

<http://www.hindu.com/2004/04/25/stories/2004042500041600.htm>

How deep shall we dig?

By Arundhati Roy

An essay on a country that is caught in the cross-currents of neo-liberalism and Hindu nationalism.



Arundhati Roy speaks out against POTA at a seminar in New Delhi on September 25, 2003.

RECENTLY, A young Kashmiri friend was talking to me about life in Kashmir. Of the morass of political venality and opportunism, the callous brutality of the security forces, of the osmotic, inchoate edges of a society saturated in violence, where militants, police, intelligence officers, government servants, businessmen and even journalists encounter each other, and gradually, over time, *become* each other. He spoke of having to live with the endless killing, the mounting `disappearances', the whispering, the fear, the unresolved rumours, the insane disconnection between what is actually happening, what Kashmiris know is happening and what the rest of us are told is happening in Kashmir. He said, "Kashmir used to be a business. Now it's a mental asylum."

The more I think about that remark, the more apposite a description it seems for all of India. Admittedly, Kashmir and the North East are separate wings that house the more perilous wards in the asylum. But in the heartland too, the schism between knowledge and information, between what we know and what we're told, between what is unknown and what is asserted, between what is concealed and what is revealed, between fact and conjecture, between the `real' world and the virtual world, has become a place of endless speculation and potential insanity. It's a poisonous brew which is stirred and simmered and put to the most ugly, destructive, political purpose.

Each time there is a so-called 'terrorist strike', the Government rushes in, eager to assign culpability with little or no investigation. The burning of the Sabarmati Express in Godhra, the December 13th attack on the Parliament building, or the massacre of Sikhs by so called 'terrorists' in Chittisinghpura are only a few, high profile examples. In each of these cases, the evidence that eventually surfaced raised very disturbing questions and so was immediately put into cold storage. Take the case of Godhra: as soon as it happened the Home Minister announced it was an ISI plot. The VHP says it was the work of a Muslim mob throwing petrol bombs. Serious questions remain unanswered. There is endless conjecture. Everybody believes what they want to believe, but the incident is used to cynically and systematically whip up communal frenzy.

The U.S. Government used the lies and disinformation generated around the September 11th attacks to invade not just one country, but two — and heaven knows what else is in store.

The Indian Government uses the same strategy not with other countries, but against its own people.

Over the last decade, the number of people who have been killed by the police and security forces runs into the tens of thousands. Recently several Bombay policemen spoke openly to the press about how many 'gangsters' they had eliminated on 'orders'. Andhra Pradesh chalks up an average of about 200 'extremists' in 'encounter' deaths a year. In Kashmir in a situation that almost amounts to war, an estimated 80,000 people have been killed since 1989. Thousands have simply 'disappeared'. According to the records of the Association of Parents of Disappeared People (APDP) in Kashmir more than 3,000 people have been killed in 2003, of whom 463 were soldiers. Since the Mufti Mohammed Sayeed Government came to power in October 2002 on the promise of bringing a 'healing touch', the APDP says there have been 54 custodial deaths. But in this age of hyper-nationalism, as long as the people who are killed are labelled gangsters, terrorists, insurgents or extremists, their killers can strut around as crusaders in the national interest, and are answerable to no one.

The Indian state's proclivity to harass and terrorise people has been institutionalised by the enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). It has been promulgated in 10 States. A cursory reading of POTA will tell you that it is draconian and ubiquitous. It's a versatile, hold-all law that could apply to anyone — from an Al-Qaeda operative caught with a cache of explosives to an Adivasi playing his flute under a neem tree, to you or me. The genius of POTA is that it can be anything the Government wants it to be. We live on the sufferance of those who govern us. In Tamil Nadu it has been used to stifle criticism of the State Government. In Jharkhand 3,200 people, mostly poor Adivasis accused of being Maoists, have been named in FIRs under POTA. In eastern Uttar Pradesh the Act is used to clamp down on those who dare to protest about the alienation of their land and livelihood rights. In Gujarat and Mumbai it is used almost exclusively against Muslims. In Gujarat after the 2002 state-assisted pogrom in which an estimated 2000 Muslims were killed and 150,000 driven from their homes, 287 people have been accused under POTA. Of these, 286 are *Muslim* and one is a Sikh! POTA allows confessions extracted in police custody to be admitted as judicial evidence. In effect, under the POTA regime, police torture tends to replace police investigation. It's quicker, cheaper and ensures results. Talk of cutting back on public spending.

