

The Role of Libraries in Amplifying Subaltern Narratives: A Case Study of Arundhati Roy's Works

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the pivotal role of libraries in amplifying subaltern narratives, focusing on the works of Arundhati Roy. By examining the inclusion, accessibility, and promotion of Roy's literature in library collections, this study investigates how libraries contribute to the preservation and dissemination of marginalised voices. The paper also examines the impact of presence of her books in a library in creating a space for counter arguments and building a new subaltern-centric narrative wherein the mainstream narrative is challenged and marginalised communities are given a voice. Through a combination of literature review, case studies, and theoretical analysis, the paper demonstrates that libraries serve as essential spaces for subaltern representation, providing platforms for critical discourse and fostering social change. The paper also addresses the political environment around Arundhati Roy's books and the institutional pressure to remove it from libraries of educational institutions. The research highlights the significance of libraries in challenging dominant narratives and empowering marginalised communities.

Keywords: Indigenous, Maoism, Mining, Post-Truth.

Introduction

India has ranked second on the concentration of tribes in the world, second only to the African continent. According to the 2011 Indian Census, there were 1,04,28,103 Scheduled Tribe people living in India, making up around 8.6% of the country's overall population. In the central belt, which includes nine states (M.P., Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, A.P., and West Bengal), the ST population is concentrated at roughly 86%. Around 10% of STs live in the eight North Eastern states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, with the remaining 4% in the seven states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Goa, Bihar, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, as well as the six union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli (Census of India, 2011). Today's society still does not hold an equal position for the marginalised communities, in terms of representation and justice. People's ability to be

compassionate towards others' problems is predominantly based on their perception of the issue in the first place. In a world where problems and permutations are formulated by news, people's understanding of political and social issues is limited to what the mainstream media decides to show and how. According to Correspondence Theory of Truth, beliefs that correspond with the masses find more merit as truth as opposed to facts that do not. In other words, people need to believe a fact in order for it to be called truth. In the context of the book, there was a concocted narrative to isolate the native tribal people from public support with the "George Bush binary: If you are not with us, you are against us" (Roy, 2011). This way, the people are manipulated into believing that if they don't support the government in its efforts to accommodate mining corporations and their activities, they automatically fall into the loosely defined group of bad people, who in this context are the tribals of Central India. The common understanding about the state-maoist issue in Central India is that the politically left inclined outlaws have armed themselves and are threatening the internal security of India. In this nationalist narrative built and disseminated, there is no space or scope for understanding the conflict in its entirety; one that involves the transition of forest dwellers, gatherers and hunters into armed militants and the reason why.

It also brings forth another significant question- who qualifies as a maoist, and how do security agencies differentiate a hunter or a gatherer from a maoist? "Will Adivasis carrying bows and arrows they have carried for centuries now count as maoists too?" (Roy, 2011). The identity of the subaltern is now in question. It is highly imperative to comprehend the sentiments of the indigenous tribal groups to understand the resistance they have built over the decades. What is all the more urgently needed is a healthy space for dialogue to involve everyone who has a stake in this issue to present their side and counter a rather one-sided narrative, leading to a public dialogue on subaltern narrative. With limited space for negotiations with the maoists, Arundhati Roy questions the intention of the state towards the poor and uncivilised who only want to protect their land and rights, by pointing at the hypocrisy- "the government was ready to talk with Pakistan after the deadly 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack and continues to negotiate with China, but plays hard-ball with maoists" (Roy, 2011). Roy, the author of *Walking with the Comrades*, has been a vocal critic of the government for its unlawful and rather blatant support to mining corporations towards extensive mining causing damage to both tribal inhabitants in the region and an irreversible damage to the environment. The value of Bauxite in Odisha alone is estimated at \$4 billion USD, and the value of bauxite in other states and all other minerals available in the region runs up to trillions of dollars in valuation (Roy, 2011).

The state's efforts to oppress subaltern rights and uproot them have not succeeded due to the tribals' involvement in public life as political left. It has since helped them fight for themselves and the nature that they live in, which is a strong part of their belief system. The conflict has led to many authors publishing books about the people's protest by meeting with villagers and tribals and recording first hand interactions. *Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story* by Ranjana Padhi and Nigamananda Sadangi is one such book wherein the authors draw a parallel between extensive mining in contemporary India to the Industrial revolution in Europe's past. The situation in Central India is very similar to what was happening around the time of Industrial revolution in Europe- farmers were uprooted and housed elsewhere to establish capitalist factories and farms and indigenous communities were driven off their native land that they had lived on for generations. The subaltern's quest for justice in a conflict with the state has led to a new era of reconstructing their identity.

