

REVIEW

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Nandini Sundar. (2016). *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar*. Delhi: Juggernaut.

The Burning Forest, Sundar's second monograph on Bastar, comes almost twenty years after *Subalterns and Sovereigns* (first published in 1997); and once again, just as in the case of the first, makes us sit up and think. This time, however, the question at hand is more urgent: that of the ongoing brutal conflict in Bastar and the prose is consequently visceral. For the most part, the book leaves you shocked and speechless.

The Burning Forest describes the counter-insurgency that began in Bastar in 2005: its landscape, design, perpetrators and victims. Taking us carefully through the various phases— the ebbs, flows and changes in this counter-insurgency—but focusing more on what she calls its first phase (2005-7)—Sundar questions the legitimacy and results of the state's claim that its policies of counter-insurgency are constitutional, moral and necessary for the welfare of the people of Bastar. She argues that counter-insurgency against the Maoists provided a cover for the large-scale forced displacement and dispersal of people whose presence was an obstacle to the takeover of resource rich lands for mining and industrialisation. At a deeper level, she interrogates the state of Indian democracy and our very pretense at humanity.

Divided into three parts with compelling titles, the book is long but continuously animated by Sundar's concerns on the subject. The first part, "The Landscape of Resistance", deals with the circumstances in Bastar before 2005: the beginnings of Maoist insurgency and the creation of a new conjuncture post-2000 which prepared the imperatives for counter-insurgency. The second part, "Civil War", vividly details the *Salwa Judum* (or "Purification Hunt", as the counter-insurgency was called by its participants) campaign and horrors that marked it. The third part, "Institutions on Trial", closely analyses the response of the state and civil society (including

statutory rights bodies, courts, human-rights organisations and the media) to the conflict and the charges of excesses by the state and semi-state actors. All through these discussions, the people of Bastar remain center-stage so that the charge of Sundar's prose never becomes abstract. The narrative in these three parts is further broken up into chapters and chapters into short expositions with titles and discussions that are evocative and pithy, each of which attaches to and fleshes out one step in the narrative.

The range of sources Sundar brings to the table is wide and comprehensive, and covers state papers, legal documents, activist literature, propaganda material, speeches, interviews, posters, photographs, whatsapp posts, etc., tracking events, processes as well as emotions that fall by the wayside, in a sweeping but well-grounded narrative. In many ways this is a methodologically innovative ethnography of the state. Sundar's prose has at once the feel of a documentary, a matter of fact mapping of the subject and a poignant personal memoir, where the author, oft-present in the midst of the crisis, struggles to render her sense of the tragedy she is witnessing. Sundar constantly juxtaposes the events in Bastar to comparable ones across the world, giving her work a global context and an almost philosophical canvas. Her abiding attachment to Bastar makes this a heartfelt document where she stands alongside the hapless testimonies of her interlocutors.

Sundar provides the reader a ring-side view of the developments as they unfolded: you come face to face with the frenzy of the counter-insurgent marches, the desolation of the ransacked and burning villages, the chilling silence of the shelled and gaping school buildings, the fear in the hearts of terrified women and children hiding in the forest, the empty platitudes of apathetic and duplicitous politicians and officers, the callous double-speak of the Maoists, the numbing routines of the security forces swishing their guns as they maraud through the jungle, the frustrating chimera of the world of the courts and the miasmatic sounds and smells of the aftermath of death in southern Bastar.

Yet, the narrative never becomes maudlin. Sundar retains a firm grip on the facts of the matter. Whether it is her account of the origins of Maoism in Bastar, its spread and dilemmas, the organisation of the Maoist "state", the planning for counter-insurgency, the changing nature of conjunctures and government policies, the response of the media and civil society to the conflict, the litigation regarding the disbanding of *Salwa Judum*, Sundar deftly weaves information and analyses to create a complex, well-argued and powerful

description of the conflict in Bastar. For her critics who argue that she is prejudiced, there is a searing indictment of the Maoist modus operandi, patronage networks and opportunism, which clearly shows us the underbelly of a "revolution".

What comes into view is a vast and tortuous web of plans and operations, people and material, nexus and deals, information and technologies, which has created and sustained the conflict, and which cuts across the divide, making us gasp at the devious structure and dynamic of this hydra-headed crisis. Though Sundar says that she does not agree with the view that this is simply a conflict between the state and the Maoists with ordinary people caught in between—and there is much substance in her stand—at the end, this is precisely what it seems the conflict gets reduced to, in real terms. In 2010, the residents of the Erabor Camp wrote thus to the Supreme Court: "We wish to return to our village and cultivate in peace without any fear. There have been mistakes from both sides and now we want reconciliation and peace. There should be peace talks between the government and the Maoists" (p. 137). You could not agree more. But the possibilities of this happening seem remote and you cannot but feel helpless at the failure of our institutions to recognise, understand and prevent this tragedy.

If I sometimes felt that the Maoist responsibility for the conflict could have been described in greater detail in the book, Sundar makes it clear that the book is "really about Indian democracy, when it reduces what are essentially political contests over rights, distributive justice and alternate visions of the good to law and order problems, and when it would rather fight against its poorest citizens than talk to them" (p. 14). She argues that as citizens of a democratic country, in which that state has a duty to protect its citizens, it is of the state that we have to ask questions. According to her, this becomes even more critical in a situation where the institutions of democracy allow for the subversion of its essence and make it difficult for anyone to ask these questions.

Sundar often makes simplistic correspondences between the binaries tribals/non-tribals and exploited/exploiter, a position that she herself at other instances in the book is wary of. It is true that the present crisis is based on the pejorative perception of the "tribals" as primitive. It is also true that the assertions of indigeneity can be empowering for tribal people. Yet the social and historical landscape of southern Chhattisgarh is more complex and necessitates greater nuance in marking divides. Further, agency is difficult to tame and control, and works out in many different ways and towards confusing

directions, something Sundar's own account bears out forcefully, so that it becomes difficult to maintain that everyone acting on the Maoist side was always reasonable, while those on the other side were always misled. Both these errors, in the second case in reverse, are precisely those that have characterised the principles of counter-insurgency in Bastar so that one needs to guard against them.

These are, however, secondary considerations in what Sundar has accomplished, a document that chronicles the tragedy of a people suspended between "the impossible dreams of armed revolution" and "the soul numbing acceptance of armed repression" (p. 290). Most importantly, she holds the mirror of conscience for all of us who claim to have a vision of democracy and freedom we are unwilling to stand up for.