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SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

Aruna Roy is one of India's most prominent activists. In 1968, she became a civil servant in the Indian Administration Service. But in 1975, she left her role in government and started working directly with poor and marginalized communities. Because as she sees it, social justice work isn't driven by government officials.

ARUNA ROY: The real change starts with the specifics. One has to get absolutely to the root of an issue. And it is from there the real change occurs.

SARAH BALDWIN: In 1987, Roy and two other activists founded MKSS, the Association for the Empowerment of Laborers and Farmers. They've fought for everything from the right to work, to food security, to government transparency.

Roy is currently a fellow at the Watson Institute. Her new book, *Power to the People-- The Right To Information Story*, looks at how this fight for government transparency in India grew from a movement into a law. We started by talking about her time in India's civil service, before she began her work as an activist.

ARUNA ROY: I was trained for two years. It's very rigorous training. And you're taught what I call, government management. Business management is about how to run a business and make profit. The civil service teaches you-- the training in civil service-- makes you managers. Management of welfare state, of delivering services to the poor, ensuring that constitutional values are realized.

So in one sense, I got a lot out of this kind of background-- learning about various laws, or the revenue law, about the penal code, about so many things-- and the criminal procedure code, the Constitution of India in detail. These are things we really don't understand when we go through a formal educational system. Though I was a masters in English literature from Delhi University, you don't really know these things automatically.

But in the seven years that I was there, I realized that the civil service only works for the status quo. No change from within a system is possible, so you have to leave.

SARAH BALDWIN: Can you say a little bit more about why the service is so invested in the status quo?

ARUNA ROY: Because, you see, we have a federal government and a democratic system in India. So we have these so-called four pillars-- the executive, the judiciary, the legislature, and of course, the media. I found that the executive and the legislature, which is the civil servants and the people who are elected our representatives, there was an unequal relationship.

I would blame it more on the civil servants, because at that time they were quite powerful. But for their own ends, they did not often resist political diktat. Because more often than not, they're looking at personal promotions, about benefits. Not that all of them are like that, but most of them are like that.

And so it was a daily battle. And you were battling within a system, and you were not really delivering to people who were much worse off outside. So I just thought this dichotomy was too much for me. Because you went back everyday, and you thought at home, who had trapped you into taking a decision which was unjust, which was unequal, which was unfair? Because when you go through so much paper, and you go to so many issues, then you don't have the time to read through everything. And you can delay, cause delay is also injustice. So you just have to take quick decisions sometimes.

And I used to be very worried, so I decided to quit and to go into a paradigm in which I see the beginning, the middle, and the end. So I decided I'd like to be in a place where I was my own mistress-- where I'd see the beginning, the middle, and the end of everything. So there'd be a causality, a rationality, a growth-- an organic growth, a logical growth, leading to some kind of fruition.

SARAH BALDWIN: And how did it feel right away, after you quit? Did it feel instantly better.

ARUNA ROY: I felt free. [LAUGHS] The first thing I said is, I don't have to say sir to anyone.

SARAH BALDWIN: So then jumping ahead to 1987, I believe you and two others found at the MKSS. It sounds like the original crowdfunded organization, but you can tell me if I'm wrong.

So could you describe the origins and the work that MKSS does, and how it led to the right-to-information movement?

ARUNA ROY: It's a quite interesting journey if one looks at it, that I went from the large, general scenario to the very specific microscopic unit of a village. What I understood in all the years of working--

and now I've worked 50 years, so it's a long, long time.

So in these 50 years, I understood that the real change starts with the specifics. And so one has to get absolutely to the root of an issue. And it is from there the real change occurs.

So anyway, so my option to go and live in a village in a mud hut with poor people was a choice both political as well as ideological. But it was also an act of conscience, because I always felt utterly privileged in India. So I wanted at least to live like that do. Because I still remain very privileged. I speak English. I have access to world media. I can read anything. I understand world politics. At that level, I always remain privileged.

But at least at the cutting edge of living, I felt I must live with them. I must eat like them. I must sleep like them. I must work the way they do everyday. It's then that I will fully understand the political meaning of what they want to change. I made very good friends with a lot of Dalit-- that is, outcast women and men-- and also, poor men and women. Because they were my mandate, so I went to them a lot. And we spent hours talking.

And if we wanted them to talk the way we wanted them to talk, they refused. They talked the way they wanted to. They talked with their own logic, their own causality. They understood issues very well. They were educated people, but illiterate. They understood politics much better than I did. They could work the system. They worked against oppression of poverty and survived.

So they all kept saying, we want work, we want work, we want work. When you asked them, they didn't want a dole. They didn't want a cash transfer. They didn't want a subsidy. But they wanted work.