Tribal Resistance over the years

The STs live in rural, hilly, secluded places, and they have fiercely fought outsider infiltration in general and foreign assaults into their territory in particular. History shows that when outsiders tried to invade the indigenous people's territory, there were protracted conflicts

amongst them. The British were forced to declare tribal majority areas non-regulatory territories and grant distinct laws for the administration of these areas in order to make peace with the tribals after several rebellions against colonial authorities were recorded. These were designated as "excluded and partially excluded territories", and specific laws were created to safeguard the tribal members' interests (Majumdar, 1982). The materialist attitude of the government towards resources and the greed for financial gains has directly and indirectly affected indigenous tribal groups- from displacement to distortion of their history and culture, thus leading to resistance and revolt. Roy criticises the people in cities and big towns for their ignorance towards the issue and lack of their participation towards nation building by saying "So what? Someone has to pay the price of progress" (Roy, 2011). The social, economic and political grievances of tribal people, such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, oppression and historical wrongs are the root causes of naxalism in the region. Tribal groups have been denied social, economic, political and human rights for decades despite constitutional protections with the dual goals of empowering and developing them for incorporation into the nation's mainstream. More than half the tribal population are illiterate and endure inhumane living circumstances as they are uprooted and made to live in roadside government camps with no signs of a dignified living. Even in the designated regions, their lands are not secure, and without a sufficient rehabilitation plan, they risk being arbitrarily evicted. They have no constitutional remedy at their disposal to insulate themselves from unlawful eviction or displacement which is done with the help of many constitutional departments. This institutionalised harassment, Roy notes, has worked against the indigenous inhabitants and has refused any legal means to the affected people- "the (rigged) public hearings, the (fake) environmental impact assessments, the (purchased) clearances from various ministries, the long-drawn-out court cases" (Roy, 2011).

This has led to the tribes fighting for their land and rights by seeking help from maoists. Naxalism in the region grew gradually along with the spread of communism over a period of 50 years. With time, there was hardly any difference between the armed naxalites fighting the corporations and the common tribal people fighting for social equality and justice- the lines blurred and their latter's identity evolved and at times, hijacked. The fight eventually turned into communists fighting capitalists. The tribals fighting for their lands took refuge under the political cloud of Communism which seemed promising with their pro-poor and anti-rich ideology. The tribal communities have long been fighting for their land and resources but didn't get much attention from the rest of the country and when they did, it was voices condemning them for their violence against security personnel and the instability they are causing in the country. To this extent, Roy paid a secret visit to Dantewada in Chhattisgarh to expose the state's partnership with corporations to allow extensive mining in the region which could lead to exploitation and dissipation of natural resources. Roy met with the locals and naxals of the region to bring out their side of the story- one of passion to fight the capitalists from exploiting resources and to protect nature and their ancestral land and rights, which eventually and inevitably turned violent and gruesome.

Post-truth and Naxalism

Post-truth, as often misconceived, is not about people misunderstanding the truth but rather it is when people are well informed about something with facts and numerical data, and they still choose to believe otherwise. It is a conscious effort to believe something because one wants that to be true. This phenomenon has led to a drastic increase in fake news and eventually an entire political ecosystem working on manufacturing and circulating it in order to command the sentiment of the masses with an intention to control public sentiment. It is easy to command one's social and political views if the news caters to their sentiment and not the intellect. To that extent, media houses have begun to distort the truth and thus create fake news to earn

people's vote. The concept of post-truth has gone from influencing individuals to manipulating large scale behavioural change as a society. The word 'post-truth' caught global attention when it was declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016. Social media has been a catalyst in this transition towards a post-truth society since issues are taken to the masses with a bias and propaganda. Furthermore, post-truth behaviour shows when people are manipulated so much that even after seeing both sides of a story, they choose to stay on a side which might be factually wrong but the decision is made predominantly on emotion and not on facts. Such behaviour is seen to be increasing with the help of social media and influencer culture wherein propaganda sets the agenda for the day. Being opinionated is a right, but to have a biased opinion (and a factually incorrect one) and disseminate it to further one's cause is propaganda. What happened in the case of naxal insurgency in Central India is no different. The mainstream media and various nationalist influencers paraded across the country with a narrative that conveniently insulated the government from criticism and ensured only the indigenous tribes were blamed for the conflict. Nationalism was an effective tool in invoking the masses' love for the country, and portraying armed forces personnel being killed every day in the region helped construct a distorted identity about the tribes that they intend to create civil unrest and conflict in the region (Roy, 2011).

