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## Public Sociology at its best: A review of Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar* (Juggernaut Publication, 2016).

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**Cover Page Footnote**

Endnotes: Mizruchi, Ephraim H. *Regulating Society*. 1983, New York: Free Press. Taylor,Verta. "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance." *American Sociological Review*, 1989. Vol. 54-5: 761-75.

**Public Sociology at its best: A review of Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest: India's War in Bastar* (Juggernaut Publication, 2016).**

Nandini Sundar's book couldn't be timelier. It comes at a moment when the biggest threats to basic rights of the most vulnerable, all over the world, are from electorally chosen governments. Abundant scholarship has dealt with questions of the consequences of authoritarian, despotic, weak, failed and fascist states, but this book stands apart. It undertakes one of the most urgent tasks sociologists have today — of deconstructing the architecture and functioning of democratic states and of exposing its underbelly.

It is in this analysis of the Indian state, one of the most populous democracies in the world, that I think *The Burning Forest's* strength lies. The work remarkably exemplifies how a functioning democracy lends itself, most incontrovertibly, to the project of uncovering the inherent structural underpinnings of states and determining their synergy with corporate interests. While Sundar's book only indirectly invokes the mechanisms by which big businesses influence the working of states, it certainly makes an extraordinary contribution to the study of the *enterprise of a state*.

By focusing on Bastar, a small region in central India rich in mineral and forest wealth and inhabited by *adivasis* (indigenous people), Sundar creates a microcosm through which it is possible to derive state theories. She uses examples of incidents relating to various state machineries in Bastar to show the state to be perfectly built and prepared to design, and perpetuate, amongst the cruelest civil wars of the century. Unlike a Weberian analysis, limited to states' attempts to reestablish monopoly over violence, Sundar's analysis is a nuanced one. It makes room for diagnosing interstices in state compositions which lend themselves to bargaining by various actors, especially, but not limited to the interests of capital.

Inhabited also by the Maoist guerrilla movement, the state in Bastar employs one of the oldest known measures of counter-insurgency — turning the region inside out. Sundar traces this counter-insurgent strategy, employed in Bastar since 2005 and known as 'strategic helmeting' or 'grouping,' all the way back to the colonial Malaya state and the Americans in Vietnam (p17). Grouping, most broadly, is the strategy of forcefully displacing local populations from villages to government controlled camps. This tactic aims to cut off the supply line to guerrilla forces, isolate them and, militarily annihilate any resistance.

How does a democratic state manage to get away with practices that were used decades ago by colonial and unpopular states? This is the puzzle that Sundar often returns to address. She observes that although insurgencies have local characteristics, "[t]he software for counter- insurgency [has] remain[ed] the same," modeling itself on an existing global repertoire (p14). The question, then, ought to not be limited to asking if democratic regimes change the operations of counterinsurgency, she suggests, but to investigate the opportunities that these precise institutions, such as elections, the free

press, national human rights commissions, and the independent judiciary provide — “as cracks through which [Indian] democracy falls — both through their institutional weakness and the official legitimation they provide” (p46).

Sundar’s meticulous research becomes obvious through the book. She uses it to describe the mechanisms working in the state’s creation of legitimacy for displacing, and then arming, local civilians, making them fight their own people under the guise of being a genuine people’s counter-movement. She shows this operation to be entirely true to the translation of its name — a state-initiated and controlled purification hunt (*Salwa Judum*) against dissenting groups.

She traces, in minute detail, the various arms of the state and their concerted effort at keeping alive and shielding the state-sponsored *Salwa Judum* militia. In this unfolds the web of interests that come to occupy regions like the conflict zone of Bastar. While minerals and public-private partnerships in mining have come to define the century so far (through a commodity super cycle leading to their demand) (p29), Sundar also traces the interests of rich *adivasi* politicians from varying political parties in combination with a corrupt bureaucracy that make the transfer of indigenous lands possible. The economic benefits to the police from being declared a guerrilla affected zone, and the aspirations of newly settled immigrants in *adivasi* areas for development (contrasted with the poverty and dehumanized image of *adivasis*), are also tied to motivations for state actions against its own people.

Development itself becomes a weapon of war. While the *Salwa Judum* camp serves as an extreme example, it is easy to find other cases of states offering benefits, but with costs attached. Such as, providing employment but at the lowest wage rates. In Bastar, Sundar shows how the state withholds medical care “as an instrument of war” (p230), at the same time offering but closely controlling education — to distance children from resisting villages. Government teachers are moved to camps, and not all children choose to travel or live there to attend school. Thus, entire villages are left without basic amenities. The highest percentage of development funds, instead, quoting the economist Kaveri Gill, Sundar shows, are spent on roads (40 per cent), presumably a priority for the movement of capital and security forces. These facts are used to explain how despite several protective laws for the *adivasis*, they remain the poorest population. Such an analysis can effortlessly be transferred to other minority populations around the world, who are protected in law, yet ironically continue to remain the most immiserated.

