



Existence and Identity: The Intellectual Discourse of Roy on Tribal Resistance¹

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ABSTRACT:

The twentieth century postcolonial India witnessed the rise of a host of new social, political and literary movements. Dalits, Tribals, farmers, women and various ethnic groups, who are the contemporary subalterns of 'free' India, came forward to raise demands and issues that have been left unattended in the established political and theoretical discourses. To protect their existence and identities, and to simultaneously seek their emancipation, their narratives struggle to fight exploitation and discrimination carried out against them due to their specific identities. In the emerging inequities and inequalities, the narratives of these marginalized sections need to be strengthened by intellectual contributions from the civil and literary society. The

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present paper titled “Existence and Identity: The Intellectual Discourse of Roy on Tribal Resistance” highlights the importance of grassroot workers and intellectual activists engaged in addressing the problems among Tribal communities in India. The necessity of intellectual intervention is analysed in the paper in the context of the flawed model of growth, development and globalization adopted by subsequent governments and the Indian state. This postcolonial and neo-imperialistic model has deprived the Tribals of their resources as well as identity and has threatened their existence. The purpose of the paper, consequently, is to interrogate, through selected essays of Arundhati Roy, the resistance narrative of the constitutionally protected yet subjugated indigenous people of India.

KEYWORDS:

Tribals, resistance narratives, intellectual activism, neo-colonialism, subalternity, marginalization, literature of dissent, exploitation, neo-imperialism, postcolonialism

Introduction:

The twenty-first century postcolonial India witnessed the rise of a host of new social, political and literary movements. Dalits, Tribals, farmers, women and various ethnic groups, who are the contemporary subalterns of ‘free’ India, came forward to raise demands and issues that have been left unattended in the established political and theoretical discourses. To protect their existence and identities, and to simultaneously

seek their emancipation, their narratives struggle to fight exploitation and discrimination carried out against them due to their specific identities. In the emerging inequities and inequalities, the narratives of these marginalized sections need to be strengthened by intellectual contributions from the civil and literary society. The present paper titled "Existence and Identity: The Intellectual Discourse of Roy on Tribal Resistance" highlights the importance of grass root workers and intellectual activists engaged in addressing the problems among Tribal communities in India. The necessity of intellectual intervention is analysed in the paper in the context of the flawed model of growth, development and globalization adopted by subsequent governments of the Indian state. The postcolonial, neo-imperialistic model has deprived the tribals of their resources and posed a threat to their identity and existence. The purpose of the paper, consequently, is to interrogate, through selected essays of Arundhati Roy, the resistance narrative of the constitutionally protected yet subjugated indigenous people of India. Her socio-political essays treat the indigenous tribals not as objects of analysis in colonial, ethnographic, anthropological, folklores or other forms of tribal studies that eliminate the space for tribals in socio-political and economic arenas. Such writings would merely celebrate or focus on tribals as exotic people and not as active participants of contemporary reality. Roy's focus subsequently marks a shift from the concerns of origin, evolution, diversity and ethnographic compilation of their traditions, customs and beliefs. Her powerful indictments of tribal resistance narratives set out with the belief that contemporary social and political reality does not require a

description, perspectives or information regarding the tribal people but rather necessitates a deeper understanding of the position and condition of these marginalised people under the impact of modern forces of globalization. This would, in turn, correct the perception of societal organization, social formation and theoretical notions of development. Her intellectual renderings, therefore, ascertain the processes that have not just reduced them to “traditionally marginalised but those that are marginalised in the wake of capitalist transformations” (Kunhaman 52). Apart from social discrimination, they have become vulnerable victims of illiteracy, poverty, and poor healthcare primarily because the state has failed completely in extending welfare to and carrying out constitutional mandate of protecting these people from varied discriminations, exploitations, oppression and subjugation.