So through a long experiment with all kinds of things, including studying handicrafts, looking at work that I gave them-- the redefinition of work by them, saying, recognize our work. Big woman's cause-- recognize that I work. So 93% of India's workforce is unorganized, so they're nowhere on the map of workers-- because they don't have one boss. They don't work in one factory. So they're were not recorded. Even today, they're very badly recorded.

So these people wanted work. And when we looked at the working-- because India is still a welfare state partly now, but we were much more of a welfare state then. So government used to give them some employment through programs. Whenever they went and worked, they never got their full wages. So it became an issue.

So it was that battle of minimum wages, with the cases that we fought, that we realized that they would give us, they would tell us, this is your version of the truth. I said, there cannot be versions of the truth. There can only be one truth. There can be versions of factual representation. So we said, show us the records, because they said the records don't say so.

So the message went across that these records they're hiding from us. And there was an Official Secrets Act, which the British had left behind. So they used to use it against us. Actually, just now it's been used against a very eminent paper in India, called *The Hindu*, by this present establishment, for publishing real issues-- facts about corruption.

So it's used as a weapon by the establishment, always to finish you off. So we wanted to overrule that act, to rescind that act. Then we picked up on this whole notion of having transparency, at first at the village council level, which we call the [? punjat. ?] And it was like wild fire. It caught on. We had public hearings. We took out whatever information we had. We placed it in front of people. They came to testify.

And India is a large country with a large population. So these public hearings, 1,500 people was the smallest. Sometimes 5,000 people. Sometimes 7,000 people. They stayed the whole day. They testified-- because it was corruption for the academics and the rich people. But for the poor corruption hurts their livelihood and life. So there was a slogan. We call it, the right to know is the right to live. So that is what it is. You don't get medicines. You don't get a number of things.

So that's how the concept of the right to information was born.

SARAH BALDWIN: So say a little bit more about why information is essential to democracy. Just unpack that a little bit.

ARUNA ROY: See, the thing is, in a democracy, we have now dwindled-- whether it's India, the USA, or whether it is Turkey-- or whether it's Hungary, Philippines-- we've all reduced democracy, because we apparently now only have the vote. But we don't have a say in decision making.

Now, how can a people take a decision on anything which they don't know. The most important thing in saying, I vote, is to say, I transfer-- not transfer. I give on loan some of the powers of my sovereignty to my representative, but with a mandate that he'll keep to the Constitution of India. I also say, he will mandate my welfare. But when they go and do things against me, I can't catch them, you see?

So to make informed choices, about which Noam Chomsky has talked so beautifully-- to make these informed choices, you need to know the facts. For instance, you go to a district-- which is a bigger unit in India-- and ask for information, they'll tell you in millions. But it doesn't tell you anything at all. So you have to see the details-- how much money came? How much money was spent? How many people benefited?

And then, you will need to know from those people whether those benefits actually reached them.

So again, another very, very wonderful woman friend of mine, whom I now pay tribute to today especially, is a woman named [? Shoshina. ?] She went with us when we gave the first draft of the bill to the media in Delhi, in 1996. And the media asked her-- they said, why have you come? You only passed your class four. What do you know about the right to information?

And she said to them, when I send my son to the marketplace with 10 rupees, he comes back. I ask for accounts. This country spends billions of rupees in my name, so it's my money. So I ask for my accounts.

So to get that whole process going, transparency is critical. Information is vital. Because you have to do it with ethics. You have to do it with correctness, and with a certain moral strength. And for that you need the backing of facts and information.

SARAH BALDWIN: You've also been involved in the right to work and right to food-- so these sort of fundamental rights that you see people having. How did you become so committed to social justice in the first place? I mean, you were an early feminist. Where did all that come from?

ARUNA ROY: We are all products of many influences in our lives. But my family-- my grandmother, my great uncle on my father's side, my grandmother on my mother's side. My mother was a student of physics and math, and my grandmother was a school leaver at that time. So my great grandmother was literate, so literacy was no issue in my family. Progressive thinking about caste, about what class. For my grandmother it was charity, but it was still working with leprosy. And my great uncle unionized workers.

So I come from a family in which social responsibility is viewed very seriously. And I come from privilege. So privilege, I feel, has an obligation to share. So these were values my family gave me.

But in my socializing, when I was in the late '60s, when I was in university, the first real large mobilization of left workers took place near Calcutta, in a place called [INAUDIBLE], in a village called [INAUDIBLE]

So there are many of us who were born used to non-violence and civil disobedience [INAUDIBLE] from Gandhi, from the national movement. Even people who disagreed with Gandhi did not use violence in the initial mode, except for some very important battles that were fought in Telangana, in a place in Andhra. It was also Chittagong uprising.

They were important uprisings, because they also led you to understand the [INAUDIBLE] of the injustice. But the mode that most of India has used in these big social movements has been non-violence. So you had to work through a communication method in which people and you sat and discussed it. And it had to be with a consensus of the people whose lives you wanted to change. It couldn't be a top-down process at all.

