BOOK REVIEWS

Reversing the Gaze

Budhaditya Das, *Ambedkar University*

Madhu Ramnath, *Woodsmoke and Leafcups: Autobiographical Footnotes to the Anthropology of the Durwa*. NCR: Litmus Harper Collins Publishers, 2015. Paperback Price: INR 399.

Bastar, the forested hilly region in south Chhattisgarh, was recently in national news for a newly-created paramilitary battalion – the 'Bastariya' battalion – which is the government's latest innovation in its war against 'Left Wing Extremism'. In a policy eerily similar to the infamous Salwa Judum, the battalion will deploy *adivasis* from the region to fight Maoist guerrillas, with their knowledge of the forest, local language and culture as the secret ingredient of counterinsurgency. The Indian state has treated Bastar as its inner frontier for at least two decades, trying to establish its writ and sovereignty by force, encouraging resource extraction from its mineral and forest-rich lands and treating its residents either as backward citizens who have to be 'developed' or as lawless rebels. Generations to come will know and remember Bastar as this theatre of war, where poverty, violence and political ideologies have been interlocked in a deadly combat.

Madhu Ramnath's book, *Woodsmoke and Leafcups*, is a song that rises above the din of war and introduces the reader to a Bastar that existed before the war began. This is a unique book, an anthropological text written by a person who spent thirty years with one of the *adivasi* communities of the region and 'became a student of Durwa life'. The result is not an impersonal, scholarly exposition of *adivasi* culture; it is an intimate window into the worldviews of a sovereign people and their acknowledgment and endurance of the hardships of life with dignity and humour. Madhu Ramnath throws into sharp relief the differences between the values and philosophy of Durwa life and the modernist aspirations of postcolonial India. In the process, he subtly questions the uncritical celebration of the market economy and the commodification of labour, without exoticizing the *adivasi* or sermonising his readers.

Durwa Life-Worlds

The 300-page book is divided into seventeen short chapters, which are more attuned to the temporal and seasonal rhythms of Durwa life than to chronology or linear time. There is a rich description of quotidian life in the village and in the forest, of events and activities that resist neat classifications of livelihood, religion or culture. We learn about hunting expeditions that are as much guided by dreams, shamans and the desire to wander as the quest for wild meat. We discover the many kinds of containers that can be fashioned out of leaves, the signs that are used to predict rain and the perennial war of wits between humans and panthers.

The book provides fascinating details of forest ecology in Bastar, borne out of the author's work of documenting *adivasi* botany, the Durwa way of identifying and classifying flora. Madhu Ramnath lives the community life – taking part in communal hunts, slash-and-burn cultivation on the hill slopes and celebrating the seasons with rituals and intoxications. As a result, he is able to describe a biocultural heritage that is deeply rooted in the Sal forests of Bastar. There is an extraordinary range of organic life that is gathered, collected, harvested from nature and is used as food, fuel or to fashion items of daily use. For instance, the meat of birds, crabs, fishes, monitor lizards, snakes, rats, civets, jungle cats, porcupines, flying squirrels, monkeys, pigs and deer are consumed, as are red ants, insect larvae, mushrooms, and the fruits, roots, stems, tubers and leaves of numerous trees and plants. The Durwa community is Latourian in its refusal of the nature/culture binary and the divide that modernity posits between nature and society.

At the same time, the book is not a parable of unchanging Edenic bliss: unlike many scholars of indigeneity, the author does not represent the Durwa as 'living relics from the past', as a community untouched by frames of progress and commerce. In perhaps a revealing description of *adivasi modernity*, he recounts the time when wall-clocks became a popular wedding gift and

more than one could be found hanging on a single wall at the homes of newly married couples. As we approach the present, he puts forth questions of sustainability: 'wants have no end, the forest does' (p. 103). There are concerns of equity as well in the use of land and forest resources between the Durwa and other *adivasi* groups (Koitoor and Dandami Maria). The scarcity of resources at the local level is exacerbated by restrictions imposed with the formation of Kanger Valley National Park. The unchecked commercial extraction of Sal resin, the bark of *ahl* (*Morinda pubescens*) (for a dye) and the bark of *menda* (*Litsea glabarata*) (for incense sticks) impoverishes the forest. As Ramnath puts it, 'scientific knowledge and common sense are no match for short-term commercial sense' (p. 256). The Durwa encounters with markets, non-*adivasi* traders and officials are marked with humour and irony, even though they often have less than desirable outcomes. What is important and distinctive about this work is that it reverses the anthropological gaze from the *adivasi* to the non-*adivasi*. The 'outsider' – the government doctor, inspector, constable, clerk or the revenue official – appears ignorant, ill-at-ease and lacking *civility* in the forests of Bastar.

