

Arundhati Roy on India's Elections: "A Mockery of What Democracy Is Supposed to Be"

Tuesday 6 August 2019, by [EARLE Samuel](#), [ROY Arundhati](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2019).

The author and activist talks to The New Republic about Narendra Modi, the decimation of India's opposition, and the way forward.

"In India," Arundhati Roy wrote in 2002, "if you are a butcher or a genocidist who happens to be a politician, you have every reason to be optimistic." Roy was referring to Narendra Modi, the then-chief minister of Gujarat who had been implicated in the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in the state that killed at least 1,000 people. Modi has always maintained his innocence—implausibly so, in many eyes—but Roy's assessment of his future proved prescient. Following India's latest elections, which Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won with a landslide on a brazen message of Hindu supremacy, he is set for a second term as prime minister—and is more powerful than ever.

As Roy puts it, the "world's largest democracy"—a proud national epithet Roy places within scare quotes—exists in several centuries at once, caught between tradition, the caste system, and the chaos of turbo-charged capitalism. Modi embodies these contradictions more than most: a figure at once authentic and aspirational, promising both the glorious resurrection of Hindustan and neoliberal reforms; the mythical child *chaiwala* who now wears \$16,000 suits.

Modi was not named in Roy's long-awaited second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in 2017. But his vision of a Hindu nation haunted the book. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this," she has said, "but if a novel can have an enemy, then the enemy of this novel is the idea of 'one nation, one religion, one language,'" which is the slogan of Modi's *Hindutva* ideology.

Though Roy first rose to fame for her fiction, winning the Man Booker Prize in 1997 with her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, she never wanted to be known, as she once said, as "some pretty woman who wrote a book." Nor was she interested in becoming a cultural ambassador for the modern, "rising" India that has dominated the Western media's characterization of the country in the 21st century. Today, Roy is known as much for her politics as for her fiction. She has been imprisoned and charged with sedition, joined Maoists in India's jungle, and thrown her weight behind political movements across the globe. In June, she publishes her collected non-fiction, *My Seditious Heart*, a book that runs to over a thousand pages.

I recently spoke to Roy over email about the Indian election result, the meaning of Modi, and the role of a writer when—in her words—"the world is in a churning." This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and style.

Amid all that's changed in your writing and the world, Modi has always stood as a consistently terrifying figure within your work. Has the "tragedy" of his presidency played out how you expected, or has his leadership surprised you in some ways?

Modi's first term played out in ways I expected as well as in ways that I did not. I did expect him to behave like a dedicated worker of the proto-fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the mothership of the BJP, dedicated to formally declaring India a Hindu nation. So, I expected the attack on the Muslim community, the demonization of Christians and communists, the drive to attack as well as co-opt and "Hinduize" Dalits. That went to script. I even expected (and anticipated in writing) a terrorist strike/war just before elections. I expected the embrace of big corporations, the privatization drive, but did not expect his policy of demonetization which he announced one night on TV, declaring that 90 percent of Indian currency was no longer legal tender. It dealt a hard blow to people—but it has not prevented them from coming out in numbers to vote for him again.

Modi is back once again, even bigger than before, worshipped like a deity. It's fascinating psychology—pain turned into pleasure for the sake of the "nation." It is a formidable victory—enabled by voters across castes, classes, regions, and ethnicity.

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In his victory speech to the thousands chanting his name he said two very frightening things—first, that the 2019 election marked the official death of secularism in India. Not a single political party dared to campaign under the banner of being secular, he said. He was more than right—the main opposition party, the Congress Party, did not have the nerve to mention the word "Muslim" for fear of being labelled "Muslim-lovers." So, the lynching, the massacres of Muslims were all airbrushed out of the story. Majoritarianism—Hindu nationalism won the day.