The justification for quelling *adivasi* movements and displacing locals, Sundar indicates is quite readily accepted by development and progress focused state players. A parallel with the acceptance of U.S state intervention in other countries under the trope of better conditions and progress, is obvious.

What does all this mean for resistance?

### **States and movements**

My own work with Maoists in India has shown state counter-insurgency measures to be erroneous in their understanding of armed movements. Armed movements establish themselves and gain resilience through working closely with local communities and building class organizations that are not quelled by militaristic solutions, at least not permanently. Armed revolutionary movements often manage to build village level structures that are much like abeyance structures identified by Mizruchi (1983) and Taylor (1989). They may temporarily cease to exist, but the foundations are set for their re-emergence.

While Sundar does not condone every Maoist action, even comparing several of their actions to the state, she does suggest a rise in their support with the strengthening of state counter-insurgency operations (p73). At the same time, the state succeeds in its goal of creating insecurity and mistrust among entire communities — pitching people against one another. In terms of a state analysis, it suggests, how the state also partakes in constructing the ‘insurgent,’ by turning people they labelled Maoists (to swell their number of arrests) to being victims of Maoists (to justify their own killings), depending on the need of the situation. However, Sundar leaves unexamined the role of capitalists and the many interlocks between business and state as a driving force behind these actions; something that would have lent to a more comprehensive analysis of democratic states.

### **Public Sociology**

Nevertheless, this book serves as much a lesson in public sociology as it does in state analytics. Sundar closely follows what transpired in village after village in Bastar, under the label of counter-insurgency, embedding herself in the lives of *adivasis* at the receiving end — a community she has been writing about for the past 26 years. Sundar eventually also turns into one of their biggest advocates against the state, filing a public interest litigation (also known as public interest law in the U.S) demanding the dismantling of the state created *Salwa Judum* militia. She painstakingly collects information, contradicting every account given by the police with what actually occurred on the ground. Such evidence is not only necessary to establish the truth, but to draw attention to the brutal side of the workings of a state. Sundar describes villages she visited in 2005, then again in the following years, up until 2016 and the conditions they underwent in the two decades — with many villages simply being wiped out. This method of employing a longitudinal analysis is crucial to any endeavor, such as Sundar's, that aims to identify causal patterns in complicated war like situations on the ground.

Much of the last section of the book discusses the arduous task of bringing the state to the book and continues to expose cracks in the structures of democratic states. Sundar makes intriguing revelations about the interlocking of security and political personnel with policy and judicial bodies; mentioning how three of the six chairpersons of the State Human Rights

Commission were former police officers. The most troubling fact however, is her description of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) (p323) in investigating the case filed by Sundar et al in the Supreme Court. The fact-finding committee sent by the NHRC, she writes, consisted of an entire team of police personnel — the very force that was implicated in the crimes. The team lived with the local police, drew their statements and used SPOs or special police officers (cheap temporary foot soldiers for the state consisting of young *adivasis* trapped in state-run camps and employed by the *Salwa Judum* to attack Maoists), as interpreters in the villages. The fact-finding team paid no mind to the fact that special police officers had become indispensable to the state and police, and were protected from being penalized for the rapes, looting and burning of villages they partook in (p198).

As you cheer for Sundar to win the legal battle against the state, you are also reminded of the risks undertaken by sociologists such as her, who engage in fighting for the communities they engage with in their research. She openly declares her frustrations, tears and exhaustion at taking on the state, all while also being a Sociology professor with full time teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Public sociology, much like living in a democratic state, as she shows, is steeped in dilemmas. The dilemma in Bastar is this, “People want both the Maoists and state, but for different reasons: the former provide freedom from a hated bureaucracy and the latter holds out the promise of welfare on a scale that no one else can provide. Even as villagers hate the government for what it is doing to them, they want justice from this very government. Even as the Maoists curse the constitution, they invoke its principles when criticizing the extrajudicial killings or the arrest of their leaders. India’s constitutional democracy, because of and in spite of all its failures, is a predicament and promise that no citizen can escape from” (p45).

## References

- Mizruchi, Ephraim H. (1983) *Regulating Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Taylor, Verta (1989) “Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance.” *American Sociological Review*, 54 (5): 761-75.

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