

India's "Shadow Capitalism": Rising Poverty and Social Destitution

Exposing the Lie about India: Shooting the Messenger

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Back in 2003/2004, the Indian government spent around \$20 million telling its citizens that India was shiny and bright with the slogan 'India shining'. Many went on to use the feelgood slogan in an attempt to legitimize the opening up of the economy and neo liberal economic policies. A part of India was indeed shining.

A strong theme that emerged to help explain the BJP-led government's subsequent election defeat was the failure to acknowledge that most of India was certainly not shining and that there were in fact two India's - a smaller macburger-munching, trendy coffee-bar-swilling stratum that had benefited from economic reforms and a much larger threadbare India struggling to get by.

In the West, politicians and pro free market economists were quick to jump on the 'India shining' bandwagon as well, heralding India as an economic miracle. Farmers drinking pesticide, hundreds of millions living in poverty, increasing food prices and state-corporate grabs for land and minerals - that was all conveniently brushed aside. It didn't fit the narrative of India as the new chic.

In March 2012, Arundhati Roy's lengthy article 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story' appeared in India's Outlook magazine. It contained a wide ranging critique of US foreign policy, capitalism, imperialism, globalization, India's industrialization and the nation's various internal conflicts and numerous other matters. This too did not fit the narrative and, as a result, from some quarters provoked the kind of personal attacks that Roy has become accustomed to.

Where Arundhati Roy is concerned, there are many who like to leave logic aside and focus on Roy the person, stridently attacking her motives, psychology and personality.

What is it about Roy that elicits such bitter reactions, especially from within India and particularly in upper middle class circles? Such responses confuse personal prejudice, character assassination and sniping with critical analysis. It could well be that there is a good deal of truth in what Roy says on various matters, and perhaps that's the problem.

If certain of her arguments are too black and white then show it. If she leaves little room for nuance then discuss it. If she is playing fast and loose with facts, challenge her. Instead, what we too often have are outbursts that have little to do with the issues themselves, but with Roy and what some consider her to be.

There are the accusations that say she merely plays to a western audience that buys her

books, she is a self publicist or that her writings display some sort of personality deficit in terms of her constant attention seeking. Even well-respected authors with academic credentials forward such views. And while it may also be the case that there is a certain underlying misogyny inherent in some of the personal attacks, the question remains as to why do so many people get so fired up over her.

Anti-establishment figures in all countries have always been vilified or ridiculed by newspapers, TV channels, politicians and opinion leaders. And ordinary folk often follow suit. Noam Chomsky experiences it in the US. Roy is as terribly anti-India as Chomsky is as single-mindedly anti-US, so the warped line of reasoning goes.

Most of the time, the writings of such figures delve beneath the rhetoric and propaganda to highlight the true motives and intent underlying official policies. Their arguments, though, too often become buried beneath personal criticisms and smear campaigns which set out to undermine them as people and by proxy their analyses. Why deal with uncomplicated truths that challenge officialdom when they can be brushed aside or attention can be diverted from them with abuse?

As far as Roy is concerned, the smears against her take many forms. She seeks the limelight by jumping on the latest cause celebre. She's not an expert – others in a given field have been working for a cause for decades and never get the column inches she gets. And don't forget that she doesn't really understand the plight of the poor or oppressed. How could she choke on the stench of poverty or oppression with such a big silver spoon filling her mouth?

India doesn't need Roy to tell us what we already know, does it? We don't need such a westernised celebrity activist with prosaic writing to tell us how to put things right? India has thousands of hands on community activists and workers who are making a real difference every day.

Such is logic of the anti-Roy brigade. It's not so much her that they dislike, but what she says.

Looking at oneself in the mirror can be a painful process, especially when the mirror is, like India, not as shiny as you were led to believe. Roy holds up the mirror and forces people to look. It is then that the gap between the poor and violently oppressed and the self congratulatory 'new' India of AC shopping malls, gated communities and all manner of conspicuous displays of luxury which so many of the Indian upper middle classes cherish so much becomes too unbearable to accept. So what better response than denial? What better reaction than to vilify the messenger?

Could it be that Roy makes many feel too insecure? Could it possibly be that living in denial helps suppress the guilt that would gush forth if people were to acknowledge that a terrible price is being paid for an urban-chic lifestyle built on squeezing the life out of much of India via population displacement, land grabs, highly exploited labour, environmental degradation and state backed violence?

You don't have to be living in the gutter before you are allowed to express a valid opinion on poverty or oppression. And if you have a message, it would be foolish not to use your talent to reach out to as wide an audience as possible. But maybe that's part of the problem. For some, holding up a mirror to Indian society is bad enough, but Roy has the ability to project a realistic yet unpalatable image of India across the globe. With all their new found wealth,

that's what seems to annoy her critics most. When you strike at a raw nerve, unthinking, knee jerk reactions usually follow.

Originally from the northwest of England, Colin Todhunter has spent many years in India. He has written extensively for the Bangalore-based Deccan Herald, New Indian Express and Morning Star (Britain). His articles have also appeared in many other newspapers, journals and books. His East by Northwest site is at: <http://colintodhunter.blogspot.com>

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