WAR AND PEACE

Democracy is the 'Biggest Scam'

Arundhati Roy

[Arundhati Roy recently had a rare journalistic encounter with the armed guerrillas in the forests of central India. She spent a few weeks traveling with the insurgency deep in India's Maoist heartland and wrote about their struggle in a 20,000-word essay published in the Indian magazine Outlook. It's called "Walking with the Comrades."

She won the Lannan Foundation Cultural Freedom Prize in 2002 and is the author of a number of books, including the Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Her latest collection of essays, published by Haymarket, is *Field Notes on Democracy : Listening to Grasshoppers*. Recently Amy Goodman and Anjali Kamat spoke with her in New York. Excerpts]

AMY GOODMAN : Before we go into the very interesting journey you took, you arrive here on the seventh anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. You were extremely outspoken on the war and have continued to be. I remember seeing you at Riverside Church with the great Howard Zinn, giving a speech against the war. What are your thoughts now, seven years in? And how it's affected your continent, how it's affected India?

ARUNDHATI ROY : Well, I think the—you know, the saddest thing is that when the American elections happened and you had all the rhetoric of, you know, change you can believe in, and even the most cynical of us watched Obama win the elections and did feel moved, you know, watching how happy people were, especially people who had lived through the civil rights movement and so on, and, you know, in fact what has happened is that he has come in and expanded the war. He won the Nobel Peace Prize and took an opportunity to justify the war. It was as though those tears of the black people who watched, you know, a black man come to power were now cut and paste into the eyes of the world's elite watching him justify war.

And from where I come from, it's almost—you know, you think that they probably don't even understand what they're doing, the American government. They don't understand what kind of ground they stand on. When you say things like "We have to wipe out the Taliban," what does that mean? The Taliban is not a fixed number of people. The Taliban is an ideology that has sprung out of a history that, you know, America created anyway.

Iraq, the war is going on. Afghanistan, obviously, is rising up in revolt. It's spilled into Pakistan, and from Pakistan into Kashmir and into India. So we're seeing this superpower, in a way, caught in quicksand with a conceptual inability to understand what it's doing, how to get out or how to stay in. It's going to take this country down with it, for sure, you know, and I think it's a real pity that, in a way, at least George Bush was so almost obscene in his stupidity about it, whereas here it's smoke and mirrors, and people find it more difficult to decipher what's going on. But, in fact, the war has expanded.

ANJALI KAMAT : And Arundhati, how would you explain India's role in the expanding US war in Afghanistan and Pakistan? This is a climate of very good relations between India and the United States.

ARUNDHATI ROY : Well, India's role is—India's role is one of, at the moment, trying to position itself, as it keeps saying, as the natural ally of Israel and the US. And India is trying very hard to maneuver itself into a position of influence in Afghanistan. And personally, I believe that the American government would be very happy to see Indian troops in Afghanistan. It cannot be done openly, because it would just explode, you know, so there are all kinds of ways in which they are trying to create a sphere of influence there. So the Indian government is deep into the great game, you know, there, and of course the result is, you know, attacks in Kashmir and in Mumbai, not directly related to Afghanistan, but of course there's a whole history of this kind of maneuvering that's going on.

AMY GOODMAN : For an American audience, and perhaps for an audience just outside of the region, if you could really talk to us about an area you've been focusing a great deal on, of course, and that is Kashmir. Most people here know it as a sweater. That's what they think of when they hear "Kashmir."

ARUNDHATI ROY : OK, mm-hmm.

AMY GOODMAN : So, starting there, if you can tell us what is going on there—even place it for us geographically.

ARUNDHATI ROY : OK. Well, Kashmir, as they say in India, you know, is the unfinished business in the partition of India and Pakistan. So, as usual, it was a gift of British colonialism. You know, they threw it at us as they walked—I mean, as they withdrew. So Kashmir used to be an independent kingdom with a Muslim majority ruled by a Hindu king. And during—at the time of partition in 1947, as there was—you know, as you know, almost a million people lost their lives, because this line that was drawn between India and Pakistan passed through villages and passed through communities, and as Hindus fled from Pakistan and Muslims fled from India, there was massacre on both sides.

