

'Its outright war and both sides are choosing their weapons'

Chhattisgarh. Jharkhand. Bihar. Andhra Pradesh. Signposts of fractures gone too far with too little remedy; Arundhati Roy in conversation with Shoma Chaudhury on the violence rending our heartland



There is an atmosphere of growing violence across the country. How do you read the signs? In what context should it be read?

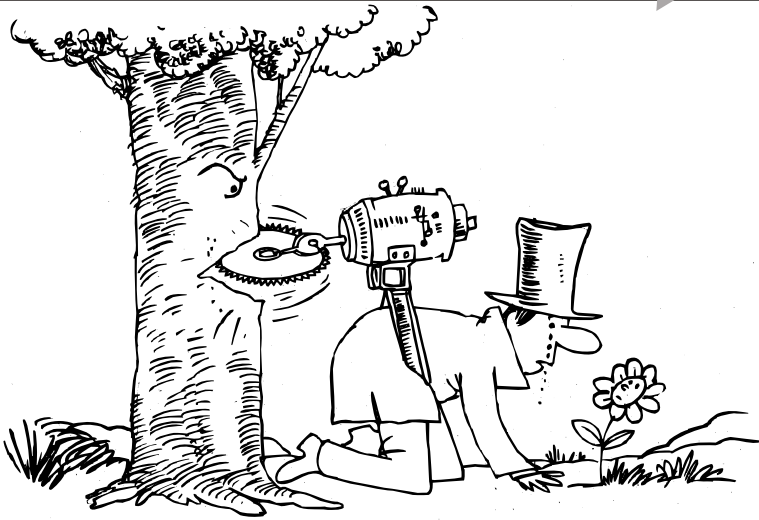
You don't have to be a genius to read the signs. We have a growing middle class, reared on a diet of radical consumerism and aggressive greed. The

'Its outright war and both sides are choosing their weapons' by Shoma Chaudhury
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greed that is being generated (and marketed as a value interchangeable with nationalism) can only be sated by grabbing land, water and resources from the vulnerable. What we're witnessing is the most successful secessionist struggle ever waged in independent India — the secession of the middle and upper classes from the rest of the country. It's a vertical secession, not a lateral one. They're fighting for the right to merge with the world's elite somewhere up there in the stratosphere. They've managed to commandeer the resources, the coal, the minerals, the bauxite, the water and electricity. Now they want the land to make more cars, more bombs, more mines — supertoys for the new supercitizens of the new superpower. So its outright war and people on both sides are choosing their weapons. The government and the corporations reach for structural adjustment, the World Bank, the ADB, FDI, friendly court orders, friendly policy makers, help from the 'friendly' corporate media and a police force that will ram all this down people's throats. Those who want to resist this process have, until now, reached for dharnas, hunger strikes, satyagraha, the courts and what they thought was friendly media. But now more and more are reaching for guns. Will the violence grow? If the 'growth rate' and the Sensex are going to be the only barometers the government uses to measure progress and the well-being of people, then of course it will.

You once remarked that though you may not resort to violence yourself, you think it has become immoral to condemn it, given the circumstances in the country. Can you elaborate on this view?

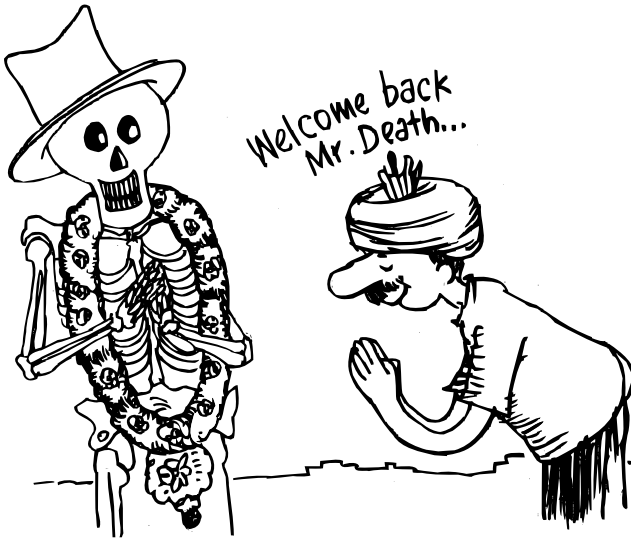
I doubt I used the word 'immoral' — morality is an elusive business, as changeable as the weather. What I feel is this: non-violent movements have knocked at the door of every democratic institution in this country for decades, and have been spurned and humiliated. Look at the Bhopal gas victims, the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The nba had a lot going for it — high-profile leadership, media coverage, more resources than any other mass movement. What went wrong? People are bound to want to rethink strategy. When Sonia Gandhi begins to promote satyagraha at the World Economic Forum in Davos, it's time for us to sit up and think. For example, is mass civil



disobedience possible within the structure of a democratic nation state? Is it possible in the age of disinformation and corporate-controlled mass media? Are hunger strikes umbilically linked to celebrity politics? Would anybody care if the people of Nangla Machhi or Bhatti mines went on a hunger strike?

