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Book Review

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Bastar Dispatches: A Passage Through the Wilds, Narendra, HarperCollins, 2018, 262 pp., INR 499.

Narendra's book, *Bastar Dispatches: A Passage Through the Wilds* took almost thirty years to be composed and reach its readers. The journey began in 1980 with a field study project titled "Tribal Perceptions and the Modern World" at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi. Abujhmad in Bastar was the epicentre of the study. While the project came to an end, Narendra continued to stay in the contiguous villages of Abujhmad. He writes, "I left Abujhmad in 1985, but to this day it continues to churn within me. There remains a deep self-doubt about articulating the spirit that is Abujhmad" (p. xi). Through the book, he shares the stories, ebbs and flows, and mysteries of Abujhmad, literally translated as the "inscrutable land."

The book is a compilation of observations, memory, reflections, anecdotes, and field notes-inspired narrations of his stay in the "wilds." The dispatches have ethnographic tendencies, but the author steers clear (as far as possible!), of any frames of the academic world. By "ethnographic tendencies," I mean to highlight the author's total immersion in documenting the everyday mundane activities of the people and their culture. Methodologically, his approach is recursive and repetitive in terms of entering the field and deepening his engagement. While time is a crucial factor in ethnography for maintaining distance from the field and drawing theoretical connections, the author "overstayed," committing a sin, *per se* in ethnography. Having said that, the author does not claim his work is ethnographic. Here, I am reminded of Renato Rosaldo's reflections on bereavement, rage and Ilongot headhunting, where he raises a critical methodological issue regarding the idea of a "detached observer" and the positionality of a researcher (Rosaldo, 1989). Besides subject positions marked by gender, class, nationality, and so on, Rosaldo wants us to consider "how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight" (p. 19). It took Rosaldo more than a decade and two personal losses to make sense of the force of the rage experienced by older Ilongot men due to bereavement, leading to the desire to engage in headhunting. In brief, a long view of the field

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through the prism of time can provide insights that might otherwise not be possible. “Dispatch” is a literary genre which has evolved as a hybrid form—part reportage, part literary narrative. It was employed by writers such as George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, and Nirmal Verma to note ethical tension, political complexity, and lived experience. Based on observation and temporal proximity to events, the form offers a sense of being written from the field for a distant audience. In his dispatches, Narendra locates himself in the dense jungles of Abujhmad, amidst the almost silent, shy, and simple men and women, narrating stories of encounters with fierce animals and spirits while sharing the worldview of Abujhmad. The book celebrates silences, one-line songs, the here and now, and Abujhmad itself, wherein the largest village Garpa, consists of seven scattered huts. It tells the stories of people and places. The author writes, “Places have personas, dispositions, likes and dislikes. They are alive” (p. 246). Astu, Bulki, Juru, Banda and a few others offer a glimpse of the life in this part of the world.

The book comprises forty-six dispatches, each of around six pages long, with a few as short as three pages and others as long as ten pages. Most importantly, the length of each dispatch tries to maintain the brevity of Abujhmad’s world: “Everything in the region is short and small—the hut, village, distance walked in a day, family size, trails, lifespan, conversations, engagements, vocabulary, counting and much else” (p. xvi). The dispatches are neither chronologically nor thematically arranged, giving an unevenness to the reading experience and lending a semblance of the cadence of the language and the landscape of Abujhmad.

We quite often fall into the trap of over-interpreting ordinary life, either by exoticising or marginalising it. Narendra circumvents both exoticisation and marginalisation of the Adivasi by bringing the Abujhmad way of life into proximity with that of the non-Abujhmad world through stories of his mother, animals, Adivasis outside Abujhmad, and people and other sentient beings from different parts of the country and the world. This is evident in dispatches such as “The Ecology of Cows,” “Word’s Intrinsic Worth,” “Paunar Ashram,” “St Julien to Abujhmad,” and so on. Narendra’s subsequent books*, A Sense of Home: Abujhmad and a Childhood Village* (2020) and *Landscapes of Wilderness: Meditation in the Wild* (2024), continue to explore the assonances between Abujhmad and the village folk, as well as between Adivasis and non-Adivasis. Through this manoeuvre, the author collapses the colonial construct of the “tribe” as a distinct social category.

