

India: The Largest Democracy?

Arundhati Roy Disturbs Democratic Daydreaming, book review

By [Trond Overland](#)

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Arundhati Roy is an unusual Indian woman. Instead of acting the graceful upholder of traditional values, she goes on challenging the hard core of establishment thinking. Roy is India's leading commentator on such evils as militaristic imperialist capitalism, Hindu-supported genocide of Muslims, and dam disasters. In her latest book, *Listening to Grasshoppers; Field Notes on Democracy*, she hammers at perhaps the most central of all contemporary sacred pillars, i.e. that of democracy, which in her words "have metastasized into something dangerous".

Grasshoppers is a collection of essays on such recent events as the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, the 2006 visit to India by "the war criminal" U.S. President George W. Bush, the 2002 Gujarat carnage (between 2000-4000 Muslims slaughtered), the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament by "so-called" Pakistan-based terrorists, and the growing inequality in India ("the old society has curdled and separated into a thin layer of thick cream - and a lot of water...").

A radical analysis of democracy runs through the book's fiery chapters, like a river running from its mountainous source towards the ocean. Roy's conclusion is disquieting: she is forced by the rationale of her facts and arguments to approve of violence as a means of people's resistance to injustice. She observes with understanding that many of the poor are "crossing over... to another side; the side of armed struggle."

While reviewers across India are busy assuring their readership of their being in wonderful agreement with the greater part of Roy's information and reflections, they uniformly disagree with her basic take on the rising violence amongst India's poor. The world-wide success of Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* would not be the only reason why they have to agree at least somewhat. The documented material is just too true and persuasive. As readers we are forcefully moved to wish that things would be very different - and this reviewer is left to ponder how such a critique of the world's largest democracy may produce such a fundamental clash between the radical author and her educated audience, the newspapers columnists, the upholders of status quo.

The key appears to be capitalism and communal unrest, or communal fascism as Roy calls it. She eloquently argues that democracy in India is not for, by and of the people but for, by and of capitalism - "designed to uphold the consensus of the elite for market growth". Here are two quotes from the book:

"Dangerous levels of malnutrition and permanent hunger are the preferred model these days. Forty-seven per cent of India's children below three suffer from malnutrition, 46 per

cent are stunted... Today an average rural family eats about hundred kilograms less food in a year than it did in the early 1990s. But in urban India, wherever you go – shops, restaurants, railway stations, airports, gymnasiums, hospitals – you have TV monitors in which election promises have already become 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 singing-dancing world of Bollywood's permanent pelvic thrusts, of permanently privileged, permanently happy Indians waving the tricolor flag and Feeling Good. It's becoming harder and harder to tell which one's the real world and which one's the virtual."

"Personally I don't believe that entering the electoral fray is a path to alternative politics ... because I believe that strategically battles must be waged from positions of strength, not weakness. The target of the dual assault of neo-liberalism and communal fascism are the poor and the minority communities. As 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... 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. Individual charisma, personality politics, cannot effect radical change."

Hardly the stuff that middle-class democratic daydreaming is made of. More like a real nightmare, actually.

So, by providing a proper perspective on the role of the world's largest democracy as a mechanism and mouthpiece for market forces, Roy stimulates debate on a question of global importance: Democracy for, by and of what? It seems that democracy can never be for democracy's sake, it has to serve some purpose. In other words, what kind of values and fundamental mentality are needed for democracy to be really successful and well functioning?

P.R. Sarkar, the founder of Prout, the Progressive Utilization Theory, opined that democracy can never be successful unless the majority of the population are moralists. In other words, there needs to be a leading trend that supports humanistic values and spiritual growth. Capitalism on the contrary serves to break down whatever remains of those very values. In its relentless quest for individual material acquisitions and selfish comfort it makes us all insensitive to the suffering of others and prone to divisive tendencies. It is in this contemporary reality, in the late phase of mature capitalism, that Roy keeps haunting the lazy, unimaginative and selfish middle class with her vision of a capitalistic system headed for hell.

Grasshoppers may not provide all or any answers at all to Roy's ongoing inquiry. Also, Roy is not God and there may be more complex causes as to Muslim genocides and other of her pet themes than what she chooses to emphasize. However, her writing most definitely raises some very important questions — and reactions. Roy's concrete, bold way of measuring the pulse and temperature of the sick body of democracy leaves no one undisturbed it seems. We would not be surprised if irrational, defensive reactions continue to hound her noble inquiry into contemporary leadership and official thinking.

Listening to Grasshoppers; Field Notes on Democracy, Arundhati Roy, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin, India 2009, 240 pages, 499 rupees.

Trond Øverland writes on progressive socio-economics. He is currently based in Copenhagen, Denmark

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