

The State will fail if the Army and Air Force are used against the Maoist

Aruna Roy

Aruna Roy, a political and social activist, gave up her career in the Indian Administrative Service in 1975 to devote her time to social work and social reform. She has focused her energies on helping establish the Sanghatan in 1990, a grass roots organization that works for the empowerment of workers and peasants. In 2000, Ms. Roy won the Ramon Magsaysay award for her role in empowering what is rightfully theirs by the people's right to violence continues unabated spoke exclusively to Jyoti Journal. Excerpts from the interview.



work and social reform. She Rajasthan, where she Mazdoor Kisan Shakti roots peoples organization empowerment of workers Roy won the Ramon community leadership and Indian villagers to claim upholding and exercising information. As Maoist in the country, Ms. Roy Malhotra for the Wall Street

WSJ: In recent weeks, India's Maoists rebels have unleashed a reign of terror across the countryside, especially in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, murdering people and damaging public property. As someone who has worked as an activist for many decades in rural India, what is the reason for this sudden violence?

AR: It is now widely accepted that development has not reached people in Chattisgarh and other parts of the country. The Adivasis, or tribals who live here, are delinked from other parts of the country socially, culturally and politically, they are really like an island. Since Independence, most government officials have treated these areas as punishment postings. Few have wanted to live and work there and those who have gone have not treated the tribals as their equals. It's been a sort of sahib-servant relationship. Several activists and those in the development sector did work there, but always came under surveillance like Binayak Sen. With Sen, as you know, he was arrested and put behind bars and accused of sympathizing with the Maoists. An important group which reached the tribal areas were the Christian missionaries who set up schools there, followed by Hindu right-wing groups who decided that the tribals must be "saved" from the Christians. These religious tensions usually ended in violence. In the meantime, the tribal belt, which is really the mineral belt of India, became the focus of interest of multinational companies...

WSJ: Tell me the geographical extent of the tribal belt?

AR: It's huge, from Bihar and Bengal to Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, via Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and parts of Maharashtra. Maoist rebels claim they control 182 districts out of 604 districts in the country. Because of this overwhelming mineral wealth and the desire of the MNCs to tap it, the government, very often, are in hand in glove with these MNCs, and rode roughshod over all democratic norms and principles of political equality and equity to acquire the land. The government tried to use the laws to clear the forests of the tribals who opposed the taking over of their lands. It didn't work because the law also empowers the tribals to rights over land. When you touch a raw nerve like land, the people rise up. In fact, there is this contradiction today in India, where we talk about the right to property as a fundamental right . But that should also mean that the right to property of the tribals is equally valid and important. So the "persuasion" tried by government and MNCs didn't work. Alternative employment was offered, but it was so meager that there was an uncomfortable impasse for some time. Meanwhile, there remains no system of governance, no delivery, no sympathy or understanding on the part of the government per se.

WSJ: But there were several infrastructure projects that came up, dams and roads and bridges, surely they were made to help the people?

AR: If you've been to any dam site you'll realize that once dams are constructed, they often don't benefit the oustees. Often the land gets sold to outsiders. I saw an interesting pamphlet the other day about "Jat land" in Chhatisgarh. Now the Jats are a community in faraway Haryana and Punjab and they've been sold land in Chattisgarh ! It's illegal because it's a violation of the rights of tribals who cannot be alienated from their land. So it's a 'benami' transaction (carried out in someone else's name).

WSJ: How did the Chhatisgarh tribals end up selling their land to the Jats?

AR: The tribals are still not only needy but also very naïve, they don't know what their rights are, they often make uninformed choices and can be persuaded to mortgage their land and when they cant repay their loans, well, they sell it. In fact, the rest of India has allowed them to remain primitive in their responses. We have not done anything to offer proper opportunities for education or given them a meaningful stake in the mainstream.

WSJ: So how did the Maoists get involved?