There are various moments and incidents when Roy was politically incorrect but quoted legitimate sources from the region and offered alternate facts and yet, she is a victim of post-truth today. This is again because of the non-correspondence between facts and people's beliefs. The issue at hand is quite suppressed and controlled as the world is kept in the dark by the state by declaring the entire area as Red Corridor. The states have signed MoUs with various corporations worth billions of rupees, for steel plants, sponge-iron factories, power plants, aluminium factories, dams and mines (Roy, 2011). The states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal have a target on their backs from the mining corporations for the abundant metal and mineral deposits, which is one of the reasons why communism is prevalent in the region, and people continue to rally against the capitalists and the state that is enabling them. These are facts that Roy puts out in the book that are otherwise not discussed and debated in the mainstream discourse.

State- Subaltern conflict

There are multiple perspectives with which the maoist movement is perceived in public discourse. One is that the naxalites are "India's biggest internal threat" (Roy 17) (as termed by the former Prime Minister of India) who are armed and dangerous, and are disturbing peace in the tribal belt of Chattisgarh, Odisha, parts of West Bengal and northern part of Andhra Pradesh, and are uncivilised people with no regard for law and order with an aim is to instigate chaos and challenge the status quo. The other is that the maoists are native tribal people who got influenced by communism and decided to take an anti-authoritarian stand against the state's ill-will towards subaltern lives and the environment. Both views have a certain level of truth in them and there couldn't be a more glaring distinction between the two. Unfortunately, as Russell and Moore proposed, the facts on the ground do not always translate into truth, which makes truth a subjective entity. There is significant evidence that the government is indeed helping the mining corporations which Roy exposes in the book. Former Home Minister of India Chidambaram, Roy notes, was a non-executive Director of Vedanta, a mining corporation from which he resigned on the same day that he took charge as the Finance Minister of India in 2004. She implies that the close ties between the people in the highest corridors of power and international corporations have led to capitalism winning over the poor and helpless tribal people who believe in collective welfare, including the environment. Additionally, they are taken advantage of by the government organisations responsible for their rights and dignity. For the indigenous people, democracy has limited value because, among other things, they are

considered merely as democratic vote banks without having any input into how decisions about their own affairs are made (Singh, 1999: 101; Verma, 2018: 239).

“The paradise of the rich is made of the hell of the poor.” (Hugo, 469). In the book *The Man Who Laughs*, Victor Hugo differentiates between the rich and the poor and states categorically that the rich should not extract wealth at the cost of poor people. This directly reflects the marxist idea of life which campaigns for equal social and economic stature of all people and to protect economically backward people (working class) from getting exploited. In this case, it is the international mining corporations evicting indigenous tribal groups from their homes, so thousands of acres of marketable minerals could be mined and sold. Marxist environmentalism speaks of the relationship between man and nature, in a way that enables man to sustain life but not at the cost of nature. In *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx writes “Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power” (Marx, 6). As inevitable as it is for humans to mine resources for their livelihood, it is also equally significant if not more, to be mindful of the consumption. Marxist philosophy provides a framework for analysing and explaining the current climate issue and how exploitation of mines and minerals leads to it. In the middle of the 19th century, Marx and Engels demonstrated how society and nature both advance through differences with common ground.

Marxist environmentalism has a world view which not only establishes a cohesive bond between man and nature, but also propagates a profound plan for sustainable management of resources, thus giving nature much importance in the industrialised world. “The hills watched over the Kondh. The Kondh watched over the hills and worshipped them as living deities.” (Roy, 2011). It ensures humans don’t overmine or exploit the available natural resources and take only what is needed for sustenance of human life but capitalism has made it tough for humans to do so. The increasing demand for industrial usage of metals and minerals has led to drastic increase in mining. Where the needs of people end, the wants of capitalism begin. Marx viewed the environment primarily as a means of human labour. He believed that humanity should utilise nature for their own objectives of production. Marx recognised that exploitation was a major factor in the quick expansion of the capitalist economy. Marx was a pioneer in analysing and critiquing how the industrialization of capitalism has a negative impact on both society and the environment. The Marxist environmentalist view of man and nature coexisting without hurting and exploiting each other is negated by the capitalist governments and corporations, thus discarding the fundamental idea of sustainable management. Marx foresaw the consequences of the breakdown in the balance between nature and humans. So, in his eyes, the alienation of workers in capitalist production was a part of the same process as humanity's estrangement from the natural world. For instance, the workers in the energy sector—oil, coal, and nuclear power—as well as the populace and the environment in entire areas or nations, face a direct threat. These sectors frequently have workers who are most aware of the risks. An essential component of the fight for the environment is the fight to improve the working environment, or in this case the tribal groups in Central India. Lack of political representation too has become an obstacle to their welfare and self-defence in a conflict zone. Over the past twenty years, political science and economics have come to dominate research into civil war, while sociology has been side-lined (Hegre and Sambanis, 2006). This unjust land grabbing from indigenous tribal groups and displacement from their homes is followed by heinous sexual crimes against women of marginalised sections of the society. These communities neither have access to political forums, nor do the government bureaucrats pay heed to their woes. The state’s decision of passing the PESA Act of 1996 was aimed at preserving the customs and traditions of the tribal communities. Whilst the objective was ideal, it did not help in any way when their land was taken and the people were driven out into roadside camps. This is one of the shortcomings of lack of political and social representation. This neo-Marxist class conflict

