

Walking with the Comrades on a Journey of Hope

Arundhati Roy
Walking with the Comrades

Every night I think of this journey. That night sky, those forest paths. I see Comrade Kamla's heels in her scuffed chappals, lit by the light of my torch. I know she must be on the move. Marching not just for herself, but to keep hope alive for us all.

With these words, Arundhati Roy ends her powerful moving account, *Walking with the Comrades*. It is the story of a journey as seen through her eyes, but made by many. The background is singular yet universal, complex yet simple, personal yet shared. It is the story of peoples', the Dalits and Adivasis, and their struggles in the form of the PLGA*. The Indian state having accepted TINA** has been sold to the highest bidders, the global corporations who buy up land, people, minerals, democracy, resources, all at suitably knocked down prices. Dams, C20 India's new gods, bring poverty, destitutions and death to millions and immeasurable wealth to a handful. Forty percent of the world's large dam projects are in India. Why dams, and why they matter, are beyond this review. Yet reading Arundhati Roy, I realised it is time to understand the scale of death, human and environmental caused by dams.

Here however, it is walking that is the focus. The comrades, in case any one imagines polite bureau style men in suits, are children, women and men marching, like Kamla, because they have no alternative. Yet that is too defeatist. Kamla and the millions like her, march because they are the alternative. This is not a story with an end toward which people walk; the walking is the end. Comrades Kamla, is seventeen and a soldier, she wears the 'dress' of her army - red and green. A sari may have been something she once had, now there is the 'dress', and as likely only one set, - take it off, wash it and put it back on - is the field practice of this army. Alternative clothing is an option; 'civil' can be a smart suit, necessary for urban political work, or just about anything else that is not 'dress'. Dress is the green and red 'uniform' of the PLGA – an army Arundhati Roy comments - that leaves less carbon footprint than the most evangelical environmentalist.

The memory of Comrades Kamla's heels in her scuffed chappals comes from one of the marches during the story. There are over a hundred comrades marching in single file. Arundhati Roy is the only one, who A. is not a comrade, and B. allowed a torch. It is a concession to her weaker urban eyes that cannot see in jungle night. Comrade Kamla walks exactly in front. Arundhati Roy is to place her feet exactly where comrade Kamla's places hers. The light of the torch, pointed downward, has in its arch only the soldier's heels, and it is these that must be studied and followed. Comrade Kamla needs no light; her eyes are trained to see in the dark, jungle dark where not even the moon may shine. On

her back she carries weight many times what Roy carries, and on her head she balances still more weight. Slung across her back is her riffle - if she is trapped in an ambush her best hope is to be shot and killed outright. The alternative of what though may happen to this comrade is in the story, but the brutality is not easy to read. Yet like all comrades, Kamla will fight first, if the regular army kills her, she will be one more statistic in the Indian State's war on "insurgents". In the forests, she will become part of the songs of love, loss, resistance and hope.

For this is a story of hope; of resources, the people, on a journey of hope. It is a story as local as Dandakaranya, yet universal. It is as modern as the C21 century, yet as old as capitalism, imperialism and the sovereign state. It is a story of people, not as they are recorded by their masters, their states, but as they create themselves. For the hope is creating; your own identity, though in the forest that may carry many names, creating a land, though in the jungle that means carrying a rifle, creating an alternative, and in the world that means hope. In the marching, is the hope. Dalits and Adivasis are non-people, they may inconveniently crop up in democratic India' social accounting from time to time, yet they are non-people. In fact, they are the Indian Indians - the native tribal peoples of that vast sub-continent, hidden to the west except as reported insurgents and killers. In walking as comrades, the Adivasis become people, become alive, creative, fun, heroic and desperately hard working. The divisions are necessary for order, Dalits and Adivasis are many million, the PLGA are far fewer, they are those of the people who have trained, learnt like Comrade Kamla how to march, carry a riffle, fight, kill and risk torture if captured.

Walking with the Comrades has stories of young women and men who had been trapped by the regular forces, and the 'trained men' of the special units. Comrades Narmada and Masse each have a price on her head, which meant if taken alive the trained men could claim a reward. Conveniently for the special units however, the Indian state might forget to register their remains. Women form nearly half the PLGA. Command is held irrespective of sex, and women such as Comrade Nix (most wanted) held authority far beyond anything a woman might achieve in a British army. The acclaim 'most wanted' had been demonstrated when the brave Indian state had once sent 740 soldiers to take her. The odds you may think sound a little one sided, and you would be right - she escaped. Her authority though there in formal command, was more real in the immediacy men and women villages ahead would obey her relayed order. Her marching carried the authority of wisdom, practice and bravery. Women have fought the internal battle for equality in the PLGA now it is taken out cross the Adivasis. To such equality there is no alternative if the as a people the Adivasis are to survive. Every adult must contribute their part, whether planting crops in ground that sees no water – the dams have siphoned it off for profit, or carrying a riffle and being ready to die.

Youth are of special importance. The young must be taught to read and write if the struggle for survival is to be extended in range and expectation. In the PLGA

command, education and culture are coupled as a single section. There is a wonderfully funny scene where the young, speaking in over accentuated manner, practice their reading using media-state propaganda descriptions of them as bloodthirsty insurgents. As EP Thompson has commented, what is written may be intended for a purpose, how it is used may be for another. As the English named a people 'Welsh', meaning alien in their own land, so the Adivasis' fighters are described as insurgents in their land.

The points might be Williams'. Learning did not for him mean an institutionalised limiting curriculum, where as much unlearning might be carried on as any contribution made. Rather, learning was part of an expanding culture. As he comments of his childhood, people took the resources they had and learnt from these. Harry Price in *Border Country* is made to illustrate that, so too the children in this forest scene. The second connection, Wales, became ever more important for Williams. From there, he took the local and made it global. His intricate interventions on debates about nationalism, speak to many peoples from Palestine to Kurdistan. *People of the Black Mountains* is a story of the Dalits, the Adivasis. Names vary, locations differ, but the struggle to make a life and to cherish that life whether against Norman army or cash soaked dam, is universal. Himself a Warrior, *Walking with the Comrades* continues Raymond Williams' march. It is a resource for a journey of hope. Out-there still comrade Kamla is marching, rattle across her back, her heels visible if you have a torch. She is marching not just for herself, but on a journey of hope, for all of us.

*PLGA, People's Liberation Guerrilla Army

** TINA, 'There Is No Alternative'

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