And if you look at Gandhi's famous Salt March, when he went to-- and that was the real downfall of the British Empire. By the time the Salt March reached the shores of Gujarat, which is where the sea is, it became India's greatest idea-- because every one eats salt.

So if you pick on an issue which everybody understands, then you build up empathy with the issue, and from there you go into larger politics. So if somebody doesn't allow you to make your own salt-- I mean, it's the height of economic oppression.

So living with people, therefore, became a very important thing for me, that I needed to understand. So the right to work, for instance, grew from this. I said, they always wanted work. And in the state of Maharashtra in the '70s, there was very enlightened politician, who passed through the Maharashtra assembly a law called the Maharashtra Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. It failed to perform. It wasn't properly implemented. But it had the seed of a brilliant idea.

So ever since then all of us who work with very poor people, whose basic problem is unemployment, we've always wanted an Indian version of the Employment Guarantee Scheme-- not just Maharashtra.

SARAH BALDWIN: But before we get into today, I just wonder if you can explain what makes India, which is so big, and so populous, and so diverse, such fertile ground for social movements.

ARUNA ROY:

See, we are a very communicative people. The most frustrating thing for me in Providence is that people don't talk to you too much. [LAUGHS] We are a talking people. The argumentative Indian is [INAUDIBLE] described as.

We have street-corner meetings. We have meetings, platforms in the village, which we call [INAUDIBLE] So wherever we meet, we discuss and talk. So we are a communicating people-- without the television, without social media. There's a history.

So in that process lie the seeds of the beginning of movements. Because the first thing you have to do is to talk it through. So that is a tradition in India-- very much so in the Bengali adda. That's a street-corner meeting. It's called an adda. It's famous.

Now, the *Indian Express*, the national newspaper, has a monthly adda, with an inverted comma, where we call people. So it's political discussion. Anyway, so that's the beginning.

And the second thing is that the concept of privacy is not so sharply defined in India. So if you have a personal problem which is political, it'll come out. You won't discuss things that are totally private. There are of course always that small area, or a nucleus that you won't discuss in public. But there are so many issues which are not private. So with health issues, or issues of being screwed by the police, or denied health services by a hospital-- or even prejudices against women and their health conditions-- many things get discussed.

So once you discuss an issue, then it's possible to plan coming together on something. And then it spontaneously comes up. So now, of course, this method has been taken, worked upon, and we also make programs around these. So in our case-- in the case of MKSS-- we are totally blessed.

If Nikhil Dey, my colleague, was the legal mind who really did massive amounts of work on the legal instrumentalities, [? Shanker ?] is the communication genius. And in fact, he's on the cover of a book published by an American writer, on the use of satire in communication. He's so brilliant with his political satire.

So you set him up somewhere and within 20 minutes he has a crowd, which listens to him in total rapt attention, because he picks up from them the issues-- so that they are committed to listening to him, because it's their story. And yet there's a twist in the end, which brings in the democratic politics, their obligation to be involved. And it's all through satire. He's extremely good. And songs-- we sing lots of songs.

SARAH BALDWIN: Aruna, you're very concerned about the state of democracy in India today. I wonder if you have any thoughts about the state of democracy here in the United States.

ARUNA ROY: There could be parallels, actually. But I think India is much worse. Because I think in the US what I've seen is that there's a fair degree of open criticism of Trump, and his ways, and the way democracy has gone-- in the universities, for example. And especially in universities, but also in other circles-- and in the media.

In India, the disaster has been that mainstream media-- most of it-- has completely changed sides. It's no longer the fourth estate, which is really there to comment and critique the government. It's become the voice of the government. And so it is very alarming that it should be so.

It's also true that independent voices are being stifled. Today, anyone who amplifies the voice of anything, especially the poor, are being targeted. The right to freedom of expression is gone in India. There's so much fear. And of course there's hatred of the minorities, which is being whipped up into such a state. There are killings and lynchings of Muslims. There's killing and lynching of Dalits. There's victimizing of women-- trying to put them into stereotypes, that we thought we'd got rid of forever-- prescribing dress, prescribing mode of conduct, and all the rest-- glorifying the domestic role of the woman. So we are fighting many battles.

And the worst possible thing, in terms of where I am today, is that the universities of India have now got gagged. And our young student leaders-- who are so very good, bright, with an enquiring mind, questioning, politically active in their thinking-- [INAUDIBLE] many of them have been arrested. And the clear signal is, don't invite people who make you think.

And it's a pity, because the universities have to generate thought. And for me, in one sense, the worst of it all is that these people who've been incarcerated-- these 10 people-- have not indulged in any violence. A thought cannot be a crime. When thought becomes a crime, I think democracy is doomed for certain, and we as a people are certainly doomed.

