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Adivasi communities and the quest for survival through the lens of Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* – A review

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's Walking with the Comrades is both literary reportage and political argument. It looks at the conflict in the forests of central India through the lives of Adivasi communities and Maoist fighters. Roy moves between travel writing, interviews, history and polemic, and she questions the way words like national security and development are used to justify state action in mineral-rich land. This review looks at how the book talks about dispossession, indigeneity, state power, corporate mining, gender and political violence. My main point is this: Roy's biggest strength is that she makes visible the human costs that official stories of progress usually hide. At the same time, her method has limits. She focuses heavily on insurgent voices, she does not always explore differences inside Adivasi communities, and she gives little space to Adivasi people who hold other political positions. The book is still valuable. Not as a neutral or complete history of the Maoist movement, but as a situated intervention. It forces us to think again about democracy, resource extraction and the rights of communities living at the edges of the Indian state.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, Adivasi communities, Maoism, resource extraction, state violence, development, literary reportage.

Introduction

When I first picked up Arundhati Roy's Walking with the Comrades (2011), I thought I was going to read a report about a distant forest conflict. Very quickly I realised it was not distant at all. Roy takes us into Dandakaranya, in central India, where Adivasi communities, Maoist guerrillas, security forces and mining companies are all caught in the same tangled story. The book grew out of her journey into the forest in 2010, and out of the people she met there.

What stayed with me is that Roy does not treat this region as just a security problem on a map. She asks us to see it as a lived place, shaped by land alienation, uneven development, resource extraction and a state that is present in some ways and absent in others. Her question is one I kept coming back to while reading: development sounds like a neutral, good word, but who gets to define progress? Who benefits, and who is left to bear the cost?

I am reading this book as literary reportage, not as a conventional academic history. Roy mixes what she saw, what people told her, description, political analysis and her own reflection. Her voice is strong, sometimes openly argumentative. That is what makes the book urgent and readable, but it also made me careful as a reader. I had to keep asking myself: is this what she witnessed, is this what someone told her, or is this her own interpretation?

In this review I try to follow that same care. I look at the political context, the way Roy tells the story, and the main themes she raises, and then I weigh what she does well against where she falls short. My own view is that Roy succeeds in showing the moral contradictions of a development model that treats Adivasi homelands as resource frontiers. At the same time, because she is so committed to foregrounding insurgent resistance, some other voices get less space.

The Author and the Context of the Book

Most people know Roy for her novel The God of Small Things (1997), but her nonfiction has always dealt with power, inequality, nationalism and the fallout of large development projects. Walking with the Comrades belongs to that body of work. The Indian edition came out with Hamish Hamilton in 2011. The essay had first appeared in Outlook in March 2010. The publisher presents it as a report from the forests of central India, a region lived in by Indigenous communities and wanted for its minerals (Penguin Random House India, n.d.; Roy, 2011). The title itself tells us two things: it is a physical journey, and it is also an ethical choice. Roy walks alongside people whom mainstream public debate usually shows only as security threats.

The setting cannot be separated from the history of Adivasi marginalization. Across central and eastern India, forest communities have fought over customary land, forest access, displacement, political representation and who gets the wealth from natural resources. There is no single cause here, and there is no single Adivasi experience either. Sundar (1997) shows that in Bastar, state formation and local authority have long been shaped by layered relations between rulers, administrators and tribal communities. Corbridge and Harriss (2000) make a similar point: the Indian state's developmental ambitions have been felt very unevenly, and the benefits of modernization have not been shared equally. Roy enters this contested ground by linking the present conflict to those longer histories of governance and economic change.

The Maoist movement also has a history that goes back well before Roy's visit. It comes out of revolutionary communist politics and grew in places where state presence, local institutions and access to justice were already deeply contested. Shah (2010) warns against

treating the Maoist conflict as a simple fight between the state and an outside enemy. She shows how insurgency is woven into everyday social relations and local economies. That perspective helps us place Roy's account, and it reminds us that the forest is not one politically uniform space. Adivasi people may oppose displacement and state violence without necessarily agreeing with Maoist ideology or Maoist strategy.

Narrative Form and the Politics of Witnessing

One of the most striking things about the book is its hybrid form. It moves between travel writing, reportage, political essay and personal testimony. The journey into the forest gives the narrative a clear physical shape: we follow Roy away from familiar urban institutions and into a place usually described in the language of danger. That movement also changes the scale of the argument. Big abstractions – national security, economic growth, sovereignty, revolution – keep coming back to everyday realities: food, shelter, illness, fear, work, family life. That back-and-forth between the large and the intimate is central to why the book persuades.

Roy's first-person presence matters. She does not pretend to be an invisible observer. She is open about the risks, uncertainties and limits of her position as a visiting writer. Her meetings with Maoist cadres and Adivasi villagers push the reader to ask how knowledge about conflict gets made. Official statements, media reports and security briefings are not neutral windows onto what happened. They are accounts shaped by institutional interests and by the categories through which the state makes conflict legible. Roy's counter-narrative gives space to people whose accounts are usually pushed aside in national debate.