interpretation aligns with the prevalent narratives of the Maoist insurgency from India, which contend that Adivasis support the insurgents because they have been evicted from their land and forced to work in agriculture or take up menial jobs in big cities. Class studies have generally been thwarted by the moral economy perspective, which is essentially based on collective consciousness (Wolf 1969, Scott 1976).

Roy travelled with the naxals for days and nights, ate and slept with them (Roy 61)- all with the intention to bring out their side of the story in their civil conflict that has lasted for decades and has claimed thousands of lives including civilians. The anti-state, anti-capitalist fight that the maoists have taken up has turned violent over the years and that has led to the public losing sight of the big picture and has led to bad optics on the side of the tribals. The word 'comrades' could have been used by Roy with a neutral tone referring to them by the common communist term used to address brethren but with Roy's personal political inclination and her pro-naxal stand, it is quite clear that Roy associates herself to be one among them. Walter Benjamin in his book *Toward the Critique of Violence*, traces the link between government power and its ways of leading to violence. "Law making is power making and to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence" (Benjamin 248). This situation in Chhattisgarh and neighbouring states is a quintessential example of a state exerting its power through unlawful means to oppress the indigenous people and help capitalists, thus showing no remorse or regard for subaltern life and rights.

Engels's Marxist Feminism stands on the objective of liberating women from oppression in a capitalist and sexist society. It combines the ideas of marxism and feminism- both concepts intend to fight discrimination and oppression based on class and sex respectively. The maoist fight in the Central states of India is a marxist feminist fight, against both capitalism and patriarchy. "Homeland to millions of India's tribal people, dreamland to the corporate world" (Roy, 2011). On the other hand, with the state cordoning off major parts of these forests and hills from the media and public, people hardly know the crimes that women experience in the red corridor. Roy recalls Kamla, a naxal, who was with Roy throughout her stay in the Red Corridor and talks of her life and the dangerous circumstances she lives in everyday- "She's seventeen. She wears a homemade pistol on her hip. And boy, what a smile. But if the police come across her, they will kill her. They might rape her first. No questions will be asked. Because she's an Internal Security Challenge" (Roy, 2011). The Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan, which has 90,000 enrolled members fights Adivasi tradition of forced marriages, abduction, making a menstruating woman live outside the village, bigamy and domestic violence. The members of the KAMS have short hair and participate in rallies protesting against Salwa Judum and their crimes against women. Roy records a couple of instances from her fellow comrades who share stories of gang rape in their respective villages by the forest officials and state sponsored Salwa Judum. This progressive communist society living and moving from forest to forest is threatening to the world of capitalism. "They want to crush us, not only because of the minerals, but because we are offering the world an alternative model" (Roy, 2011). The egalitarian society built and propagated by the maoists as an extension to defending their land and minerals is not acceptable by the capitalists. The crimes against women by the policemen, forest officials and the people's militia (armed and funded by the government) called the Salwa Judum are a common sight. A National Human Rights Commission report that brought out findings of investigation into sexual crimes against women in maoist areas says that 16 women were raped by police personnel and gangraped atleast 2 in Bijapur district alone. These numbers are only from 1 district wherein there are many more cases of sexual harassment and misconduct that have gone unreported. Roy's first-hand anecdotes from maoists who are women matches with the NHRC report claiming the misuse of state power by law enforcement agencies. For the state to be able to fulfil the promises made to corporations, the tribal people need to be removed from their homes and thus the war with

high civil casualties. Next comes feminist side wherein the tribal people have been protecting and liberating women from the designated protectors of the law. Those who should uphold the law and enforce it have a habit of breaking it in the red corridor and the media catches few out of many cases that happen.

Conclusion

The research concludes that libraries play a vital role in amplifying subaltern narratives, as exemplified by the inclusion and promotion of Arundhati Roy's works. As Roy gives voice to the voiceless and the oppressed, libraries act as a platform for disseminating their voice and narratives. This helps them defend distorted information about their culture and identity and build their own identity. By providing spaces for marginalised voices to be heard and understood, libraries contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and the fostering of social justice. India is a country that is built on the diverse cultures and traditions that co-exist and by putting these narratives in libraries, even marginalised communities are given an equal opportunity to write their own history without having someone misrepresent them. This study underscores the importance of libraries as essential institutions in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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