The global failure to protect interests of weaker sections, biodiversity and environment ultimately affects everyone but it has the most catastrophic consequences for the indigenous people who are directly dependent on ecosystems for their food, livelihood, water, sustenance and culture. “In all parts of the world, from Gualcarque river in Honduras to the Kaya forests in Kenya, from Koh Kong in Columbia to Standing Rock in the United States, indigenous people and local communities are working to protect the ecosystems on which they rely from sustainable development” (Knox: United Nations Human Rights Rights Report). Often overexploitation of natural resources by capitalist corporations pollutes their rivers and aquifers, cuts down their forests, destroys their sacred places and displaces them from their homes in the garb of

development and progress. Peaceful oppositions are most often met with harassment, violence and suppression. States and global community have an obligation not only to defend these indigenous people but their ecosystems on which the human rights of so many people directly depend. On the contrary what is happening in the contemporary world is that neo-colonialisms compete globally to demolish the rights of the silent oppressed segments of society, Roy's non-fiction offers a radical critique of the global order, new hegemony and contemporary nation-state. Throughout her socio-political essays (including the three essays taken up in the present research paper), Roy's dissenting voice aims at foregrounding the absences that are deliberately activated by the perpetrators of power against ordinary people who are subjected to divergent discriminations, oppressions and thereby relegated to a marginalized, subaltern status. Roy presents the exploitative practices of the state with regards the implementation of a capitalist and imperialistic order through legislative and policy imperatives. Whether it is the economic reforms favoring liberal-democratic models, development induced displacements, nuclear armaments, draconian and antihuman laws, Roy shows that they serve to impose a neo-colonial ideology structurally by the state and its governments to exploit the human and natural resources of the country for the benefit of the global market. There is an utter disregard of any human, ecological, or environmental costs. Roy tries to expose the suppressive structures of the new postcolonial states that implement the policies of public exploitation and subordination. Across states, suppression and exploitation are carried out in the name of development,

progress, freedom, democracy and other liberal values that deprive people of their identities, rights and freedoms. Roy's radical suspicion and denunciation of the contemporary political and economic order mirrors the absolute, exclusive and suppressive facet of the modern day nation-states. The state, in exercise of its unlimited and unchallenged power, has suppressed individuals leading to the creation of a new subalternity. In defining this new subalternity, Roy focuses on the way the current system of governance and policy making has annihilated and abolished the legal and institutional guarantees of ordinary people particularly the underprivileged and weaker sections. State ideologies and institutions emulate the imperialistic policies rendering the contemporary subalterns infinitely expendable. Roy's use of the concept of subalternity refers to a wider section of populace particularly the weaker sections like minorities, farmers, adivasis, dalits, poor, displaced people, women, residents of disturbed areas. They share a marginal status and their rights are often ignored in the larger scheme of things. In times when the interests of economic and political elites dominate, the people living in margins like the tribals hardly get represented. Roy's narrative is centred round this thematics of exploitation of the tribals by the state and its corporate allies. It is indeed one of the major issues that Roy addresses in her works. She tries to reveal the large-scale import of globalization, modernization and urbanization on indigenous tribals. The state's policy of invasive development in remote areas has led to industrialization and modernization in the tribal belts. The result of these is that tribal populations face in loss of identity.

The capitalist neo-imperialism of the present age under the aegis of globalization requires the steady flow of resources whether water or oil or land or minerals. The impact of India's full assistance and co-operation in this drive for resources has been faced mostly by the weaker sections within India. The tribals are much dependent on forests and nature, and as long as they are in control of these resources, they had means of existence and a proper identity. But in the past decade when the pace of mining, manufacturing industries, use of paper and natural resources have accelerated to a great extent, the tribals are not only on the verge of losing their sustenance but also loss of their indigenous culture and identity. The high degree displacement and dislocation caused by state backed exodus of tribals has not only created threats for livelihood in the absence of suitable/alternative occupation but also created numerous social problems like "cultural exits, economic disorganization, social disintegration" (Vidyarth and Rai: 1977). While speaking about the plight of the Adivasis, the tribals or the forest dwellers, Roy shows that the increasing marginalization and impoverishment of India's constitutionally and legally protected section has been a result of state's exploitation. The tribals witnessed the Aryan invasion and the British colonization, and had been forced into remote forest and hill areas. Now, the lands and forests that sustain them are being forcibly taken away from them. For the new state, these inaccessible forested regions have become incidentally very important because of land, forest and mineral resources. Subordinated and exploited to provide land and cheap labour, India's tribals have been compelled to enter into the global economic order where their rights have no