And at that time, oddly enough, Kashmir was peaceful. But then, when all the independent princedoms in India and Pakistan were asked to actually accede either to India or Pakistan, but Kashmir, the king was undecided, and that indecision resulted in, you know, Pakistani troops and non-official combatants coming in. And the king fled to Jammu, and then he acceded to India. But he was—you know, there was already a movement for democracy within Kashmir at that time. Anyway, that's the history.

But subsequently, there's always been a struggle for independence or self-determination there, which in 1989 became an armed uprising and was put down militarily by India. And today, the simplest way of explaining the scale of what's going on is that the US has 165,000 troops in Iraq, but the Indian government has 700,000 troops in the Kashmir valley—I mean, in Kashmir, security forces, you know, holding down a place with military might. And so, it's a military occupation.

ANJALI KAMAT : Arundhati Roy, your latest article in Outlook, "Walking with the Comrades," you end the piece by talking about the song that so many people

rose up in Pakistan listening to this song, [“Hum Dekhen Ge” by Iqbal Bano] and you place it in a completely different context. Start by talking about what’s happening in the forests of India. What is this war that India is waging against some of the poorest people, people known as tribals, indigenous people, Adivasis? Who are the Maoists? What’s happening there? And how did you get there?

ARUNDHATI ROY : Well, it’s been going on for a while, but basically, you know, I mean, there is a connection. If you look at Afghanistan, Waziristan, you know, the northeast states of India and this whole mineral belt that goes from West Bengal through Jharkhand through Orissa to Chhattisgarh, what’s called the Red Corridor in India, you know, it’s interesting that the entire thing is a tribal uprising. In Afghanistan, obviously, it’s taken the form of a radical Islamist uprising. And here, it’s a radical left uprising. But the attack is the same. It’s a corporate attack, you know, on these people. The resistance has taken different forms.

But in India, this thing known as the Red Corridor, if you look at a map of India, the tribal people, the forests, the minerals and the Maoists are all stacked on top of each other. You know, so—and in the last five years, the governments of these various states have signed MOUs with mining corporations worth billions of dollars.

ANJALI KAMAT: Memoranda of understanding.

ARUNDHATI ROY: Memorandums of understanding. So as we say, it’s equally an MOU-ist corridor as it is a Maoist corridor, you know? And it was interesting that a lot of these MOUs were signed in 2005. And at that time, it was just after this Congress government had come to power, and the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, announced that the Maoists are India’s “gravest internal security threat.” And it was very odd that he should have said that then, because the Maoists had actually just been decimated in the state of Andhra Pradesh. I think they had killed something like 1,600 of them. But the minute he said this, the shares in the mining companies went up, because obviously it was a signal that the government was prepared to do something about this, and then started this assault on them, which ended up as Operation Green Hunt, which is where now tens of thousands of paramilitary troops are moving into these tribal areas.

But before Operation Green Hunt, they tried another thing, which was that they armed a sort of tribal militia and backed by police in a state like Chhattisgarh, where I was traveling recently, they just went into the forest. This militia burned village after village after village, like something like 640 villages were, more or less, emptied. And it was—the plan was what’s known as strategic hamletting, which the Americans tried in Vietnam, which was first devised by the British in Malaya, where you try and force people to move into police wayside camps so that you can control them, and the villages are emptied so that the forests are open for the corporates to go.

And what happened actually was that out of the—in this area, in Chhattisgarh, out of, say, 350,000 people, about 50,000 people moved into the camps. Some

were forced, some went voluntarily. And the rest just went off the government radar. Many of them went to other states to work as migrant labor, but many of them just continued to hide in the forests, unable to come back to their homes, but not wanting to leave. But the fact is that in this entire area, the Maoists have been there for thirty years, you know, working with people and so on. So it's a very—it's not a resistance that has risen up against mining. It preceded that a long time—you know, by a long time. So it's very entrenched. And Operation Green Hunt has been announced because this militia, called the *Salwa Judum*, failed, so now they are upping the ante, because these MOUs are waiting. And the mining corporations are not used to being made to wait. You know, so there's a lot of money waiting.