AR: This fertile ground offered the Maoists the perfect opportunity because the state was seen as the villain in every way possible. Of course, the state reacted too. With violence it wasn't going to take things lying down. So they created, at least in Chhattisgarh, the 'Salwa Judum' or a people's army. They armed people, including children, with guns to fight the Maoists. Several people opposed the creation of such a vigilante army, set up and supported by both the Congress and the BJP.

Now an army is mandated to fight an outside, invading force, but how can it fight its own people? The need to seek political and developmental solutions remains on top of the agenda. But the State of Chhatisgarh has become a police state. All those who protested against the 'Salwa Judum' were and are being silenced and jailed. So in a situation where the tribals are beaten up by the forest guards, fired upon by policemen and even set upon by the Salwa Judum, what is their recourse without access to democracy ? We have now set up a group called the 'Citizens for Peace' and our stand is that all peaceful means must be explored and political negotiations must take place.

WSJ: Home minister P. Chidambaram has said that you should negotiate on behalf of the tribals...

AR: We have offered to come up with new ideas, and help set up a dialogue. But we are clear that we can't negotiate on behalf of the tribals or with the government. It is the government's business to negotiate, not ours.

WSJ : So what is your group going to do?

AR: We want to create public opinion that tells both sides of the story. Those of us who live in the big cities know the power of the media and how the media has access only to one kind of thought. But people need to know both sides.

WSJ: Do you think Mr. Chidambaram's offer to negotiate with the tribals is an acknowledgement that the state has failed?

AR: The government has failed, yes! But the state will fail if the Army and Air Force are used to crackdown against the Maoists. The Air Force is already supposed to have done a survey of the entire area. If the Army and the Air Force do go in, it's war. That is what we want to avoid. We have openly said that anybody who indulges in violence or kills is a murderer, be it a policeman or a tribal person.

However, I also want to make one thing clear. The law must be fair, there must be good governance and the state must allow independent monitoring teams into the area.

WSJ: Do you think good governance will solve the problem? Isn't there an ideological underpinning to the Maoist violence?

AR: Good governance may not resolve it, but it will prepare some space for resolution.

WSJ : But you don't think it's an ideological struggle ?

AR :The ideological struggle is for the Maoists. For the people it's different; they are fighting for succor. The people have taken to this ideology because there is no alternative, or they see it as their best alternative. If you give them a better alternative, the people will go there. I would like to quote the Bolivian prime minister Evo Morales here who said, there is the Left and there is the Right, but we are the people.

In our country, the way it often works is that when we vote for a particular political party, the vote is the most reasonable choice from the vast set of negative choices that we face. For the tribals, the truth is that there is no choice, or very little.

WSJ: Are you saying that there is little alternative for the tribals but to follow the Maoists in taking up arms because the government doesn't exist?

AR: Yes. The truth is that the government doesn't exist in any of these areas, or hardly. It has only existed to exploit them.

WSJ: So why the violence? Do you think the violence is justified?

AR: These are two separate questions. Violence from either side cannot be justified, but it occurs due to many reasons. It's a failure of listening to the people. If the state consistently doesn't listen to the people who are the sovereign, then what results may seem like "irrationality." Although I don't think it's irrational, the fact that the tribal is taking up arms to defend his life, his family, his land. If a man dies fighting for his country against Pakistan he is considered a hero. But if a tribal dies fighting for his land, why don't we call him a hero? Isn't it the same thing? As for the violence, we can't justify it, but we have to understand the circumstances that lead people to choose violence over other means to fight for their lives and livelihood.

WSJ: What about a state like West Bengal which have been run by the Left parties for several decades, why are the Maoists rebelling against them?

AR: There again, MNCs were brought in without consulting the people, which is why they rose up against the Left in Bengal. This has had a direct impact in the elections. Nandigram and Singur, two sites in Bengal where large tracts of land were sought to be given to MNCs are an example of the alienation from people. Truth is, the people who have gone to the "other side," who became Maoists, were once with the Left, they were supporters of the party. A party which used to consistently listen to the people and were its voice has, somewhere, not listened to them.

