comrade Sushila, it is clear that Salwa Judam targets KAMS women and made the slogan that they will have two wives. Unbearable torture directed the victim tribal women into People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), the another wing of their organisation.

Comrade Rinki's village, Korma, was attacked by the Naga battalion and the Salwa Judum in 2005. At that time, Rinki was part of the village militia. So

were her friends Lukki and Sukki, who were also members of KAMS. After burning the village, the Naga battalion caught Lukki and Sukki and one other girl, gang-raped and killed them. “They raped them on the grass,” Rinki says, “but after it was over, there was no grass left.” (*Walking with the Comrades* 16)

Comrade Rinki also shares the painful life of tribal women. She is the eye witness of the rape. Her village was burned by Naga battalion and Salwa Judam. Lukki and Sukki, the members of KAMS were gang-raped and killed from the village Korma.

Dr. Anuja Ameri gives the data from the NCRB. He has registered that 627 cases of rape of the tribal women were reported in 2007.

Indigenous/tribal women faced violence including killing, torture, rape, and other inhuman and degrading treatment at the hands of the law enforcement personnel, the armed opposition groups, and village pachayats, among others. According to the NCRB, a total of 627 cases of rape of tribal/indigenous women were reported in 2007. There was a marginal decrease since 2006 in which 699 cases of rape of tribal/indigenous women were reported. Out of these 627 rape cases reported during 2007, 45.9% were reported from Madhya Pradesh. Non-tribals were involved in these rape cases. (Anuja Ameri 2-3)

Since the State is against the tribals, a few cases might have been filed. Many cases might have not been filed. This is the case of registration. Sure, it will be big question mark about the action taken regarding these issues. The tribal women continue to face the same in many tribal regions even today.

Cultural Erasure and Forced Assimilation

Apart from the physical displacement, Roy documents the cultural violence against tribal communities. Hindutva forces tried to bring tribals into Hindu fold and start to introduce caste system into the tribal communities. The tribals wanted to make egalitarian society by having equal share among themselves. Whereas the Hindutva wanted to introduce hierarchy and divisions among themselves.

In north Bastar, Baba Bihari Das had started an aggressive drive to “bring tribals back into the Hindu fold”, which involved a campaign to denigrate

tribal culture, induce self-hatred, and introduce Hinduism's great gift—caste. The first converts, the village chiefs and big landlords—people like Mahendra Karma, founder of the Salwa Judum—were conferred the status of Dwij, twice-born, Brahmins. (Of course, this was a bit of a scam, because nobody can become a Brahmin. If they could, we'd be a nation of Brahmins by now.)As part of the Hindutva drive, the names of villages were changed in land records, as a result of which most have two names now, people's names and government names. Innar village, for example, became Chinnari. On voters' lists, tribal names were changed to Hindu names. (Massa Karma became Mahendra Karma.) Those who did not come forward to join the Hindu fold were declared 'Katwas' (by which they meant untouchables) who later became the natural constituency for the Maoists. (*Walking with the Comrades* 9)

The converted tribals were given another name. They will have two names; their original name and changed Hindu name. Roy has mentioned that even some villages have two names. One example is the village Innar changed as Chinnari. The rebels those who opposed to join with them will be considered as Untouchables. By doing so, the culture and identity of the tribals have been erased.

Professor Virginius Xaxa, a renowned sociologist and author, also pointed out the same and gives the account of segregating the tribals by introducing the caste into tribal communities.

Besides differentiation along the lines of class and occupation, there have been other kinds of differentiation in tribal society. One such differentiation is the movement of tribes in the direction of caste through such processes as sanskritisation (adoption of life style of the upper caste population by tribes) and hinduisation. In fact, studies on the sanskritisation process among tribes do point to certain changes, which affect children as well. (Virginius Xaxa 2011)

He adds the point of sanskritisation along with the hunduisation. By implementing the both, the tradition and the culture of the tribals have been destroyed and they were socially

excluded from their own community. It is very painful to live separately and unaccepted by the neighbours and the relatives.

