



Deadly Attacks and Vengeance as Portrayed by Arundhati Roy in “Walking with the Comrades”

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ABSTRACT

Maoists took the appearance of a band of outlaws in and around West Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa border. They used to live in the jungles and made military style guerrilla attacks on the British sponsored East India Company. They were called as the Cowboys, who more or less looked like the Robin Hood of the fables. They took money from the rich and gave it to the poor or they fought for the welfare of villagers. Their groups were filled with idealists though they had a very literate cross-section within them. These Maoists made many idealistic speeches to please the literate sections of the freedom movement. Even now in many villages in India, Maoists are still looked upon as the saviors of poor people.

Keywords: *Maoists Roy Villagers.*

INTRODUCTION

Maoism is a term that originated from the teachings of the Chinese political leader Mao Zedong. It depends upon the Marxist Communist Theory for its ideals. The net article “What is the Difference between a Naxalite, a Maoist and a Terrorist?” exposes how after 1960’s the Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong “. . . was taken over by Deng Xiaoping, who implemented Deng Xiaoping Theory and Chinese economic reforms in 1978.” Maoist Parties and groups are found all over the world. This group has gained a place in Peru, India, and Nepal. Recently, the Maoist Party won the elections of 2008 in Nepal. In India, Maoists history dates back to the freedom struggle movement.

At that time Maoists took the appearance of a band of outlaws in and around West Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa border. They used to live in the jungles and made military style guerrilla attacks on the British sponsored East India Company. They were called as the Cowboys, who more or less looked like the Robin Hood of the fables. They took money from the rich and gave it to the poor or they fought for the welfare of villagers. Their groups were filled with idealists though they had a very literate cross section within them. These Maoists made many idealistic speeches to please the literate sections of the freedom movement. Even now in many villages in India, Maoists are still looked upon as the saviors of poor people.

The noble nature of the Maoist group lost shape after the freedom struggle. They receded into jungles and the laws and regulations of the government were not beneficial to them. Maoists began to create a world for themselves and wished to develop the police force like other states. Recently, the tribal populations in the jungles have been deprived of all possible supports from the government. In the beginning of a free India away from the shackles of British control, the police and soldiers were chosen only from the rural populations.

As India matured into a country, and development began to take shape, the police force after the freedom struggle became more and more corrupt. They turned into small dictators, taking the law into their hands. This attitude of the police personnel made them utilize the law to oppress the poor tribal population. In order to stop these police attacks on tribal, the Maoists joined with other Naxal groups and started fighting for the rights of people. Their combined efforts brought great havoc to the police force. This triggered the police to become more and more violent, and so the Maoists turned authoritarian in their approach. Today, the Maoists are projected as a national problem or internal threat to India. The web article of Saraf, "Maoists in India" exposes thus:

. . . there are people who contradict this by saying that there is never smoke without fire, meaning there must have been circumstances which led them to such a activities. Just looking at the history of Maoism, the term 'Peoples war' was a strategic line developed by Mao Zedong during the phase of guerilla warfare of the Communist party of China. Maoism's political orientation emphasizes the . . . revolutionary struggle of the vast majority of people, against the exploiting classes and their state structures.

The ideal of Maoism allows them to fight against people who are oppressing the poor and the downtrodden classes. They follow the guerilla war tactics surrounding the cities from the countryside and attacking them in order to bring about a political transformation in the country. The Communist Party of India is a well-known Maoist Political Party that tries to overthrow the present government of India. The only goal of Maoists, according to Saraf's net article "Maoists in India," is to fight for, "The rights of the tribes in the forest belt around Central India. That region contains deposits of minerals which are of interest to mining companies like Tata and Essar." They raise funds for warfare by abducting well-known personalities. Their demand is based on freedom from the corrupt Indian society.

Roy tries to find the truth regarding the war of the Maoists against the government. She undertakes a journey into the Dandakaranya forests, to know more about these tribal people. The tribal people find it hard to live without arms as their community is always in danger. The place Dantewara in Chhattisgarh is the epicenter of war. Here the police roam about in plain clothes and the rebels are always found in uniforms.