Of Metal Wire Rolls and Forest Protection Committees

The absence or malevolent presence of the government in the life of the *adivasi* has been widely commented upon in sociological and anthropological literature. Scholarly endeavours like Subaltern Studies have represented the *adivasi* as the quintessential rebel, avoiding, repelling and fighting the state. In Ramnath's narration too, the state has an unwelcome-if-intermittent presence in Durwa life, at least until the advent of Maoist guerrillas and paramilitary forces in Bastar. However, unlike most other accounts of state-*adivasi* relations, the leviathan does not come across simply as an all-powerful, exploitative, bribe-taking, chicken-and-alcohol-stealing entity. Rather, government officials appear as bumbling, callous, unsure and undignified characters when they try to regulate and profit from the lives of villagers. The Durwa has more disdain than fear for the state: as the author explains, 'a society's self-reliance is usually in inverse proportion to its reverence for the state' (p. xx).

For the longest time, the state's reach was incomplete and impermanent in Bastar. Government officials and welfare schemes remained restricted only to villages that lay along the sparse network of roads in the 39,000 square kilometre region. Ramnath clearly distinguishes between the villages far away from roads and those that were more accessible to the state. 'The impoverishment of Adivasi society is noticeable in roadside villages, near the towns and district headquarters, where *sarkari dal* [state-subsidised lentils] and potato have come to dominate the menu' (p. 211). Culturally too, the state is ill-suited to serve the needs of the people, whether it is curing illnesses or adjudicating disputes.

Over time, the forests of Bastar have suffered the depredations of state policy, property and commerce, not unlike the region's indigenous residents. Ramnath describes the misadventures of the forest department as it sets about counting tigers, regulating the growth of bamboo, preventing cultivation on forest land (known as 'encroachments' in official parlance) and implementing the Wildlife Protection Act. State officials are not the only ones to be blamed: Ramnath criticises the Left parties for encouraging *adivasis* to occupy and cultivate forest land. The clear-felling peasant *adivasi* is compared unfavourably to the Durwa who 'clear long narrow strips (in forest tracts) that allow for rapid regeneration of fallows' (p. 244). He describes his own unsuccessful efforts at organising the village residents to agree upon rules of sustainable use, acting to control forest fires and desisting from felling trees. In the end, there are no satisfactory answers to the vexed question of forest governance: who is best positioned to sustainably manage the forests—state, civil society, market or local communities?

State schemes in Bastar exhibit what the anthropologist Tania Li has called the 'will to improve' (Li, 2007). Some are aimed at improving the material and moral conditions of the *adivasi*, while others aim to preserve the rich forests. That these schemes of improvement are ill-conceived, do not fulfil their goals and have unintended consequences will not come as a surprise to scholars, development practitioners and those familiar with *adivasi* regions. Above all, policy and actions of the state are marked by the ideology of 'primitivism' (Chandra, 2013), the idea that *adivasis* needed to be 'improved' and 'protected' under the paternalistic hand of government. Ramnath succinctly captures much of what is wrong with the discourse of 'tribal development': 'The Adivasi is not viewed as a 'person' with individual attributes and character, with specific roles and importance within his community, but lumped into a convenient category like Scheduled or Primitive Tribes' (p. 128).

To conclude, scholars will revel in the empathetic and textured descriptions of the life-worlds of Durwa people. For non-academic readers, the book is an opportunity to taste *landa* and *mel*, listen to the sound of caterpillars munching Sal leaves in the monsoonal forest, and to learn how the drum and flute were invented when two Durwa men went into the forest looking for yams. Everyone who is interested in the many pasts, presents and futures of *adiva*si communities will enjoy and learn from this lyrical part-memoir, part-anthropological work set in one of the most troubled regions of our country.