Last month I was a member of a peoples' tribunal on POTA. Over a period of two days we listened to harrowing testimonies of what goes on in our wonderful democracy. Let me assure you that in our police stations it's everything: from people being forced to drink urine, to being stripped, humiliated, given electric shocks, burned with cigarette butts, having iron rods put up their anuses to being beaten and kicked to death.

POTA courts are not open to public scrutiny. POTA inverts the accepted dictum of criminal law — that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Under POTA you cannot get bail unless you can prove you are innocent — of a crime that you have not been formally charged with. Technically, we are a nation waiting to be accused. It would be naïve to imagine that POTA is being `misused'. On the contrary. It is being used for precisely the reasons it was enacted. Of course if the recommendations of the Malimath Committee are implemented, POTA will soon become redundant. The Malimath Committee recommends that in certain respects normal criminal law be brought in line with the provisions of POTA. There'll be no more criminals then. Only terrorists. It's kind of neat.

Today in Jammu and Kashmir and many North Eastern States the Armed Forces Special Powers Act allows not just officers but even Junior Commissioned Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of the army to use force on (and even kill) any person on suspicion of disturbing public order or carrying a weapon. On suspicion of! Nobody who lives in India can harbour any illusions about what that leads to. The documentation of instances of torture, disappearances, custodial deaths, rape and gang-rape (by security forces) is enough to make your blood run cold. The fact that despite all this India retains its reputation as a legitimate democracy in the international community and amongst its own middle class is a triumph.

The Armed Forces Special Powers Act is a harsher version of the Ordinance that Lord Linlithgow passed in 1942 to handle the Quit India Movement. In 1958 it was clamped on parts of Manipur which were declared `disturbed areas'. In 1965 the whole of Mizoram, then still part of Assam, was declared `disturbed'. In 1972 the Act was extended to Tripura. By 1980 the whole of Manipur had been declared `disturbed'. What more evidence does anybody need to realise that repressive measures are counter-productive and only exacerbate the problem?

Juxtaposed against this unseemly eagerness to repress and eliminate people, is the Indian state's barely hidden reluctance to investigate and bring to trial, cases in which there is plenty of evidence: the massacre of 3000 Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, the massacre of Muslims in Bombay in 1993 and in Gujarat in 2002 (not one conviction to date!); the murder a few years ago of Chandrashekhar, former president of the JNU students union; the murder 12 years ago of Shankar Guha Nyogi of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha are just a few examples. Eyewitness accounts and masses of incriminating evidence are not enough when all of the state machinery is stacked against you.

Meanwhile, economists cheering from the pages of corporate newspapers inform us that the GDP growth rate is phenomenal, unprecedented. Shops are overflowing with consumer goods. Government storehouses are overflowing with foodgrain. Outside this circle of light, farmers steeped in debt are committing suicide in their hundreds. Reports of starvation and malnutrition come in from across the country. Yet the Government allowed 63 million tonnes of grain to rot in its granaries. 12 million

tonnes were exported and sold at a subsidised price the Indian Government was not willing to offer the Indian poor. Utsa Patnaik, the well known agricultural economist, has calculated foodgrain availability and foodgrain absorption in India for nearly a century, based on official statistics. She calculates that in the period between the early 1990s and 2001, foodgrain absorption has dropped to levels lower than during the World War-II years, including during the Bengal Famine in which 3 million people died of starvation. As we know from the work of Professor Amartya Sen, democracies don't take kindly to starvation deaths. They attract too much adverse publicity from the 'free press'.