In the area controlled by Maoists across the Indravati River, the villages are empty and the forest is filled with people. Young children are not in schools but are found running wild in the forests. Many concrete school buildings in the lovely forest villages are either blown up or captured by policemen. This war that has been going on for months is created by the Indian government. It is turning deadly as time goes on. The name given for this war is Operation Green Hunt.

The constitution of India passed a colonial policy thereby naming the state as the owner of tribal homelands. For the tribal people, it was a tragic day in their history. On the same night, many tribal populations were displaced out of their lands. They were denied rights to hold the forest areas. The government supplied them right to vote but has denied the right to lead a life of dignity and respect. Roy manifests the pathetic condition of these people in this way that, in order to build dams or to bring about irrigation projects and mines, the poor people were displaced, and the government has been proud in revealing that they are, the fruits of 'modern development'. Of the ten million people displaced by them, the majority are tribal people. The Home Minister P. Chidambaram has expressed his opinion that he is not in favour of allowing tribal people to exist in museums as barbaric, savage race. On the contrary, his ideas are based on the development of several mining companies than improving the livelihood of tribal people. So the depth of his anxiety over mining companies must be analysed before coming to a decision.

In the past five years, the governments of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal have signed MOUS with corporate houses. They have also provided several billion dollars in secret to the government. Roy is a shock that such a large amount has been provided for ". . . steel plants, sponge-iron factories, power plants, aluminium refineries, dams and mines" (9) as she exposes in "Walking with the Comrades." It is necessary to displace innocent tribals if they have to develop the dream project. Where displacement takes place, there comes war. The war is to retrieve back their lost homelands. In the same essay, Roy asks some questions in her mind like this:

When a country that calls itself a democracy openly declares war within its borders, what does that war look like? Does the resistance stand a chance? Should it? Who are the Maoists? Are they violent nihilists foisting an out-dated ideology on tribal people, goading them into a hopeless insurrection? What lessons have they learned from their past experience? Is armed struggle intrinsically undemocratic? (9-10)

Time has to answer all these questions of true concern. Roy is surprised to read an article posted on the internet which reveals that 30 police officers have been trained in Israel to demolish the Maoist organization. Weapons like laser range finders, thermal imaging, equipment and unnamed drones were supplied by Israel to put down the uprisings in forest areas. Roy questions whether they are really good weapons to use against those poor, tribal people. The areas in which she makes her journey from Raipur to Dantewara, are considered to be, 'Maoist-infested'. Maoists are like diseases that must be cured. The words like infested and diseased reveal the authorities' heartless attitude towards normal civilians.

In Raipur, Roy also found a board that was an advertisement for a Vedanta cancer hospital. The mining corporations of government enter into these places in the name of cancer hospitals and universities. This is a daylight robbery by the government who gets a profit of billions of dollars. The illegal way of producing money according to Roy in "Walking with the Comrades," is enough to buy, "... elections, governments. Judges, newspapers, TV channels, NGOs and aid agencies" (12). If the government is interested in building a cancer hospital in such places, the only reason will be the presence of a bauxite mountain. As per her view point, in the forest of Dandakaranya, there are three million tonnes of Bauxite deposits. This is a reason why companies like Vedanta have an eye on it.

The only wish of the Forest Department is to destroy the soil and fields of cultivation. In order to attain this, they have used the means of elephant and babool seeds by which a major destruction has been brought in the village. Many people are beaten up, humiliated and especially many women are raped in this village. The Forest Department breaks laws and engages in all illegal activities. Efforts by Adivasis have forced the People's Liberation Guerilla Army to take action against the Forest Department. Due to the massive contributions of PLGA, the people are able to regain their lost lands, dignity and respect. As retaliation to this action, the Forest Department has started burning a number of villages and more than sixty villages have been asked to move out and their infrastructure has been demolished.

