The Burning Forest

Praise for the book

'A very important and interesting book which should be widely read… A deeply disturbing analysis of the sacrifice of tribal lives and communities caught between the camouflaged barbarity of the security forces and the violent arrogance of a deflected rebellion. The appeal for reasoned humanity cannot be any stronger – or more eloquent – than this.' **Amartya Sen**

'Thoroughly researched, devoid of any sensationalism, and therefore all the more harrowing is this narrative of what has been happening in Bastar since 2005 when State violence was unleashed on the tribals there, trapping them between the Salwa Judum goons and the Maoists "intent on securing their rights". Nandini Sundar lays bare how, now that the inaccessibility that protected their centuries-old culture has been ripped off to reveal a vulnerable community sitting on immense mineral resources attractive to capitalist investment, a deliberate strategy of murder, destruction and devastation has been shaping the contours of "Development" in the region. Un-putdownable. Indispensable to students of Indian democracy.' **Girish Karnad**

'Nandini Sundar is one of India's most distinguished anthropologists, and the leading academic authority on Bastar. But she is also one of Indian democracy's most passionate voices, throwing a spotlight on the deep relationship between violence, development, state formation and social movements. This unique combination of talents is on full display in this book on contemporary Bastar. This is a textured, deeply researched, committed and evocative portrait of lives and communities caught in the crossfire of violence in Bastar. It is a searing critique of the state, but one that Indian democracy needs to hear.' **Pratap Bhanu Mehta**

'Nandini Sundar, an extraordinary anthropologist-activist, has mined twenty-five years of experience in the region to write an account of Bastar's civil war that is both gripping and harrowing. She pulls no punches in describing the greed and cynical violence of state agencies, mining companies, politicians and immigrants. Her account of life in the Maoist rebel zones is graphic, full of empathy but by no means uncritical. This is a story that everyone who cares about India must read.' **Partha Chatterjee**

'This disturbing book, written with deep knowledge and passion, shakes us out of our complacency as it exposes the brutal realities of the war in Bastar.' **Sharmila Tagore**

'Here is a politically important chronicle of the struggles of the adivasis of Bastar in Chhattisgarh, which challenges the Indian state's dominant narrative that overemphasizes Maoist violence alone, ignoring the state's culpability in alienating these adivasis by evicting them from their lands and unleashing terror on them. Combining rigorous theoretical analysis with intensive fieldwork, Nandini Sundar has come out with an excellently critical narrative which reiterates the basic principle that no state can ever be exonerated from crimes against humanity, and provides a compelling case for the withdrawal of security forces from Bastar, and initiation of dialogue with the Maoists there. It is a must-read for both academics and social activists.' **Sumanta Banerjee**

'Every thinking Indian, every citizen who is concerned about the present and future of the Republic, should read *The Burning Forest*. It is an impeccably researched and finely written work of scholarship, redolent with insight, and displaying enormous courage as well.' **Ramachandra Guha**

'How does democracy affect the prosecution of civil war? Nandini Sundar explores this question with untold courage and fierce determination in her remarkable extended ethnography of counter-insurgency in Chhattisgarh (India) – a desperate struggle to clear the land for mineral exploitation… A rare and brilliant treatment of a topic few social scientists would dare to touch, let alone examine at such close quarters and for over two decades.' **Michael Burawoy**

'This meticulous and powerful book not only documents a brutal regime of internal colonialism in the world's largest democracy. It reveals the insidious ways in which consent to state oppression is manufactured and amplified. Everyone interested in the commingled fate of democracy and capitalism in the post-colonial world should read this book.' **Pankaj Mishra**

'Among the most important works on the conflict in southern Chhattisgarh' ***India Today***

'There are enough questions that have been answered in *The Burning Forest* to keep you sleepless over several nights, thinking about what we have done to our own people. It is a book that all of us need to read.' ***Indian Express***

'One of the most rounded accounts of the strife [in Bastar]' ***The Telegraph***

'[A]sks for no glossing over of any kind... a thorough, diligent and finally credible effort' ***The Caravan***

'[A] razor sharp critique of the institutions that make India feel good about itself – its parliamentary democracy, its judiciary, its free press, its vibrant civil society' **The Wire**

'[E]ven if you disagree with her views… there is no way you can read it and not feel harrowed by the war India has unleashed against its own people in Bastar.' ***Business Standard***

'[T]he work needs to be celebrated for its scholarship, for its independence and for its courage.' ***The Tribune***

'[A] balanced and incisive narrative of the ground reality in Chhattisgarh' ***Force***