And, I mean, what I want to say is that we are not using this word "genocidal war" lightly or rhetorically. But I traveled in that area, and what you see is the poorest people of this country, who have been outside the purview of the state. There's no hospital. There's no clinic. There's no education. There's nothing, you know? And now, there's a kind of siege, where people can't go out of their villages to the market to buy anything, because the markets are full of informers who are pointing out, you know, this person is with the resistance and so on. There's no doctors. There's no medical help. People are suffering from extreme hunger, malnutrition. So it's not just killing. You know, it's not just going out there and burning and killing, but it's also laying siege to a very vulnerable population, cutting them off from their resources and putting them under grievous threat. And this is a democracy, you know, so how do you do—how do you clear the land for corporates in a democracy? You can't actually go and murder people, but you create a situation in which they either have to leave or they starve to death.

ANJALI KAMAT : In your piece, you describe the people you traveled with, the armed guerrillas, as Gandhians with guns. Can you talk about what you mean by that and how—what you think of the violence perpetrated by the Maoists?

ARUNDHATI ROY : Well, you know, this is a very sharp debate in India about—I mean, you know, even the sort of mainstream left and the liberal intellectuals are very, very suspicious of Maoists. And everybody should be suspicious of Maoists, because, you know, they do—they have had a very—a very difficult past, and there are a lot of things that their ideologues say which do put a chill down your spine.

But when I went there, I have to say, I was shocked at what I saw, you know, because in the last thirty years I think something has radically changed among them. And the one thing is that in India, people try and make this difference. They say there's the Maoists, and then there's the tribals. Actually, the Maoists are tribals, you know, and the tribals themselves have had a history of resistance and rebellion that predates Mao by centuries, you know? And so, I think it's just a name, in a way. It's just a name. And yet, without that organization, the tribal people could not have put up this resistance. You know, so it is complicated.

But when I went in, I lived with them for, you know, and I walked with them for a long time, and it's an army that is more Gandhian than any Gandhian, that leaves a lighter footprint than any climate change evangelist. You know, and as I

said, even their sabotage techniques are Gandhian. You know, they waste nothing. They live on nothing. And to the outside world—first of all, the media has been lying about them for a long time. A lot of the incidents of violence did not happen, you know, which I figured out. A lot of them did happen, and there was a reason for why they happened.

And what I actually wanted to ask people was, when you talk about nonviolent resistance—I myself have spoken about that. I myself have said that women will be the victims of an armed struggle. And when I went in, I found the opposite to be true. I found that 50 percent of the armed cadre were women. And a lot of the reason they joined was because for thirty years the Maoists had been working with women there. The women's organization, which has 90,000 members, which is probably the biggest feminist organization in India, now all 90,000 of those women are surely Maoists, and the government has given itself the right to shoot on sight. So, are they going to shoot these 90,000 people?

AMY GOODMAN : Arundhati Roy, the leader of the Maoists has asked you to be the negotiator, the mediator between them and the Indian government. What is your response?

ARUNDHATI ROY : Look, I wouldn't be a good mediator. You know, that's not my—those are not my skills. I think that somebody should do it, but I don't think that it should be me, because I just have no idea how to mediate, you know? And I don't think that we should be jumping into things that we don't know much about. And I certainly—I did say that. You know, I mean, it's—I don't know why they mentioned my name, but I think there are people in India who have those skills and who could do it, because it's very, very urgent that this Operation Green Hunt be called off. Very, very urgent, you know, but it would be silly for someone like me to enter that, because I think I'm too impatient. I'm too much of a maverick. You know, I don't have those skills.

AMY GOODMAN : I remember, back to Kashmir, when President Obama was running for president, Senator Obama, in an interview, talked about Kashmir, and he talked about it as a kind of flashpoint, said that we have to resolve the situation between India—between India and Pakistan around Kashmir so that Pakistan can focus on the militants. Can you talk about it as being a flashpoint and what you think needs to be done there?