And I think Indians must recognize that they can't be subdued to speak to the truth by fear, and we have to speak truth to power.

SARAH BALDWIN: What do you think it will take to change the direction of these affairs in India?

ARUNA ROY: Well, since I'm speaking in the US to US-- most people who hear me will probably be people

from the United States-- I would say that foreign opinions do matter. We've become a very small world now. Everything travels very quickly.

Now, I would say to everyone in the United States, they must absolutely not think of India as a haven which is going galloping towards the next century. But really look at it as, at what cost? What is the collateral we are paying for anything at all? If it is happening, what is the collateral we are paying?

Especially, Indians in the US must understand that those who support a repressive regime are really supporting the death of democracy. And if that is clear, then I think there can be many measures taken to improve India's constitutional positions of right to equality, right to freedom of expression, the right to fraternity, right to liberty.

SARAH BALDWIN: You've said, theory comes from practice, and reflection comes from action. What do you mean by that?

ARUNA ROY: When Newton defined gravity, he had to see that apple fall. Without practicality of phenomena, you can't have knowledge. The mind is very useful, once it experiences something. But it was practice that led to theory. If there hadn't been oppression, I wouldn't have gone into social activism. So it's the oppression that makes me go into social activism.

And then later on-- India's democracy today, if there's any democracy left, is because of these movements at the cutting edge-- whether it's women, whether it's Dalits, whether it's peasants and workers, farmers. 40,000 farmers were in the Delhi streets, in the end of November last year, demanding a special session of parliament.

So you know, it's us who are keeping democracy alive, protest alive. Though the establishment wants to come down heavily on any kind of freedom of expression, we are just hanging on to it. So we have to be seen as not people to whom something was be given, but who really are giving something to democracy-- propelling and making democracy stand on its feet in my country.

So if that is the way we see them, then there's a dialogue of equality, saying, you have a tremendous amount of knowledge. I have some knowledge. Let's share it. Because there isn't one knowledge.

SARAH BALDWIN: Do you ever get disheartened? You just embody so much conviction, and energy, and strength. I wonder if you ever have moments of--

ARUNA ROY: Yes, I do. I'm human. And there have been very dark moments this last four years in India-- very dark ones. Because I saw the attempt to dismantle the right-based laws, which didn't fully succeed. I've seen the dismantling of institutions created in the last 60, 70 years by a nascent democracy-- and some of the best institutions in my country. The independence of all those institutions have been destroyed. How long that will last, I don't know.

But the dismantling of institutions by the present government-- the ones who see it and talk about it become seditious. And the ones who don't see it, or the ones who see it and are afraid, keep quiet. So it requires continual battles all the time. But when I'm in a battle and struggle, I'm fine. It's when I move away from it and look at the larger picture that I really sometimes feel-- I mean, I'm also a pacifist. So this war on Pakistan is not, for me, a good thing.

We should have looked at the dialogue. We should have looked at diplomacy. So, for me, war actually negates every principle of democracy. And today we are armed to the teeth. So it really hangs there. [INAUDIBLE] because this is not conventional warfare anymore.

SARAH BALDWIN: One last question, if you're willing-- I know you're here at the Watson Institute. And so you're coming into contact with students. You're giving lectures. Have you gotten any sense of students today and their level of awareness and/or activism?

ARUNA ROY: I think that they are aware-- maybe to the degree to which they can possibly do or be so-- within the constraints of a very, very tough academic discipline that they're all in. But they did come-- maybe not in so many numbers-- when we did a stand down for peace in South Asia.

But they were still people. I mean, everybody must understand, though activism and going out in the streets is the business of many of us-- some of us do it all the time. Some of us come and go. But to understand and sympathize with that activism is also a very important role-- to write about it, to theorize on it, to protect the lives of people who are really battling for values which will impact the whole country, the world. They're not fighting individual battles alone. Because every one of these struggles is also a struggle for democratic principles, and keeping the spirit alive.

If that feeling gets into academia, then academia will support-- in its own way, with its theories, with its analysis, with reports, with figures, with statistics, with data-- the battle that's ongoing. That's what happened to us in India. Because all the battles and struggles we fought, we got

tremendous support from economists, from sociologists, from political specialists, from people who did just political analysis-- and the media. We got so much help. And that's how all our laws got enacted.

SARAH BALDWIN: I hope that comes back. I hope that happens again.

ARUNA ROY: We won't let it die. Let's see. [LAUGHS]

SARAH BALDWIN: Aruna Roy, I can't tell you what a privilege it is to have you talking with us today. Thank you so much for coming in.

ARUNA ROY: Thank you

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards and Babette Thomas. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

To learn more about MKSS and Aruna Roy's work, as well as find her book, *Power to the People-- The Right To Information Story*, check out the links in our show notes.

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