'Sundar's book is a must-read for those interested in the genesis and the nature of conflict in Bastar and for those willing to think beyond "development" achieved through the dispossession of land from the Adivasis to whom it belongs and for whom it is a source of livelihood.' ***The Hindu***

'[A] timely and pro-Adivasi book written with utmost honesty and a deep sense of empathy' ***Open***

'A compelling account of the real-politik of "democratic nation building"' ***Seminar***

'Sundar's book is an exceptional expose of the scandal of rural governance in India, a chronicle of State excesses, an anthropologist's view about how conflicts perpetuate themselves and an account of how India's democracy is degraded when few are watching. Policymakers ought to take away the key lesson from it that there really are no military solutions to social conflicts.' ***Hindustan Times***

'If many places are like Bastar, few books are like *The Burning Forest*... it resonates with classics on frontiers and dispossession.' ***Journal of Agrarian Change***

'The message of this monumental social science inquiry is loud and clear – citizens have to assert their rights to get justice from the Indian state.' ***Contributions to Indian Sociology***

The Burning Forest

India's War in Bastar

Nandini Sundar

juggernaut

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To Manish Kunjam – who has fought for his people
with honour and retained a sense of humour through terrible times

To Ashok Desai and Nitya Ramakrishnan
for striving to make the Constitution of India meaningful

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Preface

A colleague at the Delhi School of Economics, Rabindra Ray, once told me a story which had circulated in the 1970s, in the days when he was a 'Naxalite' or an armed revolutionary, drawing inspiration from communist struggles around the world. A policeman taunted a youth he had arrested: 'You Naxalites talk so much about Vietnam,' he said. 'Show me where it is on the map.' The youth – who was illiterate – put his hand on his chest and replied, 'It is in my heart.'

Today, in the former undivided district of Bastar stretching over 39,114 square kilometres in the south of Chhattisgarh, the landscape of the heart is like a torn map, fluttering between resistance and anguish. The region is at the core of the Indian government's war with Maoist guerrillas. The Government of India is represented by barbed wire camps, helicopters, roads and mines that cut deep gashes through the forest. The *janathana sarkar* or 'people's government' of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), on the other hand, has unmarked boundaries and mysterious circuits of information. Its citizens face an uncertain, perilous journey, on which they have embarked with determination but no clear destination. They are not always sure who their fellow travellers are. When I asked a man whom he preferred, the government or the Maoists, he replied, 'I know what is in my own heart, I cannot speak for the hearts of others.'

Starting in the early 1980s, the Maoists established a strong base in Bastar, helping the villagers resist the petty tyrannies of the

bureaucracy. Years of sporadic battle followed. In 2005 the Indian government began concerted operations to bring the area back under its control. The fabulous mineral resources of Bastar and practical sovereignty were both at stake. The first step was to prop up a so-called people's movement named the Salwa Judum, which in Gondi, translates literally as 'purification hunt'. Vigilantes accompanied by security forces went through villages, burning, looting and killing, forcibly removing villagers to government-controlled camps. By 2009, the Judum had been converted into a full-fledged police and paramilitary operation, named Operation Green Hunt. In the years since, the number of deaths, rapes and arrests of civilians has only grown, quite apart from the deaths of security forces and Maoist cadres. A standard feature of such wars is the impossibility of fixing numbers and even identities.

In Part I of this book, I attempt to locate the war in the social fabric of exploitation and describe the beginnings of resistance. In Part II, I explore the varied forms that counter-insurgency has taken and what it means to be an adivasi citizen of India caught in armed conflict. In Part III, I ask what difference it makes, if any, when a counter-insurgency campaign is conducted in a democracy rather than a military regime or colonial government. How have different institutions and actors reacted, ranging from the welfare bureaucracy to political parties, human rights organizations, the media and the judiciary? The tragedy of India is not that there are only a few fringe elements or brave dissenters who oppose its wars, 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.