So dangerous levels of malnutrition and permanent hunger are the preferred model these days. 47 per cent of India's children below three suffer from malnutrition, 46 per cent are stunted. Utsa Patnaik's study reveals that about 40 per cent of the rural population in India has the same foodgrain absorption level as Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, an average rural family eats about 100 kg less food in a year than it did in the early 1990s. The last five years have seen the most violent increase in rural-urban income inequalities since independence.

But in urban India, wherever you go, shops, restaurants, railway stations, airports, gymnasiums, hospitals, you have TV monitors in which election promises have already come true. India's Shining, Feeling Good. You only have to close your ears to the sickening crunch of the policeman's boot on someone's ribs, you only have to raise your eyes from the squalor, the slums, the ragged broken people on the streets and seek a friendly TV monitor and you will be in that other beautiful world. The singingdancing world of Bollywood's permanent pelvic thrusts, of permanently privileged, permanently happy Indians waving the tri-colour and Feeling Good. It's becoming harder and harder to tell which one's the real world and which one's virtual. Laws like POTA are like buttons on a TV. You can use it to switch off the poor, the troublesome, the unwanted.

There is a new kind of secessionist movement taking place in India. Shall we call it New Secessionism? It's an inversion of Old Secessionism. It's when people who are actually part of a whole different economy, a whole different country, a whole different *planet*, pretend they're part of this one. It is the kind of secession in which a relatively small section of people become immensely wealthy by appropriating everything — land, rivers, water, freedom, security, dignity, fundamental rights including the right to protest — from a large group of people. It's a vertical secession, not a horizontal, territorial one. It's the real Structural Adjustment — the kind that separates India Shining from India. India Pvt. Ltd. from India the Public Enterprise.

It's the kind of secession in which public infrastructure, productive public assets — water, electricity, transport, telecommunications, health services, education, natural resources — assets that the Indian state is supposed to hold in trust for the people it represents, assets that have been built and maintained with public money over decades — are sold by the state to private corporations. In India 70 per cent of the population — 700 million people — live in rural areas. Their livelihoods depend on access to natural resources. To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is beginning to result in dispossession and impoverishment on a barbaric scale.

India Pvt. Ltd. is on its way to being owned by a few corporations and of course major multinationals. The CEOs of these companies will control this country, its infrastructure and its resources, its media and its journalists, but will owe nothing to its people. They are completely unaccountable — legally, socially, morally, politically. Those who say that in India a few of these CEOs are more powerful than the Prime Minister know exactly what they're talking about.

Quite apart from the economic implications of all this, even if it were all that it is cracked up to be (which it isn't) — miraculous, efficient, amazing, etc. — is the *politics* of it acceptable to us? If the Indian state chooses to mortgage its responsibilities to a handful of corporations, does it mean that this theatre of electoral democracy that is unfolding around us right now in all its shrillness is entirely meaningless? Or does it still have a role to play?

The Free Market (which is actually far from free) needs the state and needs it badly. As the disparity between the rich and the poor grows, in poor countries states have their work cut out for them. Corporations on the prowl for 'sweetheart deals' that yield enormous profits cannot push through those deals and administer those projects in developing countries without the active connivance of the state machinery. Today Corporate Globalisation needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, preferably authoritarian governments in poorer countries, to push through unpopular reforms and quell the mutinies. It's called 'Creating a Good Investment Climate.'

When we vote in these elections we will be voting to choose which political party we would like to invest the coercive, repressive powers of the state in.

Right now in India we have to negotiate the dangerous cross-currents of neo-liberal capitalism and communal neo-fascism. While the word capitalism hasn't completely lost its sheen yet, using the word fascism often causes offence. So we must ask ourselves, are we using the word loosely? Are we exaggerating our situation, does what we are experiencing on a daily basis qualify as fascism?