Second, Modi declared that this election proved that by soundly defeating parties that claimed to represent the "lower" castes, the BJP had defeated caste. The only two castes he recognized, he said, were the poor and those who work to end poverty. So, while socially, the BJP thrives on portraying The Enemy, in economic terms, apparently, there are no enemies. In a country where nine people own the combined wealth of the bottom 500 million—the rich are missionaries. This is a terrifying view. And having been re-elected and achieving God-status by throwing crumbs to the poor, a gas cylinder to rural families stalked by hunger, a gift of 2000 rupees (30 dollars) to farmers deep in debt and committing suicide in their hundreds of thousands, by arming millions of jobless youth with nothing but vicious rhetoric, Modi has earned himself the right to continue with the economic policies that created this problem.

By claiming that there are no more castes except the poor and those who want to alleviate poverty, he is claiming that he and the RSS have done what Dr B.R Ambedkar, a pioneering advocate for Dalits, could not—they have annihilated caste. This is an extremely disturbing statement. Because, as Ambedkar said—Hindusim is caste. What the RSS-BJP has done in this election is to reinforce caste—to work with caste divisions, exploit the material contradictions between castes and sub-castes, and pit them against each other with mathematical precision.

It seems he has effectively redefined the political center in his image. Do you see ways of challenging this "new normal" over his next term?

In the days after he was elected, following some harsh criticism in the international press, Modi made a speech in which he spoke about protecting minorities and upholding the Indian constitution. He more or less directly contradicted what he himself and his senior colleagues had said the previous day. This sort of expediency is pure RSS tactics. Interestingly, the deification of Modi has overshadowed the idea of the BJP as a party. Its massive wealth, its party machinery, have all been harnessed to the crowning of the monarch. There is a ridiculous hagiographic Modi bio-pic, full of falsehood, that has just been released. No doubt it will contribute to his deification. But despite all this, Modi can only be the monarch for as long as the RSS wants him to occupy the throne. RSS-rule

is the new normal.

You ask how this can be challenged. At this moment, in northern India, most of the other political parties are in shambles. The Congress has been vanquished, the Communists destroyed, the political parties that identify themselves as Dalit/backward caste parties have been more or less decimated. On the whole, the opposition parties behaved pettily and arrogantly with each other, diminishing each other while their ship went down. Hopefully they are asking themselves some serious questions.

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The RSS has about 600,000 disciplined, highly trained cadres it can deploy. The others have almost none. This time around the BJP had 20 times more money than all of them put together. Next time that will probably become 50 times more money. And certainly, elections in India are more and more about money, about spectacle, about controlling the mainstream media and social media. Every institution in this country was bent to their will, including the Election Commission and, who knows, perhaps the electronic voting machines. That money bought them tens of thousands of IT experts, data analysts, social media activists who ran thousands of Whatsapp groups with carefully directed propaganda—tailored and tweaked for every section, region, caste, and class, every voting booth in every constituency.

That kind of money can sell anything it decides to sell—in this case a product so toxic, it created an epidemic. Not a single thing of importance, not climate change, not the looming economic crisis, not health, not education was a part of the campaign. Nothing except toxic, medieval stupidity on an epic scale. How can we treat this as a fair election? It was a race between a Ferrari and a few bicycles—and the media cheered the Ferrari as though they hadn’t noticed anything unusual. And now lathers it with praise while it mocks the bicycles for their poor performance.

So, what are the avenues that remain to challenge this formation? Existing political parties in this particular model of first-past-the-post democracy will not easily be able to take on this formidable, money-filled hate-filled machine. I believe that peoples’ rage will one day break the machine. I’m not talking about a revolution. I’m talking about an outbreak, the re-emergence of non NGO-ized social movements. It will come. And that will create new energy and a new kind of opposition that cannot be managed. We will have to play a new game—one that has not been fixed like this one has. This election in India, that is being hailed as a great exercise in democracy, is the opposite—just a mockery of what democracy is supposed to be.

Do you see the BJP’s success as of a piece with other recent nationalist convulsions in places like Britain, America, and Brazil?

I think it is very much of a piece with prevailing nationalist convulsions. Although in India the RSS has been conscientiously working towards this moment for 95 years. It has systems in place that no other current fascists or white supremacists do.

In 2009, you dedicated a collection of your essays to those who have “learned to divorce hope from reason.” What’s hope and reason’s relationship like now? Are there any signs of a reunion on the cards?