meaning. "The national objective to build up a productive structure for future growth and resource mobilization was far more important than issues concerning the welfare and interest of the tribes" (Xoxo: 6). Given the economic priorities of growth, progressive provisions and laws that were periodically passed to empower tribal communities have been largely undermined by subsequent regimes. Despite having thousands of years old moral claims and rights, they still remain the most insecure and underprivileged section in India today. The indigenous people and tribals are the single largest group among the people displaced by various development projects since India's independence. They have not received any benefits of such development. They enjoy constitutional protection, yet they are the ones frequently dispossessed of their lands, agricultural as well as forest.

Despite a plethora of well-meaning constitutional laws and provisions aimed at protecting and safeguarding the welfare and interest of tribal communities, their marginalization has gone unabated. The provisions created for the tribal populations are laid down elaborately under Part X of the Constitution (Articles 244 and 244 (A)), and the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. Apart from these provisions the constitution also provides the Educational and Cultural Rights (Articles 15(4), 29, 46, 350), Social Rights (Articles 23 and 24), Economic Rights (Articles 244 and 275), Political Rights (Articles 164 (1), 243, 330, 334 and 371), and Employment Rights (Articles 15(4), 16(4) and 164 (A)) to protect the tribal communities. Clearly, the makers of the constitution were prudent enough to keep certain permanent safeguards for the

protection of such communities “in order to prevent the democratic machine from being used as an engine of oppression by the numerical majority” (Rout 2015: 6). But the pressure of modernization, globalization, cultural flows and market forces have not only led to the deterioration of these constitutional provisions but also the tribals’ identity, culture, and perceptions. Paradoxically, at the roots of such marginalized plight is the state itself. The process of tribal alienation and exploitation has been going on since the colonial period, but the skewed pattern of socio-economic development after independence has furthered it. Their possession of land and forest resources has become the biggest source of their exploitation under the new capitalist order which “necessarily results in perpetuation of many kinds of inequality among people” (Ramdas: 4). Given the symbiotic relationship between the Tribals and nature, the various developmental projects undertaken mostly in tribal lands and forests has an eroding impact on the tribal way of life – social, economic as well as political. The intensified exploitation caused by economic liberalization of the global era has consequently led to a host of resistance movements in India where the tribals are engaged in a never ending struggle to protect their identity as well as existence. The processes that were taken up for bringing about rapid and sustainable national development led to displacement and deprivation of tribal lands forced by successive regimes. The consequent poverty and lack of development have led to terrible consequences, chief among them being the rise of Naxalism. Though the present model

of development tribals have been pushed to a corner owing to economic interests of various dominant groups

Roy combines her brilliant analysis, reportage and personal research to examine the nature of progress and development in the emerging global superpower. She sets out to question the modern civilisation and the modern liberal democratic welfare state of India in its treatment of the marginalised and oppressed populace. The present paper focuses on her intellectual response to one of the multiple facets of contemporary subalternity within India through her exploration of the tribal resistance. Roy's essays address the issue of tribal marginalization within the ambit of a large canvas of contemporary subalterns in India. Her writings have a direct political character which is explicitly directed against state backed suppression and exploitation of these subalterns. Her emphasis is on the paradoxical relation of power, conflict and change within the discontent, despair and fragmentation of the present day neo-imperial world. In such a socio-political climate, resistance narratives have to be strengthened and emboldened through a growing awareness of rights felt and expressed politically against the onslaughts of the state. The imperative underlying such resistance is simply that "whenever a mechanism has become available, this consciousness has found expression, often against very heavy odds, against a constellation of interests that are too powerful and complacent to shed (even share) privileges. At bottom it is consciousness against a paradigm of society that rests on deliberate indifference to the