WSJ: You say that MNCs grabbed land in the name of development, but several MNCs like the Tatas in Singur in West Bengal, Posco in Orissa are trying to build industry, improve per capita income and socio-economic indicators...?

AR: Let us say that most of the projects grab more land than they need and come in without any democratic process of consultation with people. The government has given large tracts of land to Special Economic Zones and to MNCs in the name of boosting export, but I would like to know whether exports

have really gone up. Moreover, they hardly employ local people...We have to ask ourselves, who is benefiting from this industrialization. Who is losing?

WSJ: Aren't we romanticizing this? After all, industrialization is the way forward...

AR: This is the voice of the people, not a few romantic young people with revolutionary ideals. There is no transparency, that's the problem. Nobody knows whether the MNC is telling the truth when they demand a certain acreage for developing a project. Or whether the people have really been consulted and whether the government has the people in mind when it agrees to certain terms and conditions. There have been so many betrayals...The breakdown of trust is more or less complete.

Meanwhile, the question also is, what is "development"? If I don't have food in my belly and my land has been taken away for a big project, is that "development?" How am I going to gauge it? Does 8% or 9% growth every year constitute "development"? Should we measure it by the property we own in the cities or the amount of gold that is bought and sold or whether the people of India have access to food, shelter and health?

And if someone thinks that this 8%-9 % growth is going to take India forward and India's going to fly, then believe me, it is going to be pulled down by the remaining 80%. That is why this 80% has got to be nurtured, they have to be given rights and access, they need some share in this spectacular growth of ours.

WSJ: And violence...

AR: It is the absolute last resort. When reason has failed, when rationality has failed, when compassion has failed...History teaches us that violence only occurs when everything else has failed. If this is beneficial development, why is there so much violent opposition to it?

WSJ: So this "red corridor" that runs through the heart of India, a state within a state...

AR: I don't know how "red" it is. But we have to ask ourselves, how to take this forward. I would go the Gandhian way, which is talk to the other side and treat them as equals, negotiate, find out what's gone wrong. But we can't send the army in as Home Minister P.Chidambaram is threatening to do. In any case we must talk to the people who are facing the consequences the most.

WSJ: Its interesting that the Congress-led government at the Centre has the same views as all the opposition parties which run the affected states, whether it is the Left in Bengal or the BJP in Chhatisgarh?

AR: Why is that surprising? After all, every political party laying claim to a different ideology has ruled different parts of the country at different times and nothing changed for the tribals. Moreover, the tribal leadership has either not been accepted and promoted, nor have their histories or ideologies become part of the mainstream. Instead, they've been forever the subjects or recipients of ideologies evolved by others. One of the biggest failures of independent India has been the failure to give the tribals a place in the national scene.

WSJ: Do you think government programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) work in disaffected areas like these?

AR: That's what the states are claiming. However, programs like the NREGA demand a modicum of peace, you can't work in the fields if violence is breaking out all around you.

WSJ: On the Right to Information (RTI) Act, with which you've been closely associated since its inception 4 years ago, what is the progress so far?

AR: The RTI has become a lifeline for democracy in our country. Despite the failures of various state commissioners or government to implement Section 4. (This mandates the government to publicly disclose as many as 17 bits of information, including its budget, personnel, areas of work, etc.) That's why today the government can't touch the RTI without touching the whole of India. Because it's been used by a variety of people for a variety of reasons, with reasonable success. Sharing information is sharing power and nobody understands this better than the bureaucracy and the politicians, in that order.

But the people are now asking for their, for our share of governance, our share in decision-making, in fact if the tribals of India had had RTI 40 years ago, the situation that we face today wouldn't have happened. Wherever I travel, people feel the RTI is their Act and they own it. This is a fundamental change from what existed years ago.

Of course, a number of problems remain, of infrastructure, non-delivery, of systems not being in place, information commissioners not being trained, etc. But on the whole, the Act has worked.

WSJ: But despite its success, the government wants to amend it. Why?

AR: The government wants to put all file notings under wrap. Meaning, all discussions, consultations, all reasons for decision-making should become secret. Which means you'll know nothing about the process, just the end decision.