On the request of the villagers to the PLGA, the remaining villages have been occupied by them and thus the PLGA has prevented the Forest Department from entering the village. Here, many forest officials have been captured and beaten up by the villagers. Finally, the Forest Department has left the place and ran away. Roy points out how three hundred thousand acres of forest land has been redistributed to the villagers by the PLGA. The past incidents are just a distant memory to the young generation. The stories of heroism have been passed on from generation to generation. They consider this now as freedom attained from the Forest Department. Even now, they can sense the blood and toil laid down for the freedom struggle by their ancestors.

The departure of the Forest Department was then followed by the arrival of the Police Department. It set about another series of bloodshed. Many fake encounters were carried out by the police. In spite of this, the villagers recaptured the land. Many problems arose to them as pointed out by Roy in "Walking with the Comrades" like, "... irrigation, agricultural productivity and the problem of an expanding population arbitrarily clearing forest land" (45). Thus one after another, the problems have been increasing without a proper solution.

In addition to this, Roy also reveals how the BJP government signed two MOUS and planned to construct the Steel Plants. Secret discussions were held behind the backs of the tribal people. In that same month, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pictured the Maoists as a serious threat to India. This proves the cruelty meted out to tribals by the Indian government. After that, the BJP Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh issued a declaration which read how the villagers who did not move into camps would be considered as Maoists. It means that the tribals must sacrifice their lands to the government and move into some protection provided by them. And if the villages were not surrendered by the tribals to the government of India, it would be completely burnt to ashes. He also gave instructions to shoot the journalists who take efforts to record the real happenings of the village. The first village to be destroyed on 18 June 2005 was Ambeli. Roy, in "Walking with the Comrades," pictures how "Between June and December 2005, it burned, killed, raped and looted its way through hundreds of villages of south Dantewara" (53). Many people lost their lives in this brutal attack. Nearly sixty thousand people heeded the words of government and moved into camps. This happened solely out of terror. The government also gave an offer to the villagers that the people who agreed to serve as special police officers would be given a salary of fifteen hundred rupees. Young people like Nilesh's brother accepted this offer and sold themselves to the government. They have been the first victims of this horrible war.

The first attack took place on 26 January 2006 between the PLGA and Gangalaur police camp. In this attack, seven people lost their lives. The second attack on 17 July 2006 took the lives of twenty people and 150 got injured. The

thrilling victory of the PLGA against the police officials came on 15 March 2007. This attack actually took place in Rani Bodilikanya Ashram, a girls' hostel, where the girls were held as hostages by 80 Chhattisgarh police. The PLGA annexed the place and attacked the police officials. The cruel attack resulted in the death of nearly 55 police men and the girls were rescued from the building.

The Superintendent of Police of Dantewara gave a power point presentation to Roy with, "horrifying photographs of the burned, disemboweled bodies of the police men amidst the ruins of the blown up school building." Roy laments in "Walking with the Comrades" as follows: "They were so macabre, it was impossible not to look away. He looked pleased with my reaction" (55-56). Following the attack on Rani Bodilikanya, there was a great uproar in the country.

The policemen and soldiers, who have received bravery medals, cash awards and promotions are those who have indulged in killing the innocent people. The government, according to Roy in the article "Walking with the Comrades" mentions them as, 'Brave hearts'. Even the Supreme Court is not able to render justice for the people. A simple example is the death sentence given to Mohammad Afzal without evidence. In the same article, Roy presents Maoists as, ". . . a sea of people, the wildest, beautiful people, dressed in the wildest, beautiful ways. . . . They have feathered headgear and painted tattoos on their faces. Many have eye make-up and white, powdered faces. There's a lot of militia, girls in saris of breathtaking colors with rifles slung carelessly over their shoulders. . . ." (88).