But witnessing is not the same as comprehensive representation. Roy's access to the forest was arranged and mediated by the people who took her there, and the narrative is necessarily selective. Her political sympathies are visible, not hidden. That openness can be a strength: we can see the standpoint she is writing from. At the same time, we should not treat the book as a survey of all Adivasi opinion, a complete account of Maoist organisation, or a substitute for independent historical and ethnographic research. Its value lies in the situated encounter it records, and in the questions that encounter raises.

Adivasi Land, Dispossession and the Meaning of Development

The strongest thread in the book is its treatment of land and dispossession. Roy describes a landscape where forests are not empty spaces waiting for investment. They are lived environments, sources of livelihood, storehouses of memory, and the basis of social and cultural life. When state and corporate plans treat such territories mainly as mineral-bearing assets, they shrink complex relationships down to ownership, extraction and revenue. The conflict, then, is about more than where a mine goes or where a road is built. It is about competing ideas of what land is, and what kind of life it should sustain.

Roy's critique is aimed at the dominant promise that industrial investment will automatically bring broad social benefit. The language of development often presents mining, roads and large projects as proof of national progress. But costs and benefits are rarely shared equally.

Communities may face displacement, loss of forest access, environmental damage and the weakening of local institutions, while profits and decision-making power gather elsewhere. Padel and Das (2010) document the social and ecological fallout of bauxite extraction in eastern India, showing how mineral development can create deep conflicts over land, livelihood and cultural survival. Their work backs up Roy's insistence that extraction has to be judged by what it does to the people who live in resource-rich regions, not only by output or investment figures.

The book works particularly well when it exposes the gap between the formal promise of citizenship and the practical experience of marginalization.

Adivasi communities are citizens of India, yet their relationship with state institutions may be marked by coercion, neglect, or being shut out of decisions about their own homelands. The question is not whether development should happen in any form, but who sets its goals, who gives consent, what safeguards exist, and how benefits are shared. Roy pushes us to treat these as democratic questions, not as obstacles to economic growth.There is a risk, though, that the book's sharp contrast between corporate extraction and forest-based life simplifies the range of aspirations inside Adivasi communities. People may want education, healthcare, communications and economic opportunities while also defending customary land and collective rights. Those desires are not necessarily contradictory. A fuller exploration of internal debates about development would have deepened the analysis. Even so, Roy's central corrective still matters: development cannot be judged only by the wealth it creates if the people most affected are denied agency and carry a disproportionate share of the harm.

The State, Security and Democratic Legitimacy

Roy pushes back against framing the conflict as a straightforward campaign to restore law and order. She argues that the vocabulary of internal security can hide the political and economic interests at work in the region. The state's claim to act in the name of national unity sits alongside the experiences of people who meet state power through policing, surveillance, displacement and militarization. That leaves a fundamental question: can democratic legitimacy hold when communities experience the state mainly as an armed authority, rather than as a provider of rights and accountable institutions?

This critique should not be mistaken for a denial that Maoist violence exists, or that civilians can suffer at the hands of insurgent groups. A balanced reading has to recognize that armed movements also exercise power, and their actions also need scrutiny. The state carries a distinct obligation, however, because it claims constitutional authority and is bound by law, due process and fundamental rights. The use of force by public institutions therefore has to meet especially demanding standards of necessity, proportionality and accountability. Roy is at her strongest when she insists that security policy cannot be judged without looking at its impact on civilian life and the political conditions that keep conflict going.

Sundar (2016) argues that counterinsurgency in central India has to be understood through its effects on democratic institutions, local governance and the everyday lives of citizens. Her analysis is a useful counterpoint to Roy: it reinforces the need to examine state violence and

institutional failure, while giving a broader scholarly framework for judging the conflict. Roy's prose, by contrast, works through vivid scenes and moral urgency. Taken together, these approaches show why the conflict cannot be understood through security statistics or official declarations alone.

Resistance, Maoism and Political Ambivalence

Roy's encounters with Maoist cadres complicate the familiar image of the guerrilla as a faceless figure defined only by a weapon. She shows people with relationships, routines, humor, memories and political convictions. That humanization is a real achievement, because it interrupts a public discourse in which insurgents are often reduced to an abstract threat. It does not, however, require the reader to endorse Maoist ideology or armed struggle. The book is better read as an attempt to make the social and political conditions of insurgency visible.

The narrative also invites reflection on the limits of resistance. Armed struggle may emerge where legal and political avenues feel closed, but it can also deepen insecurity and expose civilians to more violence. A movement that claims to speak for marginalized communities must itself be open to questions about representation, consent, internal hierarchy and dissent. Roy's account gives us glimpses of the social world of the movement, but it does not fully answer those questions. Nor should we expect it to: this is a report and a political essay, not a comprehensive institutional study of Maoism.

Shah's (2010) ethnographic account is valuable here because it looks at the everyday entanglements through which Maoist politics takes shape. It helps prevent a romantic reading of insurgency as a simple expression of community resistance. Roy's sympathy for the people she meets gives the book its moral intensity, but readers need to keep some analytical distance between understanding why people resist and accepting every method used in the name of resistance. That distinction is essential for a democratic evaluation of both state and non-state power.

