

‘PEACE AND SECURITY IS FOR THE MARGINALISED’

Excerpts from ARUNA ROY’s presentation at the Conclave

I was thinking what security and peace would mean for all my people. I go back to the rather machismo election speeches of our local politicians from Rajasthan who were running for MP and MLA. They told the youth that if they elected them to power, they would teach Pakistan and China a lesson. So I asked them, “Why do you like Modi so much?” They said, “Oh, he will settle the Pakistan and China issue once and for all”. I told them that they would get nothing out of it, other than the barren land coming back to India’s territory. Modi’s new economic policies would be unjust. Where would be their peace at all?

So, I think all of us need to understand that we have to challenge the myths that is currently in great circulation if we wish to have a larger successful campaign against the ruling establishment. There are a couple of these myths. One of them is that now with the coming of the BJP Government we can finally secure our nation. The popular dialogue is that the previous regimes failed us badly in this aspect. If we really wish to re-build the “other” discourse, we have to step out of these rooms and go and engage with whichever groups we can to talk about it. I think we all know that a bully has to be challenged and there are bullies in power now who do not let you speak. The whole notion of freedom of speech and expression is under threat. I recently met U.R.Ananthamurthy who, as you all know, was not allowed to say anything and was threatened over the telephone, and was sent on a one-way ticket to Karachi, because he said, “I do not want to live in the country in which Modi is the ruler”.

What is this moral policing in vogue in our country that you cannot say something you want to? And there are innumerable other things too. Books have been pulped; Wendy Donniger’s book *The Hindus* was pulped. Megha Kumar’s excellent book on the rape cases of Gujarat was disallowed to even go into print. What is the meaning of all this? And there are so many other things of which we do not have knowledge. First of all, if we do not defend our Constitutional rights, we will not have space to fight our political battles, our economic battles, to express a different opinion. And I am really worried, because what they do with moral and social policing is that they arouse in you a fright of God. You cannot post anything on social media websites and there is somebody ready to attack you, to put you in jails, throw acid on you. How are we going to go ahead with the big public debate on issues in which a minority is claiming a majority and ruling over the thoughts of the country’s people?

So for me peace and security is not the borders. Peace and security is not the nuclear issue. Peace and security is the issue for the security of the people on the margins. Even I am on the margins in a way now! I am not economically on the margins, but I am on the margins because my thoughts are rubbished.

Wherever I go, there is someone or the other who asks me about the rights-based legislations because of which India has lost 10 years of development. Now it has become a public discourse. It has obsessed the minds of the people; they think all the rights-based legislations have set India back.

Economists and statisticians tell us that our poverty has increased over the last 10 years because we gave rights to the people. That is preposterous! These are percentages which they argue out. To counter argue we need social activists to hasten the process of empowerment. We need journalists to write about it. We need film-makers to make films about it.

With every right that is taken away, we lose security.

There is a war on the NREGA legislation now. The Chief Minister of Rajasthan has written a letter to the Government of India saying that we do not want the NREGA as a law; we want it only as a scheme. What is this? Who is she to decide that no benefits accrued from the law? Were the people of Rajasthan consulted to ask if the law was a success or not?

These are the issues that should be considered as central to the debate on peace and security. *Roti, kapda, makaan* (food, clothing, shelter) are of the essence to the security of the poor. The poor have nothing to do with those who fuel wars and make bombs. We are uprooting their livelihood and existence.

There is another thing I would like to speak of. We need to engage with people who we do not really engage with.

We have had attacks on our economic paradigm. Right to Food has not even begun. Right to Employment and Work is threatened, and I believe that the Intelligence Bureau is now preparing a list of RTI activists, although this information is not yet verified. What will follow from there I do not know! The bureaucracy never liked the RTI, and the politicians also just went along with it. If there are attacks on the RTI too, then all legislations like the Right to Education will be usurped. They will become Hindutva programmes. They will insist that the entire curriculum is changed, and for me this is insecurity - redefining a syllabus which is going to make me narrow-minded --, hate my friends, my neighbours, hate everyone who is not like me. So we have multiple challenges to our security and peace.

About discrimination, they have begun to say that there is nothing like discrimination of the Dalits. Dalits are quite happy; they are not being attacked anywhere. They have co-opted some of the Dalit leaders in to the paradigm of the Hindutva! Therefore, we have to re-state the whole Dalit issue. We have to re-state the issue of discrimination towards Dalits. For minorities, again we have to rebuild a new discourse; we have to use a new language and idioms to unpack the meaning of "secular". Till we continue to feel that secular defines an individual and not the State, we do not have the right idea of the meaning of this word.

People like me need to be armed with statistics and a new economic discourse must be popularised by us somehow. So in this whole battle, we have to move out and engage with a lot of people. The biggest failure of my ilk has been that we never fully analysed or understood what the youth of the nation want. Our opponents understood this and exploited the youth to their advantage. We have to engage with the youth and make them our *gurus* to understand what our mistakes have been and how we can remedy them in the future. If we do not do this, we are doomed.

If we do not interact with the youth in the cities and rural areas, they will understand security threats are only from Pakistan, China and the Maoists. They will not understand the bigger issues.

As far as the women's issue is concerned they have distorted the issue completely. This has to be redefined too. We have failed to communicate the issue well. New communication channels such as online newspapers, blogs will have to increase coverage for our issues, because the doors of the conventional media are more or less closed to us. Sometimes a small window opens and we enter, but largely we are out of it.

What we are looking at is a democratic war! We will have to work at war-scale. And our war is not against the neighbouring nations. It is a war to bring security for the poor and deprived sections of the Indian society.