When a government more or less openly supports a pogrom against members of a minority community in which up to 2,000 people are brutally killed, is it fascism? When women of that community are publicly raped and burned alive, is it fascism? When authorities see to it that nobody is punished for these crimes, is it fascism? When a 150,000 people are driven from their homes, ghettoised and economically and socially boycotted, is it fascism? When the cultural guild that runs hate camps across the country commands the respect and admiration of the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Law Minister, the Disinvestment Minister, is it fascism? When painters, writers, scholars and filmmakers who protest are abused, threatened and have their work burned, banned and destroyed, is it fascism? When a government issues an edict requiring the arbitrary alteration of school history textbooks, is it fascism? When mobs attack and burn archives of ancient historical documents, when every minor politician masquerades as a professional medieval historian and archaeologist, when painstaking scholarship is rubbishised using baseless populist assertion, is it fascism? When murder, rape, arson and mob justice are condoned by the party in power and its stable of stock intellectuals as an appropriate response to a real or perceived historical wrong committed centuries ago, is it fascism? When the middle-class and the well-heeled pause a moment, tut-tut and then go on with their

lives, is it fascism? When the Prime Minister who presides over all of this is hailed as a statesman and visionary, are we not laying the foundations for full-blown fascism?

That the history of oppressed and vanquished people remains for the large part unchronicled is a truism that does not apply only to *Savarna* Hindus. If the politics of avenging historical wrong is our chosen path, then surely the Dalits and Adivasis of India have the right to murder, arson and wanton destruction?

In Russia they say the past is unpredictable. In India, from our recent experience with school history textbooks, we know how true that is. Now all `pseudo-secularists' have been reduced to hoping that archaeologists digging under the Babri Masjid wouldn't find the ruins of a Ram temple. But even if it were true that there is a Hindu temple under every mosque in India, what was under the temple? Perhaps another Hindu temple to another god. Perhaps a Buddhist stupa. Most likely an Adivasi shrine. History didn't begin with *Savarna* Hinduism, did it? How deep shall we dig? How much should we overturn? And why is it that while Muslims who are socially, culturally and economically an unalienable part of India are called outsiders and invaders and are cruelly targeted, the Government is busy signing corporate deals and contracts for Development Aid with a government that colonised us for centuries? Between 1876 and 1892, during the great famines, millions of Indians died of starvation while the British Government continued to export food and raw materials to England. Historical records put the figure between 12 million and 29 million people. That should figure somewhere in the politics of revenge, should it not? Or is vengeance only fun when its victims are vulnerable and easy to target?

Successful fascism takes hard work. And so does Creating a Good Investment Climate.

It's interesting that just around the time Manmohan Singh, the then Finance Minister, was preparing India's markets for neo-liberalism, L.K. Advani was making his first Rath Yatra, fuelling communal passion and preparing us for neo-fascism. In December 1992 rampaging mobs destroyed the Babri Masjid. In 1993, the Congress Government of Maharashtra signed a power purchase agreement with Enron. It was the first private power project in India. The Enron contract, disastrous as it has turned out, kick-started the era of Privatisation in India. Now, as the Congress whines from the side-lines, the BJP has wrested the baton from its hands. The Government is conducting an extraordinary dual orchestra. While one arm is busy selling the nation's assets off in chunks, the other, to divert attention, is arranging a baying, howling, deranged chorus of cultural nationalism. The inexorable ruthlessness of one process feeds directly into the insanity of the other.

Economically too, the dual orchestra is a viable model. Part of the enormous profits generated by the process of indiscriminate privatisation (and the accruals of `India Shining') helps to finance Hindutva's vast army — the RSS, the VHP, the Bajrang Dal and the myriad other charities and trusts which run schools, hospitals and social services. Between them they have tens of thousands of *shakhas* across the country. The hatred they preach, combined with the unmanageable frustration generated by the relentless impoverishment and dispossession of the Corporate Globalisation project, fuels the violence of poor on poor — the perfect smokescreen to keep the structures of power intact and unchallenged.

However, directing peoples' frustrations into violence is not always enough. In order to 'Create a Good Investment Climate' the state often needs to intervene directly.

In recent years the police has repeatedly opened fire on unarmed people, mostly Adivasis at peaceful demonstrations. In Nagarnar, Jharkhand; in Mehndi Kheda, Madhya Pradesh; in Umergaon, Gujarat; in Rayagara and Chilika, Orissa; in Muthanga, Kerala. People have been killed.