plight of the impoverished and destitute” (Kothari: 218). For the tribals in India, the socio-economic and political structures are the very source of deprivation and marginalization. Roy in her writings questions these structures that sustain exploitation and marginalization and subsequently challenges and attacks pernicious political authority to make the system accountable, efficient, responsive and workable. In these attempts the civil society in particular shares the responsibility to develop a certain degree of understanding and reflection of the issues that concern “the edges of our own society” (Roy 2011: 9). In her anthology titled *Broken Republic: Three essays*, her main theme is to bring to the forefront the plight of adivasis of India. The three essays “Mr. Chidambaram’s War”, “Walking with the Comrades” and “Trickledown Revolution” focus specifically on the spectrum of struggles all over the country that are “pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale corporate takeover of people’s land and resources” (Roy 2011: 3). As a writer with responsibility and a part of the civil liberties community in India, she takes up the cause of the tribals who “even after (more than) sixty years of India’s so-called independence...have been mercilessly exploited for decades, consistently cheated” (Roy 2011: 7). She raises her voice against a government and state that has repeatedly neglected and violated the indigenous people. Today, both tribal and non-tribal writers and activists like Arundhati Roy are engaged in a radical resistance against any sort of discrimination against these descendants of the aboriginals of India. Their endeavour is to bring tribal right to protect their resources, identity and existence to the forefront. With their efforts

the representation of tribals has ceased to be merely portrayal of tribal life and society through literature, poetry, stories, novels and other forms of creative expression. Rather it has found its way into mainstream discussions at social, economic and political levels. It is through the efforts of these participants of civil activism that focus has been brought to the development and environmental projects that are marginalising tribal livelihoods and habitats. Their primary struggle has been against the penetration of global capital into tribal lands and forests that has led to dispossession and displacement mainly through mining, quarrying, infrastructure projects like dams, thermal power projects, and building and construction projects. Such onslaughts have rendered the scheduled tribes as well as castes as the most disadvantaged sections of our society through socio-economic exploitation and isolation over a long period of time. In order to fuel modern development, the state has rendered these marginalised sections extremely vulnerable to more and more oppression. Whenever there has been any resistance from the tribals to such practices, the state's response has been "repression, deviousness and the kind of opacity that can only come from a pathological disrespect for ordinary people. Worse, it went ahead and accelerated the process of displacement and dispossession" (Roy 2011: 177).

Under the pressures and exigencies of the free market, Tribal lands, mountains and forests offer a repository reservoir of "bauxite, iron ore and 2-8 other precious mineral resources including uranium, limestone, dolomite, coal, tin, granite, marble, copper, diamond, gold, quartzite, corundum, beryl alexandrite, silica, fluorite and

garnet" (Roy 2011: 24). Added to these mineral invaluable mineral resources are "power plants, dams, highways, the steel and cement factories, the aluminium smelters, and all the other infrastructure projects" that fuel the Indian developmental project towards progress. The resources that sustain India's tribal people, incidentally, are priceless for "scores of corporations, mining companies and steel manufactures in the world (that are) in the fray to appropriate adivasis homelands- the Mittals, Jindals, Tata, Essar, Posco, Pio Tinto, BHP Billiton, and of course, Vedanta" (Roy 2011: 25). The resistance movements launched by the tribals against the state led corporate fundamentalism are a proof of the failure of India's miraculous 'growth' story... (with the people) refusing to give up their land and their access to resources" (Roy 2011: 33). Ever since India's independence, large populations (mostly Adivasis and Dalits) have been displaced for dams, irrigation projects, mines, other development projects. "Of the tens of millions of internally displaced people, refugees of India's progress, the great majority are tribal people" (Roy 2011: 43). The war that is being fought covertly between the Indian state and the Adivasis, ever since the Indian constitution of was adopted by the Parliament in 1950 posed a paradox in tribal existence and identity. On the one hand, "the constitution ratified colonial policy and made the state custodian of tribal homeland" (Roy 2011: 43). On the other hand, it provided safeguards, guarantees and special provisions for the upliftment of the same population that had been disposed of their traditional rights to their lands and forests.

