

***Capitalism: A Ghost Story***  
**by Arundhati Roy, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014.**

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The year 2014 was a turning point in the history of India, the world's largest democracy. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), a Hindu-right wing party, singlehandedly won an electoral majority for the first time in independent India, bringing to an end a decade-long coalition led by the Indian National Congress. Victory for the BJP may not have been unanticipated in a climate of rampant political and financial corruption, of which many in the Congress stand accused, yet it seemed paradoxical on many accounts. The BJP had won on a mandate of categorical economic development, in stark contrast to its political ideology of a virulent and fundamentalist Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva* as it is better known. The paradox was resolved soon after the party took over the reins of government, not as the rejection of religion for economics as many had hoped for, but as a strange coalescence of the two within a renewed neoliberal embrace of India and its buried mineral wealth. Two years since, gross inequality, poverty and mounting violence perpetrated by flash mobs, party functionaries and the army on Muslims, Christians, tribes and Dalits (lower-caste people) have become part of everyday reality in several parts of the country. While Kashmir, Manipur

and Nagaland continue to suffer, as they have for several decades now, from heavy militarization and its effects, all in the name fighting against Islamic terrorism as well as Maoism, or Naxalism (an underground movement of extreme left radicals working to overthrow the state), even newer regions, like Bastar in the mining belt of central and eastern India, are entered on the blacklist for state intervention along military lines. However, what is unprecedented is the state's assault on public institutions such as universities, its deliberate undermining of democratic space for intellectual and political activity and its laying siege to concepts such as democracy, nationalism and social justice, etc., in the new populist mode of Hindu majoritarianism and religious sentiment.

I read Arundhati Roy's *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), parts of which were first published as an essay in *Outlook* in 2012, against the contemporary political, economic and social situation briefly outlined above and the narrowing scope of such concepts as democracy and social justice for political and legal action in India. A brilliant analysis that dredges deep into many of these questions by transposing them into a broader historical context of global capitalism, *Capitalism* reads almost like a prophecy for our times. Where most critical discourse in India would reduce these events and developments to the essentially Hindu upper caste predisposition for a state with its inbuilt hatred for the lower castes, tribes and minorities, such as Muslims and Christians, Roy helps us perceive them as the fulfillment of capitalism's many strategies in the 21st century. The current regime's brazen patronage of corporations and the shrewd crony capitalists who run them bring into sharp focus some of the patterns Roy had identified as early as 2012. It is in these historic patterns that we must seek cues to the changing demographic profiles, social constituencies and conceptual meanings of democracy and state in India, as well as the forces that have enabled a political transition along religious and culturally nationalist lines.

Clearly placed outside of the institutional spaces of academia and with

a strong reputation as a novelist, Roy raises a set of significant questions even as she rightly points out why academics, artists, film makers and public intellectuals largely balk at them. Why have left-liberal establishments in India and abroad failed to take cognizance of the wiping out of entire villages and their communities, primarily tribes and Dalits, in massive mining and construction projects undertaken by multinational companies on forest land with state patronage? Why have the media, whether in journalism, art or cinema, not raised these issues and made them the subject of public debate within a national democratic framework? What does this critical indifference and lethargy, even coverup, tell us about how capitalism picks and fashions a clientele suitable to its smooth operations at levels ranging from the local and the national to the regional and the global? How does the corporate bid to the state and its political territory work alongside a successful fragmentation of the social and political consciousness of a democratic citizenry in binaries such as urban/rural, Hindu/non-Hindu, etc.? A close scrutiny of what these questions point to perhaps explains why it is not surprising that Roy has earned much criticism, attracted a great deal of controversy from all quarters and remained isolated as a public intellectual over the last few years.

*Capitalism: A Ghost Story* finds answers to these questions in the project of global corporate governance and its adjunct, corporate philanthropy. Initiated by the Rockefeller and the Carnegie Foundations in the early 20th century and continued by Ford in its latter half, the two have constituted the defining philosophy of global institutions that govern the everyday lives of people across the world, including the CIA, the World Bank, the IMF and a whole host of international NGOs, universities, think tanks, etc. Corporate philanthropy as a political strategy for standardizing market practices and keeping the world perpetually safe for capitalism was reinforced even more strongly during the Cold War. Despite a pronounced left-leaning state under Congress

rule for the most of its postcolonial history, India could not escape the incursions these corporate philanthropists made into its political, educational and artistic institutions through massive scholarship and funding programs, as well as awards and prizes. Creating a whole generation or more of the middle classes in India through such redefinition of academic and professional excellence, and co-opting them into the ways and discourses of capitalism through competitive access to universities in the West and global institutions like the IMF, the UN, etc., corporate philanthropy has ensured that voices speaking in tones not recognized by these institutions remain subdued. Where there were still resistant voices, new academic programs and fields of study funded by Ford and others, like Development Studies, Cultural Studies and Gender Studies, emerged to soak them up. Not only does capitalism make many of these co-opted individuals morally culpable, but it also leaves them without the concepts and the vocabulary needed to address problems at the scale and depth at which capitalist forces actually operate.

A strategic fragmentation and reduction of scale and a carefully managed climate of constantly escalating tension among those competing to make it to these institutions and programs deflect and contain criticism and analysis within the conceptual and political limits agreeable to capitalism. In many ways, it is this form of competition defining a higher education funded by global corporations that shapes the discourse on race, religion, caste, gender, etc., since it is patriarchy as well as race and caste privilege that ensure entry, mobility and personal success within this domain. These categories have gained global resonance besides a highly populist dimension to them; it seems that resistance somehow can only be articulated and addressed in the terms afforded by these. Trickle-down economics may have been a failure, but trickle-down effects from concepts have met with remarkable success.

The Occupy Movement, where Roy had hoped change would begin, and where prospects for a new language and discourse to propel politics

and the act of resistance would emerge, did not hold out. Having read and followed her politics closely, I do not believe that she brought in the movement as an ornate detail, ending a heavy narrative on a frail note of hope; the novelist in her is perhaps appealing to our political imagination to salvage the language of the Occupy Movement and transform it into a new set of possibilities against capitalism's 21<sup>st</sup>-century gush-up strategy. However, gush-up is an already crumbling model. This is more the case in India, where the multi-layered and cross-cutting collusions and contestations afforded by its 3000-odd caste, tribal and linguistic groups with their living memories of death act as a bedrock of perpetual resistance to capitalism's many projects and ambitions. The institutions and the philosophies that romanticize resistance, prescribe the terms and conditions for it and confine it within enclaves have much to learn from these movements, since it will not be long before the onslaught will be directed against them. In India, where a brutal state and its mindless religiosity make corporations look benign, capitalism does not have to spend a part of its returns on institutions and intellectuals to advertise itself that way. With capital outsourcing violence to a deferential state, the assault has, in fact, already begun.