Narendra makes a conscious choice of using the nomenclature "Adivasi," the term which has much greater acceptance among the people themselves (Dasgupta, 2018, pp. 3-5). Historian Sangeeta Dasgupta (2018) discusses at length the choice of the terms "Adivasi," "tribe," "Scheduled Tribe" and "Indigenous People" in her paper "Adivasi Studies: A Historian's Perspective" and reminds us that "the choice of which nomenclature to use is usually a careful, political one" with each "having their own sets of limitations" (p. 3). Narendra prefers to capitalise the "A" in "Adivasi[1]." Through this move, does he give a pan-Indian identity to them, in the process dismissing the multiple histories of adivasis and plural ways of being an adivasi?

On Adivasiyat, Narendra observes: "His [referring to an Adivasi friend's] understanding of Adivasiyat does not depend on ethnicity. It comes from kinship with the forest, the nurturance one receives from it, and its intrinsic value" (p. 101). I am reminded of Jacinta Kerketta's poem "Mera Adivasi Hona" which seems to echo similar sentiments. She writes, "To be close to the land is to be an Adivasi/ To follow nature is to be an Adivasi/ To be close to the land is to be an Adivasi/ To be more human is to be an Adivasi" (Kerketta, 2022, translation mine).

For Jacinta Kerketta, as for Narendra, "Adivasiyat" has a much broader connotation, based on a common humanity. There is an openness, an invitation of sorts, "to be more human." It is therefore no surprise when Narendra says, "Abujhmad could well be used as a referent for the Adivasi universe in India and the world at large" (p. xv). He clarifies, "Unless married to contemporary sensibilities, there is nothing much that can be classified as an Adivasi identity. As against neat segmentations of an anthropological kind, there is indistinctiveness of a cultural type. Such indistinctiveness is crucial to the Adivasi's self-image" (p. xv). This distinction has gradually been mapped onto people and geography, and histories of disenfranchisement now abound. He explains that the dissonance occurs as the "referents for an ancient community come from modern categories as state, progress, democracy, development, economics, governance, market, equality, ecology and the rest. They have little or no echo in the Adivasi's experience or memory" (p. xiv).

[1] I prefer to use "adivasi" with a lowercase "a" to acknowledge the multiple histories and diverse ways of being adivasis in India, which is in alignment with scholars such as Sangeeta Dasgupta and others. However, while referring to Narendra's book for this review, I use the capitalised "Adivasi," as it is the form used by the author.

For someone who appreciates poetry, this book is a sheer delight. Words weave together a misty haziness through which Abujhmad comes across as an apparition— the more one tries to "understand" it, the more one loses its possibilities. Abujhmad's existence is not completely known; it is there but still not. Its darkness is not the opposite of light but that which has its own identity. The world comes to form every day with the rise of the sun and gives way to otherworldly beings in the complete darkness; where counting goes only till five, vocabulary does not go beyond 500 words, and songs usually have only a line rendered again and again. Home is not inside the hut-like structures but outside them. There, life is still, and it goes on in its ordinariness, with no words exchanged between people for days! As the Abujhmadia remains in stupor after the consumption of *ghorgha* (a toddy drink), the reader remains lost, or rather, is found in the cadence of words. Abujhmad is a metaphor. It has definite geographical coordinates, but it is as elusive as life itself. Abujhmad suggests that which was, that which could have been, and that which we may never be able to return to, which we have left behind forever! But maybe, as the author observes, it is still alive in the crevices of living and being. These are reminders of life in its ordinariness, a resistance to conformity without consciously attempting it, and something deeply particular yet profoundly universal.

For those of us interested in education, adivasi studies, development studies, anthropology, and literature, this book is an important reference. In the subtle and potent use of the trope of Abujhmad, the author critiques all that humanity now aspires to—modernity, equality, democracy, development, education, action, activism, and purpose —and takes us closer to the humans we are and are capable of becoming. Narendra seems to be putting forward the idea that a vocabulary brings its own apparatus; it multiplies itself in different forms and fills the space of silence and ordinariness. The apparatus of language requires more descriptions, more explanations, more arguments, and more of everything. The production of language through academic, political, economic, and cultural machinery creates surplus. The surplus of words, in the absence of experience, is empty, standardised, jargon-heavy, and meaningless. According to the author, "many a time word is a way of impoverishing the world around" (p. 105). This applies not only to those who control and regulate the "market" but also to those who consume and conform to it.