In almost every instance, those who have been fired upon are immediately called militants (PWG, MCC, ISI, LTTE). The repression goes on and on — Jambudweep, Kashipur, Maikanj.

When victims refuse to be victims, they are called terrorists and are dealt with as such. POTA is the broad-spectrum antibiotic for the disease of dissent. This year 181 countries voted in the U.N. for increased protection of human rights in the era of the War on Terror. Even the U.S. voted in favour of it. India abstained. The stage is being set for a full scale assault on human rights.

So how can ordinary people counter the assault of an increasingly violent state?

The space for non-violent civil disobedience has atrophied. After struggling for several years, several non-violent peoples' resistance movements have come up against a wall and feel quite rightly, they have to now change direction. Views about what that direction should be are deeply polarised. There are some who believe that an armed struggle is the only avenue left. Others increasingly are beginning to feel they must participate in electoral politics — enter the system, negotiate from within. (Similar is it not, to the choices people faced in Kashmir?) The thing to remember is that while their methods differ radically, both sides share the belief that (to put it crudely) — Enough is Enough. *Ya Basta*.

There is no debate taking place in India that is more crucial than this one. Its outcome will, for better or for worse, change the quality of life in this country. For everyone. Rich, poor, rural, urban.

Armed struggle provokes a massive escalation of violence from the state. We have seen the morass it has led to in Kashmir and across the North East.

So then, should we do what our Prime Minister suggests we do? Renounce dissent and enter the fray of electoral politics? Join the roadshow? Participate in the shrill exchange of meaningless insults which serve only to hide what is otherwise an almost absolute consensus? Let's not forget that on every major issue — nuclear bombs, big dams, the Babri Masjid controversy, and privatisation — the Congress sowed the seeds and the BJP swept in to reap the hideous harvest.

This does not mean that the Parliament is of no consequence and elections should be ignored. Of course there is a difference between an overtly communal party with fascist leanings and an opportunistically communal party. Of course there is a difference between a politics that openly, proudly preaches hatred and a politics that slyly pits people against each other.

And of course we know that the legacy of one has led us to the horror of the other. Between them they have eroded any real choice that parliamentary democracy is supposed to provide. The frenzy, the fair-ground atmosphere created around elections takes centre-stage in the media because everybody is secure in the knowledge that regardless of who wins, the *status quo* will essentially remain unchallenged. (After the impassioned speeches in Parliament, repealing POTA doesn't seem to be a priority in any party's election campaign. They all know they need it, in one form or another.)

Whatever they say during elections or when they're in the Opposition, no government at the State or Centre, no political party right/left/centre/sideways has managed to stay the hand of neo-liberalism. There will be no radical change from "within".

Personally, I don't believe that entering the electoral fray is a path to alternative politics. Not because of that middle-class squeamishness — 'politics is dirty' or 'all politicians are corrupt', but because I believe that strategically battles must be waged from positions of strength, not weakness.

The targets of the dual assault of communal fascism and neo-liberalism are the poor and the minority communities (who, as time goes by are gradually being impoverished.) As neo-liberalism drives its wedge between the rich and the poor, between India Shining and India, it becomes increasingly absurd for any mainstream political party to pretend to represent the interests of both the rich and the poor, because the interests of one can only be represented at the *cost* of the other. My "interests" as a wealthy Indian (were I to pursue them) would hardly coincide with the interests of a poor farmer in Andhra Pradesh.

A political party that represents the poor will be a poor party. A party with very meagre funds. Today it isn't possible to fight an election without funds. Putting a couple of well known social activists into Parliament is interesting, but not really politically meaningful. Not a process worth channelising all our energies into. Individual charisma, personality politics, cannot effect radical change.

However, being poor is not the same as being weak. The strength of the poor is not indoors in office buildings and courtrooms. It's outdoors, in the fields, the mountains, the river valleys, the city streets and university campuses of this country. That's where negotiations must be held. That's where the battle must be waged.

