

BOOK REVIEW

Abuse and Misuse of Nature and *Adivasis* in Bastar

The Burning Forests: India's War on Bastar, by Nandini Sundar, New Delhi, Juggernaut, September 2016, 413 pp., \$31.68 (Hardcover), ISBN # 9386228009.

Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forests* captures multilayered failures of the Indian state to provide basic life needs to its Indigenous (Adivasi) populations. The book has three sections: 1) the origin of the state-led war against Maoist rebels in Bastar District, Chhattisgarh, eastern India; 2) various forms of counterinsurgencies and what it means to be an Adivasi citizen in India caught in armed conflict; and 3) the difference between counterinsurgency carried out in a democratic state versus in a militaristic regime.

"The tragedy of India," writes Sundar, "is not that there are only a few fringe elements or brave dissenters who oppose its war, but that, despite a well-developed institutional structure, even the most basic of checks within the state fail in the face of corporate and political greed and official indifference" (2016, xiv). India's covert means of achieving neoliberal development with total apathy towards its Adivasi populations pose the question: Do democracies function only for those with power, position, and capital?

The Burning Forests is not a simplistic description of the Maoists, though this is unavoidable in parts. Instead it is a study of the miscarriages of the Indian judicial system and democracy. Sundar devotes the book to all the ordinary Adivasis who are forced to make difficult ethical decisions, whose fearlessness is inconceivable and requires "superhuman efforts for them to merely survive," and to "those who hate the impunity and arrogance of the Indian State, who admire the Maoists for their sacrifices but disagree with the wisdom of their path, and who recognize that violence, even against injustice, can degenerate into brutality and corruption"(xiv-xv). Nevertheless, the book provides an outlet for Sundar to express the rage, humiliation and helplessness she has experienced watching the ongoing extermination of the Adivasis and their ways of life (xv), expanded in Wolfe's (2006) analysis of territoriality as the primary motive for elimination. As I write this review, I wonder if India sees settler-colonialist trends as the "post" in the post-colonial condition, a condition does not actually exist since land-based people are still annihilated in the name of economic development.

Under the British Raj forests were not only privatized but also nationalized. Land enclosures transferred common lands, waste lands, and other resources to state control for profit. This theft by legal agreement was called "primitive accumulation" or "original accumulation" by Karl Marx ([1867] 1977), and was identified by Rosa Luxemburg ([1913] 1968) as an ongoing process, by David Harvey (2003) as "accumulation by dispossession," and by James O'Connor (1998) as qualitative and quantitative changes in the ways people use the environment. Neither the capitalist economy nor the process of accumulation emerged naturally through some abstract natural law but rather manifested through a series of induced social and institutional changes. So I must challenge Jonathan Kennedy's (2017) assertions that "until the end of the nineteenth century the Adivasis enjoyed a bucolic existence" or were insulated from the exploitation of caste Hindus. Arguably exploitation of nature and Adivasis can be tracked back to pre-colonial times, escalating in the nineteenth century when the British colonial officers negotiated treaties to enable logging operations in

1843 and prohibited native use of forested lands through the Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878. Since Independence, despite many promises and amendments to the Indian constitution, with the sheer lack of implementation, Adivasis all over India have continued to languish socially and economically. Adivasi marginalization was also due to forced mass relocation and the intrusion of non-Adivasi migrants in the resource-rich Adivasi regions around state-corporate extractive development. The situation in Bastar District is no different. Overall, this uneven distribution of development and power is prominently legitimized and maintained in post-colonial India, and Sundar (5-19) eloquently captures this.

On the one hand, Bastar marks militarized fences, land mines, choppers, and artillery posts that cut deep through the feral landscapes. On the other hand, it symbolizes the stronghold of the Maoist guerrillas operating on mysterious circuits of information, fluid boundaries, dauntless determination but less well-structured aims. In the early 1980s the Maoist *dalams* (guerilla squads) crossed into Bastar from neighboring Andhra Pradesh. Maoists were running an alternative state from the forests of the northern Indrawati River to ensure that Adivasis were not exploited by the forest officers, contractors, traders, and land revenue officers. For two decades, politicians in Delhi and Bhopal effectively ignored Maoist control over the region until the 2003 liberalization of the mining sector. In 2004, when the Maoist war against the state intensified, the then-Prime Minister of India called Bastar India's "biggest internal threat" (13). Arundhati Roy mentions how India considers this region Pakistan, the other side of the border. From 2005 on, the Indian state made concerted efforts to undermine the Maoists' sources of food, recruits, shelter, and intelligence to take absolute control of the region in the name of sunken sovereignty, but (in hindsight) to tap into its fabulous mineral wealth for economic development. A step toward achieving the latter was by emboldening the people's movement, Salwa Judum.

There can be many interpretations of Salwa Judum, depending on the analyst. In the Gondi language Salwa Judum means "purification hunt." The current Hindu State and the opposition political party mobilized the local people while the media upheld a tendentious view of Salwa Judum as "popular uprising" and a "spontaneous self-initiated people's movement against the Naxalites." In reality Salwa Judum is a state vigilante caucus who are stationed to hunt down the Maoists; they have mercilessly attacked village after village, looting, killing, raping, and dislocating the people in temporary camps, often called model villages. Nandini Sundar documents similarities of this to state-orchestrated violence connected with the extortion of Mizos in the 1960s, to the British domination in Malaya, American invasion of Vietnam, and more.

In November 2009 Salwa Judum became a full-blown paramilitary operation called "Operation Green Hunt." As years passed the death toll among ordinary Adivasi and non-Adivasi villagers surpassed that of Maoist forces and state security squads (15-16). In Bastar Salwa Judum have forced the Adivasis to resettle in squalid camps and recruited Adivasi male and female youths into their ranks (132-136). Another important contribution of *The Burning Forests* is its account of the dysfunctional Indian justice system. The local police sanction Salwa Judum to function with impunity, refusing to record any information on the offenses of Salwa Judum security forces. With no responsibility to trace the accused, the police incarcerate a range of Adivasis and non-Adivasis for alleged connections to the Maoists. Bail is routinely denied and court hearings are always delayed, so, even when acquitted, the accused spend years in fetid jails awaiting trials. Sundar describes these tactics as ways to segregate the villagers from Maoist guerrillas.

The Burning Forests works on all levels of scholarship. I enjoyed the commonplace description, free from the usual academic lingo. Nonetheless, a numbing effect and nostalgia

crept into me as I journeyed around Bastar through Sundar's depictions. Although she ends with a discussion of an alternative future for Bastar, I worry, just like the author (349-350), if we will ever see the scarred forestscapes heal after decades of military abuse.

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