I've always felt that it's ironic that hunger strikes are used as a political weapon in a land where most people go hungry anyway. We are in a different time and place now. Up against a different, more complex adversary. We've entered the era of NGOs — in which mass action can be a treacherous business. We have demonstrations which are funded, we have sponsored dharnas and social forums which make militant postures but never follow up on what they preach. We have all kinds of 'virtual' resistance. Meetings against SEZs sponsored by the biggest promoters of SEZs. Awards and grants for environmental activism and community action given by corporations responsible for devastating whole ecosystems. Now we have NGOs who make a lot of noise, write a lot of reports, but whom the sarkar is more than comfortable with. How do we make sense of all this? The place is crawling with professional diffusers of real political action.

There was a time when mass movements looked to the courts for justice. The courts have rained down a series of judgements that are so unjust, so insulting to the poor in the language they use, they take your breath away. The judiciary, along with the corporate press, is now seen as the lynchpin of the neo-liberal project. In a climate like this, when people feel that they are being worn down, exhausted by these interminable 'democratic' processes, only to be eventually humiliated, what are they supposed to do? Of course it isn't as though the only options are binary — violence versus non-violence. There are political parties that believe in armed struggle but only as one part of their overall political strategy. Political workers in these struggles have been dealt with brutally, killed, beaten, and imprisoned under false charges. People are fully aware that to take to arms is to call down upon yourself the myriad forms of the violence of the Indian State. The minute armed struggle becomes a strategy, your whole world shrinks and the colours fade to black



and white. But when people decide to take that step because every other option has ended in despair, should we condemn them? We are living in times when to be ineffective is to support the status quo (which no doubt suits

some of us). And being effective comes at a terrible price. I find it hard to condemn people who are prepared to pay that price.

You have been travelling a lot on the ground — can you give us a sense of the trouble spots you have been to? Can you outline a few of the combat lines in these places?

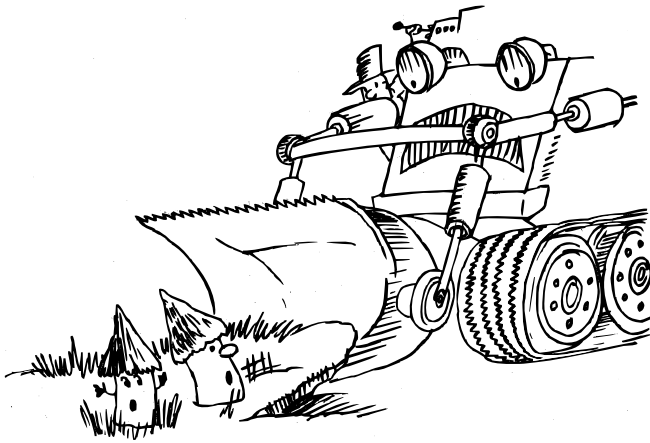
Huge question — what can I say? The military occupation of Kashmir, neo-fascism in Gujarat, civil war in Chhattisgarh, mncs raping Orissa, the submergence of hundreds of villages in the Narmada Valley, people living on the edge of absolute starvation, the devastation of forest land, the Bhopal victims living to see the West Bengal government re-wooing Union Carbide — now calling itself Dow Chemicals — in Nandigram. I haven't been recently to Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, but we know about the almost hundred thousand farmers who have killed themselves. We know about the fake encounters and the terrible repression in Andhra Pradesh. Each of these places has its own particular history, economy, ecology. None is amenable to easy analysis. And yet there is connecting tissue, there are huge international cultural and economic pressures being brought to bear on them.

How does one view the recent State and police violence in Bengal?

No different from police and State violence anywhere else — including the issue of hypocrisy and doublespeak so perfected by all political parties including the mainstream Left. Are Communist bullets different from capitalist ones? I don't know if all of this has to do with climate change. The Chinese Communists are turning out to be the biggest capitalists of the 21st century. Why should we expect our own parliamentary Left to be any different? Nandigram and Singur are clear signals. It makes you wonder — is the last stop of every revolution advanced capitalism? Think about it — the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the Vietnam War, the anti-apartheid struggle, the supposedly Gandhian freedom struggle in India... what's the last station they all pull in at?

The Maoist attack in Bijapur — the death of 55 policemen. Are the rebels only the flip side of the State?