The state's economic totalitarianism is described by Roy as "almost from the moment India became a sovereign nation it turned into a colonial power, annexing territory, waging war. It has never hesitated to use military interventions to address political problems. Tens of thousands have been killed with impunity, hundreds of thousands tortured. All of this behind the benign mask of democracy" (Roy 2011: 123). They are being ignored by the political establishment, but they haven't lost their resolve to fight against the grabbing of their lands for industries and special economic zones all over the country whether in Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh or Bihar. It is true that political emancipation from the British brought great expectations of a bright future but yet the contemporary treatment of the subaltern sections of Indian society reiterates that "the old empire may not exist. But obviously our tradition of servility has become too profitable an enterprise to dismantle" (Roy 2011: 153). The advancement and progress made by India on economic fronts with regards liberalisation, privatization, globalization, and corporate capitalism is summed up by Roy as "trickledown revolution" which is nothing more than the western world dictated structural adjustment and economic reforms aimed at corporate takeover of water, electricity, minerals, agriculture, land, telecommunication, education, health, amongst other things. By allowing market forces to mine India's national as well as tribal resources quickly and efficiently, this pseudo revolution has shown how "disempowerment works" (Roy 2011: 52) against "the non-people" (Roy 2009: 44). Local regimes and governments in their race of "creating a good investment climate" (Roy 2009: 76) have successfully undermined the position and status of the

“poorest people in the poorest quarters – the Adivasis and the Dalits” (Roy 2009: 87). In this dramatic reversal of decolonization of the twentieth century, the Indian state has nativized imperialism by “colonizing ourselves, our own nether parts... The greed that is being generated...sated by grabbing land, water and resources from the vulnerable” (Roy 2009: 221).

By focusing on the socio-political aspect of the tribal resistance narratives, Roy advocates the need to demand that indigenous people get prior and informed consent for any development centred round their traditional lands, territories, water and other resources that form the core of their existence. They have a distinct spiritual and material relationship with their lands and territories and are inextricably linked to their survival. They rely on these natural resources and habitats for the preservation and development of their knowledge systems and culture. Therefore, it is an added responsibility of the state and its people to seek sustainability of the tribals in continued capitalist production. Roy insists that development projects must look first to “autochthonous peoples for knowledge, not only of particular ecosystems, but also of systems of power and domination” (Siobhan 7). Roy targets the implosion of neo-imperialism and extractive capitalism, and subsequently urges for reconsideration of the community vulnerability and environmental damage in the indigenous land expropriation. Roy’s focus is on foregrounding indigenous survival caused by the abrogation of their territorial sovereignty and the need to re-evaluate development in such a way that tribal cultures can sustain alongside ecologies. The present model of

progress needs to be re-directed towards the “kind of sustainability that allows a human population to live on same land base for thousands of years without destroying it” (Waziyatawin 77).

Her essays are aimed at dismantling “the barriers that prevent ordinary people from understanding what’s happening to them” (Roy 2009: 36). She writes about social justice that in her view can only be achieved through globalization of dissent. It is ultimately the informed and educated people who can collectively demand accountability and responsible political state and institutions of governance. She, however, cautions against being morphed into a representative of the subalterns. Socio-political activism and engagement must instead be a conscious decision to advocate a political position in support of a people’s movement as a means of adding “one’s voice to theirs in order for them to be heard” (Roy 2009: 17). The anthology ends up reiterating the need to not just understand and expose the underlying patterns of power and subordination rampant in our specific times but also to vehemently seek alternatives which “will emerge from the places and the people who have resisted the hegemonic impulse of capitalism and imperialism instead of being co-opted by it. Here in India, even in the midst of all the violence and greed, there is still hope... We still have a population that has not yet been completely colonized by that consumerist dream. We have a living tradition of those who have struggled for Gandhi’s vision of sustainability and self-reliance, for socialist ideas of egalitarianism and social justice. We have Ambedkar’s vision. We have the most spectacular coalition of resistance

movements, with their experience, understanding and vision. Most important of all, India has a surviving Adivasi population of almost 100 million. They are the ones who still know the secret of sustainable living. If they disappear, they will take those secrets with them" (Roy 2011: 212-13).

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