I practiced that doctrine during the run-up to the elections. While all the pundits predicted a win for the BJP [with a reduced majority], some of us insisted they would lose. I said so publicly, because I felt the certainty of the outcome needed to be punctured. There were those who dreaded the victory

of the BJP who publicly predicted they would sweep to victory. It was probably meant to advertise the fact that they had their finger on the pulse of “the people.” It was no great shakes to feel the pulse. It was all around us. But those doleful predictions only added to the propaganda, to the sense of inevitability. So those of us who had learned to divorce hope from reason stubbornly insisted that the opposition would win, that they had secret pacts and clever strategies. But it is precisely that kind of mad hope that will eventually make people rise up against this nightmare. So yes, hope divorced from reason. And add to that, defiance divorced from reason. That’s what we need.

India’s mindset seems increasingly militarized, and Modi did his best to drum up this sentiment during his election campaign, aligning himself with the armed forces and stoking fears of purported “enemies of the nation.” What is the place of a writer—especially one with a “seditious heart”—in such an atmosphere?

Ha! Tenuous I’d say, and extremely dangerous. Because we have been reduced to a situation in which even those opposed to Hindu nationalism are weakly offering up various brands of “better” Hinduism and better nationalism. Our brains are being shrink-wrapped in the national flag. The attack, not on intellectuals, but on any form of intelligence is going to be ferocious. While politicians, corporate CEOs, and their service-partners in the media are millionaires and billionaires—wealthy beyond the realm of imagination—students, professors, writers, independent journalists are being targeted as elitist “anti-nationals.”

“The attack on universities, on intelligence itself, is on hand.”

“Elite” is the stand-in word for anybody of above-average intelligence who harbors non-servile instincts. Amit Shah, the president of the BJP, and Ram Madhav, the general secretary, issued their un-adorned threats on day one. Amit Shah, from the victory pulpit on the very night the results were declared; Ram Madhav, in a newspaper column the next day called “The Leader is the Truth,” in which he said that the “remnants” of the “pseudo-secular/liberal cartels that held a disproportionate sway and stranglehold over the intellectual and policy establishment of the country” needed to be “discarded” from the country’s “cultural and intellectual landscape.” Age-old, straight-up, fascist-speak. In this second term, they will try and finish what they started five years ago—the shut-down of any real learning, real scholarship, real thinking, real art. The attack on universities, on intelligence itself, is on hand.

You’ve always refuted those who try to impose a distinction between your “art” and your “activism,” saying “writer” will suffice. Is this constraint—where serious, active engagement with the world is put beyond the remit of a writer—something you feel more strongly in India?

No, actually not. I feel it more strongly in Europe and America, where I used to sense a sort of smug complacency—an assumption that there were no more questions—there was no better aspiration other than to strive to be like them. I think that is changing now—destabilization has set in. Great fears have arisen. Big questions are once again being asked. The whole world is in a churning. Art and literature will reflect that.

Language, in the broadest sense, has become a focal point in your thought—its pluralities, its possibilities, its political perversions. Is this partly a response to the Hindutva doctrine of “one nation, one language, one religion”—a doctrine which all nationalists share—or is language simply the natural terrain of a writer?

It’s the natural terrain of this country—this complexity. And naturally, being a writer, I delight in it. The funniest part of the Hindu Nationalists’ “one language, one religion, one nation” doctrine—

known here as “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan”—is that all those three words are actually Persian words. But more seriously, in a region where there are 780 spoken languages, 20 of which are recognized by the Indian Constitution, can you imagine the violence of that doctrine? Then you have the English-speaking elite who routinely accuse each other (in English) of being English-speaking elite, you have the upper-caste non-English speaking elite who send their children to English-medium schools, but want to deny the poor the right to learn a language that will give them opportunities that they would not otherwise have.

Finally, over the course of your life you’ve expressed yourself across many different mediums, including fiction, film, plays, reportage, essays, even acting and architecture. Is there a form—or a setting, a time, a place—where you feel most at home?

I’m a story-teller. I think in stories. They are my home. My true love.

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