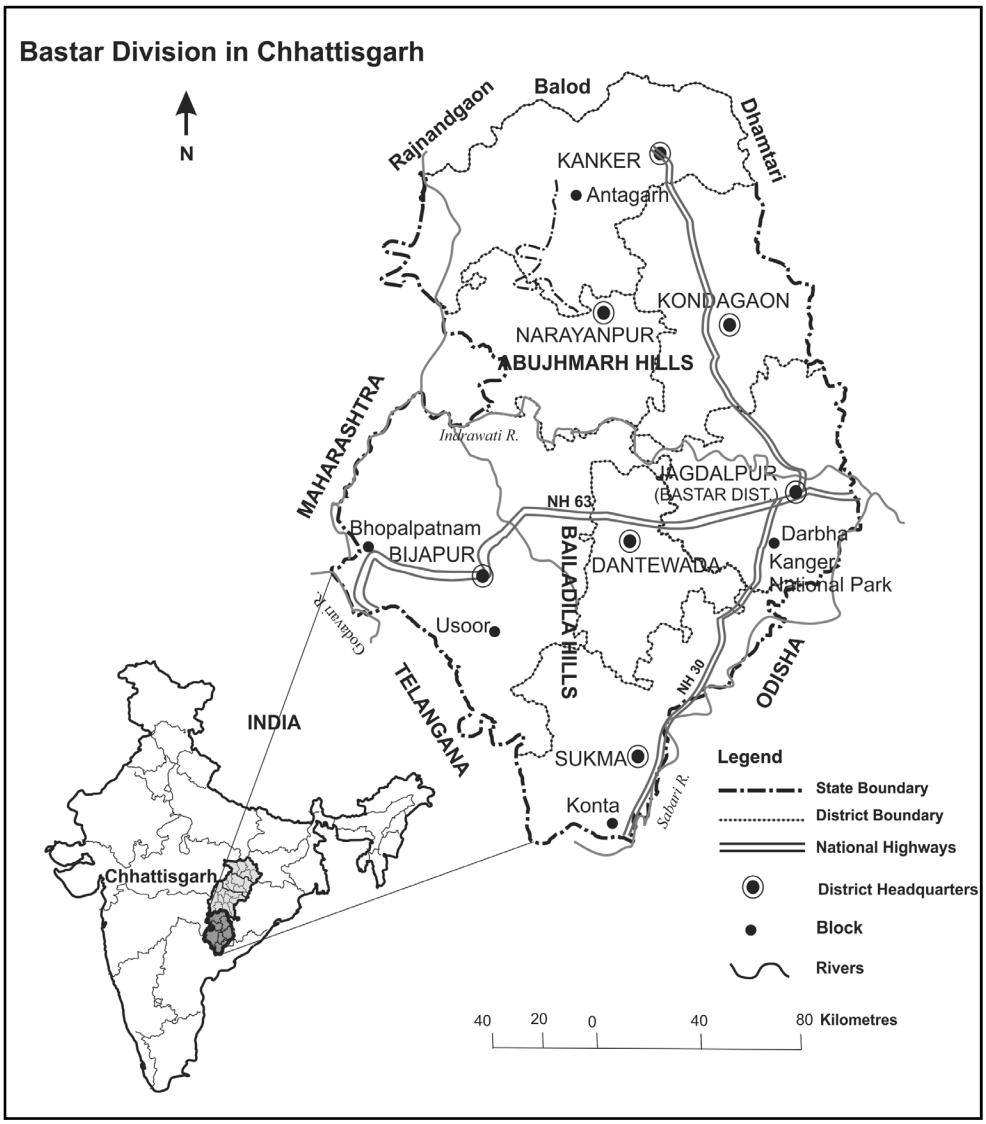
This book is written against both the government's militaristic understanding of the Maoist movement as a law and order problem that must be crushed and the revolutionary certainties of the Maoists and their sympathizers. It is written for all those who hate the impunity and arrogance of the Indian state, 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.

This book is written for all the ordinary adivasis I know, who make difficult moral choices within complex constraints, and many of whom are heroic beyond bounds I can scarcely imagine. In today's conditions, it requires superhuman effort for them to merely survive.

This book is written because, in the absence of justice, at least the truth must be on record.

This book is written for myself – as catharsis, as helpless witnessing, as rage about the annihilation of a people and their way of life.


Bastar Division in Chhattisgarh
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Sabari R.
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State Boundary
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District Headquarters
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40 20 0 40 80 Kilometres

Prologue:
Dandakaranya, the Forest of Exile

do not forgive truly it is not in your power
to forgive in the name of those betrayed at dawn

Zbigniew Herbert, *The Envoy of Mr Cogito*

February 2006

Hungi lay counting the stars as they slowly faded into half-light, putting off the moment when she would have to start her morning chores. The goat kid had kept her up half the night by running up and down below her bed, rubbing its back against the ropes that made up the cot and nibbling at her toes. Pandri, the white rooster her father was training for a prizefight, had just started crowing but was not yet insistent. Her mother, Deve, had got up earlier to defecate while it was still dark – a time when only the dim shapes of people would be visible. But Hungi was being lazy that morning. Suddenly, 16-year-old-Masa, one of the village sentries, came running through the village, shouting loudly, 'The Judum is coming.' Nearing Hungi's house, he said breathlessly, 'They have come to Itapalli…and it's our turn next.' On her feet instantly, Hungi grabbed her baby brother and ran in the direction she had seen her mother going. Her father, Rama, who had been up for a while warming his hands around a small fire, went inside the house and gathered as much grain as he could in a small cloth bag, quickly untied the cattle and followed

her. In half an hour, the entire village was deserted, except for the squawking chickens and some pigs.