ARUNDHATI ROY : Well, I think, you know, unfortunately, the thing about Kashmir is that India and Pakistan act as though Kashmir is a problem. But really for them both, Kashmir is a solution. You know, Kashmir is where they play their dirty games. And they don't want to solve it, because whenever they have, you know, internal problems, they can always pull up—pull this bunny out of the hat. So it's really—I really think that these two countries are not going to solve it, you know?

And what is happening is that there is a population of people who have been suffering untold misery for so many years, you know, and once again so many lies have been told about it. The Indian media is just—the falsification that it's

involved with about Kashmir is unbelievable. Like two years ago—or was it last year? Two years ago, there was a massive uprising in Kashmir. I happened to be there at the time. I've never seen anything like this. You know, there were millions of people on the street all the time. And—

AMY GOODMAN : And they were rising up for?

ARUNDHATI ROY : They were rising up for independence. You know, they were rising up for independence. And then, that uprising was—you know, when they rose up with arms, that was wrong. When they rose up without arms, that was wrong, too.

And the way it was defused was with an election. An election was called. And then everybody was shocked, because there was a huge turnout at the elections. And all the—you know, we have many election experts in India who spend all their time in television studios analyzing the swing and this and that, but nobody said that all the leaders of the resistance were arrested. Nobody asked, what does it mean to have elections when there are 700,000 soldiers supervising every five meters, all the time, all year round? They don't have to push people on the end of a bayonet to the voting booth, you know? Nobody talked about the fact that there was a lockdown in every constituency. Nobody wondered what does it mean to people who are under that kind of occupation. The fact that they need somebody to go to, you know, when someone disappears—or, you know, they need some representative.

So now, once again, the violence has started. You know? It's a permanent sort of cycle where, obviously in the interest of geopolitical jockeying, any sense of morality is missing. And of course it's very fashionable to say that, you know, there isn't any morality involved in international diplomacy, but suddenly, when it comes to Maoists killing, morality just comes riding down on your head. You know, so people use it when they want to.

ANJALI KAMAT : And Arundhati, in both India and the United States, as these wars expand, as the military occupations, as you delineated, in Kashmir, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, as they expand, what is your message to antiwar activists, to peace activists around the world, here and in India? What do you think people need to be doing?

ARUNDHATI ROY : See, I think I just want to say one thing more, which is that in Kashmir, you have, as I said, 700,000 soldiers who have been turned into an administrative police force. In India, where they don't want to openly declare war against the Adivasis, you have a paramilitary police, which is being trained to be an army. So the police are turning into the army. The army is turning into the police. But to push through this growth rate, you know, you have basically this whole country is turning into a police state.

And I just want to say one thing about democracy. You know, in India, the elections—the elections were—they cost more than the American elections. Much more. This poor country costs much more. The most enthusiastic were the corporates. The members of parliament are—a majority of them are millionaires.

If you look at the statistics, actually this big majority it has ten percent of the vote. The BBC had a campaign where they had posters of a dollar bill—$500 bill sort of molting into an Indian 500 rupee note with Ben Franklin on one end and Gandhi on the other. And it said, “Kya India ka vote bachayega duniya ka note?” meaning “Will the Indian vote save the market?” You know? So voters become consumers. It’s a kind of scam that’s going on.

So the first message I would have to peace activists is—I don’t know what that means, anyway. What does “peace” mean? You know, we may not need peace in this unjust society, because that’s a way of accepting injustice, you know? So what you need is people who are prepared to resist, but not just on a weekend, not peace but not just on the weekend. In countries like India, now just saying, “OK, we’ll march on Saturday, and maybe they’ll stop the war in Iraq.” But in countries like India, now people are really paying with their lives, with their freedom, with everything. I mean, it’s resistance with consequences now. You know, it cannot be—it cannot be something that has no consequences. You know? It may not have, but you’ve got to understand that in order to change something, you’ve got to take some risks now. You’ve got to come out and lay those dreams on the line now, because things have come to a very, very bad place there. □□□

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