How can the rebels be the flip side of the State? Would anybody say that those who fought against apartheid — however brutal their methods — were the flip side of the State? What about those who fought the French in Algeria? Or those who fought the Nazis? or those who are fighting the US occupation of Iraq? This facile new report-driven ‘human rights’ discourse, makes politicians of us all. However pristine we would like to be, the tragedy is that we have run out of pristine choices. There is a civil war in Chhattisgarh sponsored, created by the Chhattisgarh government, which is publicly pursuing the Bush doctrine: if you’re not with us, you are with the terrorists. The lynchpin of this war, apart from the formal security forces, is the *Salva Judum* — a government-backed militia of ordinary people forced to take up



arms, forced to become *spos* (special police officers). The Indian State has tried this in Kashmir, in Manipur, in Nagaland. Tens of thousands have been killed; hundreds of thousands tortured, thousands have disappeared. Now the government wants to import these failed strategies into the heartland. Thousands of *adivasis* have been forcibly moved off their mineral-rich lands into police camps. Hundreds of villages have been forcibly evacuated. Those lands, rich in iron-ore, are being eyed by corporations like the Tatas

and Essar. While everybody's eyes are fixed on the spiralling violence between government-backed militias and guerrilla squads, multinational corporations quietly make off with the mineral wealth. That's the little piece of theatre being scripted for us in Chhattisgarh.

Of course it's horrible that 55 policemen were killed. But they're as much the victims of government policy as anybody else. For the government and the corporations they're just cannon fodder. For the Maoist guerrillas, the police and spos they killed were the armed personnel of the Indian State, the main, hands-on perpetrators of repression, torture, custodial killings, and false encounters. They're not innocent civilians if such a thing exists. I have no doubt that the Maoists can be agents of terror and coercion too and they have committed unspeakable atrocities.

I have no doubt they cannot lay claim to undisputed support from local people — but who can? Still, no guerrilla army can survive without local support. That's a logistical impossibility. And the support for Maoists is growing, not diminishing. That says something. People have no choice but to align themselves on the side of whoever they think is less worse.

The government has slammed the door in the face of every attempt at non-violent resistance. When people take to arms, there is going to be all kinds of violence — revolutionary, lumpen and outright criminal. The government is responsible for the monstrous situations it creates.

'Naxals', 'Maoists', 'outsiders': these are terms being very loosely used these days.

'Outsiders' is a generic accusation used in the early stages of repression by governments who have begun to believe their own publicity and can't imagine that their own people have risen up against them. That's the stage the CPM is at now in Bengal, though some would say repression in Bengal is not new, it has only moved into higher gear. In any case, what's an outsider? Who decides the borders? Are they village boundaries? Tehsil? Block? District? State? Is narrow regional and ethnic politics the new Communist mantra? About Naxals and Maoists — well... India is about to become a police state in which everybody who disagrees with what's going on risks

being called a terrorist. Islamic terrorists have to be Islamic — so that's not good enough to cover most of us. They need a bigger catchment area. So leaving the definition loose, undefined, is effective strategy, because the time is not far off when we'll all be called Maoists or Naxalites, terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, and shut down by people who don't really know or care who Maoists or Naxalites are. In villages, of course, that has begun — thousands of people are being held in jails across the country, loosely charged with being terrorists trying to overthrow the state.

The Indian State and media largely view the Maoists as an “internal security” threat. Is this the way to look at them?

I'm sure the Maoists would be flattered to be viewed in this way.

The Maoists want to bring down the State. Given the autocratic ideology they take their inspiration from, what alternative would they set up? Wouldn't their regime be an exploitative, autocratic, violent one as well? Isn't their action already exploitative of ordinary people? Do they really have the support of ordinary people?

I think it's important for us to acknowledge that both Mao and Stalin are dubious heroes with murderous pasts. Tens of millions of people were killed under their regimes. Can we pretend that China's cultural revolution didn't happen? Or that millions of people in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were not victims of labour camps, torture chambers, the network of spies and informers, and the secret police. The history of these regimes is just as dark as the history of Western imperialism, except for the fact that they had a shorter life-span. We cannot condemn the occupation of Iraq, Palestine and Kashmir while we remain silent about Tibet and Chechnya. I would imagine that for the Maoists, the Naxalites, as well as the mainstream Left, being honest about the past is important to strengthen people's faith in the future. The Maoists in Nepal have waged a brave and successful struggle against the monarchy. Right now, in India, the Maoists and the various Marxist-Leninist groups are leading the fight against immense injustice here. They are fighting not just the State, but feudal landlords and their armed militias. They are the only people who are making a dent. And I admire that. It may well be that when they

come to power, they will, as you say, be brutal, unjust and autocratic, or even worse than the present government. Maybe, but I'm not prepared to assume that in advance. If they are, we'll have to fight them too. But right now, it is important to acknowledge that they are bearing the brunt of being at the forefront of resistance. Many of us are in a position where we are beginning to align ourselves on the side of those who we know have no place for us in their religious or ideological imagination. It's true that everybody changes radically when they come to power. But does this mean that people whose dignity is being assaulted should give up the fight because they can't find saints to lead them into battle?

Is there a communication breakdown in our society?

Yes.▶

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