They came from the east, some 400 men dressed in camouflage fatigues, some with black scarves around their heads, carrying Kalashnikovs. They reached the village just as dawn was breaking. In front was the former Maoist Kiche Handa, now working with the police as a 'Special Police Officer'. His task was to point out houses. 'That's the house of the headman,' he said, 'where the Maoist leaders always stay when they visit the village. And that's the house of Hadma, an active sympathizer.' The force went inside the houses and took whatever they found – rice, money, jewellery. In Hungi's house, they kicked at the sack of beans she had so carefully collected, spilling them around the house before setting fire to it. The fire took time to catch since the houses were at a little distance from each other. But by 11 a.m., all seventy mud and thatch huts in the hamlet were burning. The forces were tired and the local commander called a halt. They moved a little way off and began to cook, feasting on the frightened chickens they had captured and the rice they had looted. By the time lunch was over, it was two in the afternoon, and time for the next village.

Jogi's house on the western edge of the neighbouring hamlet was shielded by a grove of mango and tamarind trees. She had been out since 4.30 a.m., gathering the mahua flowers used to make the local liquor, and had just come home. Jogi's father, Hunga, had a bad leg after he had fallen off a tree some years ago. As he did most afternoons, he was sitting outside the house making a bamboo basket. When the forces came, neither Jogi nor her father was prepared. Two of the men hit Hunga with rifle butts, and when Jogi ran to save him, she was caught and pushed inside the house. After they had finished raping her, the soldiers shot Jogi. That evening, back in camp, the force commander called a press conference. He proudly displayed a woman's corpse dressed in an olive-green uniform. A guerrilla squad commander, he said, captured after a heavy encounter in which both sides fired several rounds.

The villagers of Koruthguda did not come back that night or even the next. From the forest, they watched the flames devour their houses. Luckily Hungi had found her mother and some others from the village in the forest. They cooked what little rice they had brought, hushing the babies in case the forces were still out there. Hungi's father, Rama, went back to the village briefly to try to retrieve some grain, but the houses were still smouldering. When people came out of hiding on the third day, they found only the charred remains of their homes, an occasional mud wall still standing, and in some places the twisted metal mouth of a blackened vessel visible through the ashes. Even the sounds of the village were missing – the chickens gone, the pigs no longer grunting.

After two weeks of trying to live in the forest, the entire village left. Most went across the border to Khammam in Andhra Pradesh, a day's walk away, where they had contacts among the Telugu farmers who employed them seasonally to harvest chillies. A few took shelter with relatives in villages which had not yet been burnt. Some tried to take a few head of cattle with them and some just let them go, defeated by the enormity of what had happened. The cattle became feral, appearing together in wild groups at the edge of the forest, and fleeing again. Grass began to grow out of the houses, and the tracks disappeared as the forest took over. The village died.

April 2009

Rama was the first one to return to the village. He went up to the herd of cows grazing nearby, and found his favourite brown cow, Moti. He gently touched her face and called her by her name, and Moti quietly followed him home. For both man and cow, there was real joy in this reunion. Others began to come back in ones and twos, reclaiming their cattle, cleaning the debris of burnt grain and broken pots from their homes. The men went into the forest and cut down fresh logs. Slowly, slowly, the village began to grow again.

In the neighbouring village, Itapalli, some families had been

captured by the forces, and had been living in the Salwa Judum 'relief' camp at Dornapal, along with people from other villages. They were ostensibly refugees from the Maoists and under police protection. When they heard that the villagers of Koruthguda and Itapalli had started trickling home, Hidma and Mahesh, who had been living in camp, sent a letter asking whether they too could come back: 'Our lives have been miserable, without forests and fields, without the sunrise on the river, and the sound of the birds. Forgive us for staying on the other side.'

February 2016

The villages were tense again. The fields had yielded little this year because of the drought. A paramilitary camp had come up 2 kilometres from Itapalli, and the forces went out patrolling every day, raiding villages at dawn, arresting men and taking them to the camp. The women spent the days pleading with the police to release their men. Two boys had been picked up while cutting wood from the forest between Itapalli and Koruthguda. A week later, the Koruthguda villagers found out they had been killed as Maoists.

Hungi had got married the previous year and was living in a neighbouring village, but had come home to check on her parents. The family talked late into the night. Hungi's mother, Deve, said, 'When we came back seven years ago, we vowed we would never leave again.' 'But who knows,' said her father Rama, 'what the future will bring?'