WSJ: But so far the process has been open?

AR: Yes, so far the process has been open, although they now want to close that. The Department of Personnel & Training which comes under the Prime Minister's Office, which is responsible for the functioning of the RTI, is now saying that the "consultative process" as well as anything that protects the "candour" of people expressing their opinion, will not be revealed. Behind this move to amend the Act and to kill its spirit, is the bureaucracy.

WSJ: So the government which gave the RTI to the people four years ago is now taking it away?.

AR: Equally horrifying is that all applications which are "frivolous or vexatious" will be disallowed. Now who is going to decide what that is? Possibly, the policeman or the 'patwari' (village revenue official) or the 'sarpanch' (village headman)... Naturally, everything will be "vexatious"...The move undermines the entire Act itself.

WSJ: You've been involved with the NREGA on the ground, how well do you think it has worked?

AR: I will say that this is the first rural development service where people know what they are receiving so they can monitor it, where there has been concurrent evaluation, where we know what the losses or gains are. So, every time I read about corruption in the NREGA I am thrilled, not because there is corruption but because for the first time, so many people are protesting against waste of public money. India should be proud.

WSJ: Give me an example...

AR: A women's group in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, has got 1400,000 rupees (\$29,710) as unemployment allowance because they applied for work and didn't get it. According to the Act, you have to get work in 15 days within five kilometers of your village, and if the government can't give you work, it has to pay you unemployment allowance...Could you ever think of something like this before?

WSJ: But what about the enormous leakages and lakhs of rupees down the drain...

AR: For the first time, we know where the money has gone, even if its down the drain. We know who's swindled it and how it has been swindled. In Bhilwara, in Rajasthan, we have just completed a social audit. We used RTI to access public records and bring them out into the public domain, share it with people whose names are on the records and took a public meeting to testify whether their names were rightly or wrongly there.

You see, RTI is a mandatory provision in the NREGA, which means transparency and accountability on the part of government functionaries is now mandatory. That's how you find out what's going on, because now the people can't be refused information. It's mandatory for every 'panchayats' to do a social audit before the next installment of money is released by the government.

WSJ: What is a social audit?

AR: It is an audit where every penny can be tracked, but it goes beyond the money to questions like quality and choice. They are now taking place all over the country. In Andhra Pradesh, they do more than 2 dozen audits every day, and over the last few months they've recovered more than 60 million rupees from defaulters...For me, this is democracy at work.

WSJ: Tell me about your Bhilwara social audit?

AR: We were able to get some transparency in the muster rolls, in the labor lists. Then we discovered how money for materials was being wasted. There was this bicycle repair shop that was issuing bills for the supply of cement and materials worth lakhs of rupees. We traced this through VAT, etc, and now the whole lower political system and the lower bureaucracy is up in arms against us. I'll give you a positive example too. Thirty Bhil tribal families, which have been migrating for several years looking for work in the big cities, for the first time did not migrate last year. Because of the NREGA, they found work in the village.

If there had been a process like this in Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand, in the tribal areas, why should there have been any violence at all? Fifteen years ago, when we talked of social audit, we were told we were Naxalites, but today a social audit is an institutional form of governance.

WSJ: So this is now being replicated all over the country?

AR: Two years ago, an industrial design institute in Pune, Maharashtra, came to us asking us they wanted to look at the tools used by women in the NREGA. In the last 60 years, nobody has taken so much interest in tools used by poor women. What should the 'gainti' or the pick-axe be like, can fiber-glass rods be used to reduce its weight, and should it be both-sided or one-sided? What about the 'tagari,' or the tray in which the mud is lifted, should it be lighter? If you carry it on your hip, should it be shaped round or should it have a dent?

Now, with one click of the computer mouse you can find out the name of the man or the woman who has got work under NREGA, her job card number, how many days of work they've got, how they have been paid, etc. It's all on the Web site and its open to everyone.

WSJ: Thank you very much. [WSJ](#)