Deep into the forest, the Maoists presented a tribal dance for Roy which revealed their feelings and thoughts. The accompanying song was deeply moving because of the scar left behind by the war. It seems to explain how their happiness has been snatched off by the government. As a reply to this, one of the villagers in the group sang back giving a kind of hope to the people. He consoled them by saying, "My beautiful daughter, don't cry today. Everyone who is born must die. These trees around us will fall, flowers will bloom and fade, one day this world will grow old but who are we dying for? One day our looters will learn, one day truth will prevail, but our people will never forget you, not for thousands of years" (92) as Roy distinctly manifests in "Walking with the Comrades."

Roy herself finds out how even a short span of happiness is taken very seriously by Maoists in Dantewara. Usually, the people feast and dance under the very eyes of the police. They never think that death and destruction were waiting for them. They spent their time happily right in the midst of the Operation Green Hunt. Roy presents the story of a young woman who lost her husband in a fake encounter the next day. The man was arrested in Nasik and sent to Warangal to be killed. The woman's feelings were painful in the words of Roy in "Walking with the Comrades" as follows: "They must have tortured him badly" (100). The torture finally led to his death in a fake encounter. Such happenings are common in this long term war.

The forest was full of military people. They have learnt the meaning of words like search, advance, retreat, firing, and action. They need a place to protect them during the harvest of crops. Even if they need to go to a market, it was a tough task. The market had been filled with mukhbirs or informers, who get a regular payment from the police of about 1500 per month. The place was actually named as Mukhbir Mohallah or informers' colony. Here, there were nearly four thousand Mukhbirs.

Men avoid going to the market place and women were the ones forced to buy things from the market. The women who buy a little extra would be accused of supporting the Naxals. People were not allowed to purchase medicines even for their normal use. Ration stores and public distribution systems have been located near the police station. This prevented most of the people from buying necessary items like sugar, rice, and kerosene.

Roy spent the night time along with the Maoists on the outskirts of the forest area. They listened to the BBC channel on the radio. The news broadcast was about the Maoist attacks on motor cycles. About 60 Maoists were responsible for the attack, which left 14 policemen dead. In the camp, Roy listened to the murmur of happiness at this news. Then the interview with Maoists leader Kishanji was heard. To a question about, "When will you stop this violence and come for talks?" in the words of Roy in "Walking with the Comrades" (120), he replied that it would take place only if they call off this Operation Green Hunt. Maoists were also blamed for using land mines to destroy others. Back in the camp, Roy presented how she got a clarification from a member of the group that, "They always say landmines. We don't use landmines. We use IEDs" (121) as Roy indicates in the same essay.

The next morning Roy made a request that she wants to view an ambush video to know more about their real time attacks. They played one for her and Roy narrates in “Walking with the Comrades,” how it begins, “. . . with shots of Dandakaranya, rivers, waterfalls, the close up of a bare branch of a tree, a brain fever bird calling. Then suddenly a comrade is wiring up an IED, concealing it with dry leaves. A cavalcade of motorcycles is blown up. There are mutilated bodies and burning bikes. . . . Three policemen, looking shell shocked have been tied up” (122).

As she manifests in “Walking with the Comrades,” Roy’s inner mind was confused with the questions like, “Who’s filming it? Who’s directing operation? Who’s reassuring the captured cops that they will be released if they surrender?” (122) nearby one of the group members assured her that the cops have been released later. Then, Roy got a picture from one of the Maoists about a gruesome incident of the beheading of a policeman by name Francis Induvar. This was an example of how discipline attacks can turn into criminalized violence or ugly wars.

Roy’s travel to Dandakaranya forests gave her a refreshing feeling to take up the subject of Maoists and present a lot of facts about them to the people outside. Roy seemed to conclude that the ideals of humanism which the country boasts of stands defeated and destroyed. Without proper steps, this nightmare cannot be stopped. Children must be taught about peace and harmony from their tender age. When they are small, children tend to learn all the time. Their learning must include peaceful thoughts and love for neighbouring countries. If there is proper education like this, the child will not tend to think about war. This may help to cherish some humanistic values in their little hearts.

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