Education is the tool for liberation. In order to manipulate the people, they should be made not to think. People can be easily made so by denying the education. Roy has registered that schools were misused in the tribal regions. People were not given proper education. Teachers were threatened and sent out from the schools.

We're waiting for the children from the Bhatpal school which was closed down after the Ongnaar encounter. It's been turned into a police camp. The children have been sent home. This is also true of the schools in Nelwad, Moonjmetta, Edka, Vedomakot and Dhanora. (*Walking with the Comrades* 22)

Instead of giving education to the children in the school, they have been used as police camp. This is the case in many villages. By doing this, they can easily manipulate the people and make them to forget their own history and culture. This is also a kind of social exclusion.

Prof.V.Subramanyam in his article "Social Exclusion, Inclusion, Integration and Development of Tribes in India: Anthropological Holistic Perspective" gives the statistics of literacy rate of tribals.

The 2011 census records a gap of literacy average of 14.3 percentage points between S.T and all social groups. This gap is 12.36 percentage point and 15.29 percentage points for corresponding male and female groups. Between S.T male and S.T female the gap of literacy stands at 19.18 percentage point. It is very clear that the incidence of S.T exclusion is more than national figures in all categories. The tribals who are still experiencing with the problems of geographical isolation and segregation, literally in access to many welfare schemes of government including education and health. (Subramanyan 2020)

From the above census, it is clear that tribals are excluded from education. Due to that, they are unaware of the government schemes. They lose all their rights and the benefits from the government. It will affect not only the present generation but also their future generation too.

Health, Hunger, and Invisible Suffering

Roy's journey also shed the light upon the health issues of the tribals. Dandakaranya has seen the different cases like Chronic anaemia, tuberculosis, protein-energy malnutrition, and childhood starvation.

I ask him what it's looking like, the health of Dandakaranya. His reply makes my blood run cold. Most of the people he has seen, he says, including those in the PLGA, have a haemoglobin count that's between five and six (when the standard for Indian women is 11.) There's TB caused by more than two years of chronic anaemia. Young children are suffering from Protein Energy Malnutrition Grade II, in medical terminology called Kwashiorkor. (I looked it up later. It's a word derived from the Ga language of Coastal Ghana and means "the sickness a baby gets when the new baby comes". Basically, the old baby stops getting mother's milk, and there's not enough food to provide it nutrition.) "It's an epidemic here, like in Biafra," Comrade Doctor says, "I have worked in villages before, but I've never seen anything like this." (*Walking with the Comrades* 21)

The entire community survive without shelter, healthcare and education. Mainly women and children suffer a lot due to health issue. Children were not sent to schools because the schools were converted into police camps. Doctor sees this pathetic situation as an epidemic.

Virginius Xaxa also pointed out that the State tries to provide medicinal assistance to tribals. It also focuses the health issues of women and children.

In the sphere of health, emphasis has been laid on extending and improving health infrastructure such as PHC, CHC, etc. as well as prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Many of the schemes under health and education exclusively deal with women and children's issues. (Virginius Xaxa 2011)

Tribals suffering remains unacknowledged. This invisibility is not an accidental but structured one. Tribals are left unnoticed purposely. They become unknown citizens of the nation.

Conclusion

Removal and relocation are major issues for many indigenous peoples. *Walking with the Comrades* exposes the two opposite sides of State with regard to democracy. Through the journey with the displaced tribal community, Roy reveals that the State is partial towards its own citizens in the name of development and security. Tribal people live as invisible citizens in their own nation and they are socially excluded from the nation. This paper argues that Roy's work is not only a Journalistic account but also a counter narrative against the dominant narrative. By displaying the silenced voices and erased histories *Walking with the Comrades* challenges the readers to fight against the injustice and to rethink the meaning of citizenship, justice and democracy in contemporary India.

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