Right now those spaces have been ceded to the Hindu Right. Whatever anyone might think of their politics, it cannot be denied that they're out there, working extremely hard. As the state abrogates its responsibilities and withdraws funds from health, education and essential public services, the foot soldiers of the *Sangh Parivar* have moved in. Alongside their tens of thousands of *shakhas* disseminating deadly propaganda, they run schools, hospitals, clinics, ambulance services, disaster management cells. They understand powerlessness. They also understand that people, and particularly powerless people, have needs and desires that are not only practical humdrum day to day needs, but emotional, spiritual, recreational. They have fashioned a hideous crucible into which the anger, the frustration, the indignity of daily life, and dreams of a different future can be decanted and directed to deadly purpose. Meanwhile the traditional, mainstream Left still dreams of 'seizing power', but remains strangely unbending, unwilling to address the times. It has laid siege to

itself and retreated into an inaccessible intellectual space, where ancient arguments are proffered in an archaic language that few can understand.

The only ones who present some semblance of a challenge to the onslaught of the *Sangh Parivar* are the grassroots resistance movements scattered across the country, fighting the dispossession and violation of fundamental rights caused by our current model of "Development". Most of these movements are isolated and (despite the relentless accusation that they are "foreign funded foreign agents") they work with almost no money and no resources at all. They're magnificent fire-fighters, they have their backs to the wall. But they *do* have their ears to the ground. They *are* in touch with grim reality. If they got together, if they were supported and strengthened, they could grow into a force to reckon with. Their battle, when it is fought, will have to be an idealistic one — not a rigidly ideological one.

At a time when opportunism is everything, when hope seems lost, when everything boils down to a cynical business deal, we must find the courage to dream. To reclaim romance. The romance of believing in justice, in freedom and in dignity. For everybody. We have to make common cause, and to do this we need to understand how this big old machine works — who it works for and who it works against. Who pays, who profits.

Many non-violent resistance movements fighting isolated, single-issue battles across the country have realised that their kind of special interest politics which had its time and place, is no longer enough. That they feel cornered and ineffectual is not good enough reason to abandon non-violent resistance as a strategy. It is however, good enough reason to do some serious introspection. We need vision. We need to make sure that those of us who say we want to reclaim democracy are egalitarian and democratic in our own methods of functioning. If our struggle is to be an idealistic one, we cannot really make caveats for the internal injustices that we perpetrate on one another, on women, on children. For example, those fighting communalism cannot turn a blind eye to economic injustices. Those fighting dams or development projects cannot elide issues of communalism or caste politics in their spheres of influence — *even at the cost of short-term success in their immediate campaign*. If opportunism and expediency come at the cost of our beliefs, then there is nothing to separate us from mainstream politicians. If it is justice that we want, it must be justice and equal rights for all — not only for special interest groups with special interest prejudices. That is non-negotiable.

We have allowed non-violent resistance to atrophy into feel-good political theatre, which at its most successful is a photo opportunity for the media, and at its least successful, simply ignored.

We need to look up and urgently discuss strategies of resistance, wage real battles and inflict real damage. We must remember that the Dandi March was not just fine political theatre. It was a strike at the economic underpinning of the British Empire.

We need to re-define the meaning of politics. The `Ngo'isation of civil society initiatives is taking us in exactly the opposite direction. It's de-politicising us. Making us dependant on aid and hand-outs. We need to re-imagine the meaning of civil disobedience.

Perhaps we need an elected shadow parliament *outside* the Lok Sabha, without whose support and affirmation Parliament cannot easily function. A shadow parliament that keeps up an underground drumbeat, that shares intelligence and information (all of which is increasingly unavailable in the mainstream media). Fearlessly, but *non-violently* we must disable the working parts of this machine that is consuming us.

We're running out of time. Even as we speak the circle of violence is closing in. Either way, change will come. It could be bloody, or it could be beautiful. It depends on us.

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(This is based on the first I.G. Khan Memorial Lecture delivered at Aligarh Muslim University on April 6, 2004.)