Gender, Community and Everyday Life

The book's attention to women and ordinary social relations widens its political frame. Conflict is not experienced only by armed men or political leaders. It is lived through care work, family relations, food gathering, agricultural labour, displacement and the management of fear. The presence of women inside the movement and inside forest communities unsettles conventional assumptions about the public and private sides of political struggle. It also raises questions about how gendered labour sustains communities under militarization and economic pressure. Even so, gender is not developed as systematically as land, state power and corporate extraction. The reader gets moments that reveal women's participation and vulnerability, but a fuller analysis of gendered authority, domestic labour, sexual violence and women's independent political agency would have strengthened the book. This is a limitation of emphasis, not a reason to dismiss what it does. The narrative opens up space to ask how the costs of conflict are distributed differently across gender, age and social position.

Literary Style and Rhetorical Strength

Roy's literary background shows in the precision of her descriptions, the rhythm of her sentences, and her ability to turn a landscape into an argument. The forest is not just a backdrop; it becomes a contested political space. Her use of irony exposes the gap between official language and lived experience. The juxtaposition of bureaucratic phrases with intimate scenes works especially well, because it shows how administrative abstractions can hide human consequences. The book's readability is an important strength: it makes difficult political questions available to readers beyond specialist academic circles.The same rhetorical force can also be a limitation. Roy often writes in a polemical register, and her argument sometimes moves quickly from observation to conclusion. Readers who disagree with her political position may feel that opposing interpretations get less sustained attention. Some claims would benefit from fuller evidentiary development, especially where the book links security operations, corporate interests and state policy. That does not invalidate the testimony or the critique; it means the book should be read alongside historical, legal, ethnographic and environmental research. As advocacy-oriented reportage, its force lies in directing attention and challenging complacency, not in offering a detached adjudication of every disputed claim.

Critical Assessment and Contemporary Relevance

The book's main achievement is to change the terms of the conversation. Instead of asking only how the state can defeat an insurgency, Roy asks what political and economic arrangements make the conflict intelligible in the first place. She links security to land, and development to democratic consent. That reframing matters because it resists separating political violence from the material conditions in which it happens. It also pushes readers to ask whether economic growth can be called inclusive when the people living on resource-rich land have little say over its future. A second achievement is ethical. Roy asks readers to recognize people who are usually met through categories − tribal, rebel, extremist, beneficiary, displaced person − as individuals with histories and political agency. The book's human scale counters the tendency to talk about conflict only through state strategy or national economic indicators. It also shows why independent reporting matters in places where access is difficult and public narratives are polarized.

Its limitations should stay in view. The narrative gives considerable space to insurgent perspectives and less to Adivasi people who may reject both state coercion and Maoist authority. It does not provide a systematic account of the internal organization of the movement, nor does it offer a detailed policy programmed for resolving the conflict. The polemical style can sometimes blur distinctions between state agencies, corporations, local political actors and communities. These gaps matter because the politics of the region are plural and changing. A reader should therefore treat Roy's account as a forceful intervention from a particular vantage point, not as the final word on Bastar or on Adivasi politics.

The work remains relevant to debates about extractive development, environmental justice and democratic participation. Gadgil and Guha (1995) show that environmental conflicts in

India are also conflicts over access, control and the distribution of ecological costs. Their framework helps illuminate Roy's concern that resource policy often privileges commercial and urban interests over the needs of local communities. Likewise, Corbridge and Harriss (2000) remind us that the Indian state's developmental project has produced uneven outcomes and contested forms of citizenship. These wider studies place Roy's reportage within a longer discussion about whose knowledge counts, whose claims are recognized, and how the costs of modernization are allocated.

In the end, "Walking with the Comrades" is most persuasive when it refuses easy moral comfort. It does not let readers treat the forest conflict as distant from the rest of India. The minerals taken from marginalized regions, the policies made in distant capitals, and the goods consumed in urban centers are connected within wider economic systems. Roy's argument asks readers to acknowledge that connection and to question the narratives that make it look natural or inevitable. The book's continuing importance lies in its insistence that democracy must be measured not only by elections and formal institutions, but also by the ability of vulnerable communities to shape decisions that determine their lives.

Conclusion

For me, "Walking with the Comrades" is not an easy book to put down and forget. It is impassioned, uncomfortable and challenging. Through her journey into Dandakaranya, Roy makes visible lives and political claims that the language of internal security usually hides. What struck me most is her critique of extractive development. She connects mineral wealth not just to growth figures, but to displacement, environmental change and people being shut out of decisions about their own land. Her style – personal, descriptive, polemical – is what gives the book its urgency. It is also what limits it. Because she writes so strongly from one position, the range of perspectives narrows, and some complex claims are left without full exploration. I felt that while reading, and that is why I think the book should be read critically, alongside ethnographic, historical and environmental scholarship.Its importance for me does not depend on agreeing with every conclusion Roy reaches. It lies in the questions she forces into the open: who owns the land, who defines progress, whose security counts, and what does democracy actually require of a state that acts in the name of its citizens? Those questions stayed with me after I finished the book, and I think that is why, for readers concerned with contemporary India, it remains such a significant intervention into the ethics and politics of development.

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