Narendra asks a fundamental question— "What it means to be human?" He answers with another set of questions: "Should it mean anything? What are the referents we have when talking as such?" (p. 57). According to him, human beings create meanings, and therefore they

are plotted as we deem fit. In contrast, natural things, including spirits, have magnitudes of their own which are independent of meanings.

In the same dispatch, he continues to ponder knowing and knowledge: "How much does one know? Why know? What does one do with knowing?" (p. 63). Schooling and education today celebrate questions and a questioning attitude, but Narendra cautions us against its excesses. There is an infrastructure of questions that clouds the education system, conflating questions of learning and knowing with being. He writes, "When one does not have many questions, or seeks many answers one addresses life differently. One also perceives and relates to self and phenomenon differently" (p. 25). In questioning, we tend to forget the capacity to "be," to attend, to listen, and to observe within and without.

Related to this are the nature of stories that circulate in Abujhmad. Stories, Narendra shares, "have no inherent information, education, reprimand or reminder for the listener; neither resolution, nor fulfilment…nor convey a rehearsed or accumulated knowledge of the community…nor virtue, vice or illustrious deeds" (p. 176). So, what are they about? They are about "not knowing and being happy about it; with minimal intervention in what *is*" (p. 177).

In yet another dispatch, Narendra invites the reader to consider the nature of one's relationship with the self and the world if the idea of home is located outside the structure of a hut. A typical hut in Abujhmad measures about 3m by 3m. The hut accommodates around seven people and several animals, including dogs, cats, poultry, pigs, and goats. Yet the Abujhmadias never built bigger huts, despite the availability of sufficient land and resources. When asked by the author, Banda, an elder from Garpa village, explains that the hut was just a shelter for the night; all daily rituals and activities, including intimacies, took place outside the hut. For the Abujhmadias, the whole world is their home!

Related to this is the idea of the relationship between the Adivasi and the forest. Narendra astutely observes: "The Abujhmadia has enjoyed freedom with the forest, hunted its animals, gathered its fruits, bathed in its rivers and streams; revered and used it. Yet he does not have a conviction that the forest is his, nor would he" (p. 5). Inherent in this relationship are the ideas of complete ownership and tenancy intertwined; separate the two, and the world and its people fall apart.

On the issue of "becoming," the author believes that the apparatus of modernity colludes in diverting us from our being. In Abujhmad, he writes, "There are not the agitations or progressions to 'becoming'" (p. 15). The Abujhmadia has no real work or purpose in life, engendering stillness, that which is neither ascetic nor consciously strived for.

In this book, Narendra brings to the fore different ways of thinking and being through the lives of the Adivasis of Abujhmad. Sangeeta Dasgupta urges the need to tell the stories of Adivasis not "always to express difference and dissonance, but also as stories that point to the multiplicity of cultures and myriad ways of thinking" (Dasgupta, 2018, p. 7).

While reading the book, one wonders at times: Does the author romanticise Abujhmad and the Abujhmadia's way of life? Has this romanticisation not made the Abujhmadia most vulnerable to attacks from both the state and non-state actors?

Having said that, it may not be fair to read this book on Abujhmad through a lens outside its frame. Maybe then we can sense what it is about. Quite poignantly, the author writes, "Abujhmad is more a perspective, less of content. It spurs one to lose focus and step into the uncertain and unknown and live faith and trust" (p. 177). Characteristically Abujhmadia-like, Narendra ends the book with "Ko Jani," meaning "who knows," for he forewarns the reader right at the beginning that "mine is only an experience of Abujhmad, with its underlying tentativeness … Its communicability is, and shall remain, an idiosyncrasy of speech, and there is an irregularity about such speech" (pp. xv-xvi). It is difficult to live with the unknowability, uncertainties, and vulnerabilities of Abujhmad, but the book compels one to pause and ponder.

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