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‘Please let us live’ – Childhoods and the Politics of ‘Life’

by

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Abstract: Drawing from thirteen-month ethnographic fieldwork, in this paper I examine how the discourses, practices, and experiences of development and violence shape Indigenous children in the interlocking framings of future and threat, where on the one hand, they are envisioned to become responsible citizens through education, and on the other hand, they appear to be marked as “threat” to the nation. Adivasi childhoods, fraught with the notions of threat and futurity, exist at the intersections of geographical, historical, and political contexts. I explicate the political and geographical terrain within which Adivasi childhoods are tethered to the politics of time. I argue that in the children’s struggle today, there is an emerging politics of life. Foregrounding life, especially for the young victims of the conflict in the already existing articulation of protecting the ecology of water, land, and forest, is central to Adivasi childhoods. Adding life to the old slogan of struggle over water-forest-land, the Adivasi youth rearticulate the urgency and the entanglement of their lives and childhoods with the natural ecology.

Introduction

For six-month-old Mangali, the morning of January 1, 2024, was perhaps like any other day as she suckled on her mother’s breasts. Except it was not. Lifting the baby to her shoulder, the mother ran towards her house when she heard a familiar sound of bullets being fired. But before she could reach, both were caught in the volley of bullets. While the mother was injured in the leg, Mangali sustained a fatal bullet injury. The news of this incident, alleged to be a cross-firing between the People’s Left Guerrilla Army (PLGA) and the Indian paramilitary forces, gained momentum on digital media platforms. I received multiple WhatsApp messages alerting me of youths’ protests condemning the military action. A newspaper clipping of children holding placards that read, “Please do not kill us. Please let us live” was one of the

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messages I received. The rally included hundreds of playschools and primary school children. The incident triggered a political and moral pandemonium that centered on the loss of Adivasi (a self-referenced term meaning original inhabitants) lives in Central India since the inception of the counter-insurgency operations in the early 2000s.

This was not an exceptional event in the lives of rural Adivasis of Bastar. Over the last two decades, questions surrounding children's safety, protection, education, and childhood have been a concern in policy and academic writings (Rashmi Kumari 2021). While the early 2000s saw an intense discussion around the use of children as soldiers and informants by the PLGA and the state in an armed conflict that erupted with a civil vigilante movement, Salwa Judum (Nandini Sundar 2016, Alpa Shah 2019; Human Rights Watch 2009), the recent years have seen an increase in violence against children. Over the last five years, an increased state operation intended to end the Maoist insurgency by early 2026 has resulted in deaths of minors, the exact count of which is not publicly available. A report published in January 2025 demonstrates the extent to which a minor's death is reported as that of an adult by both the postmortem reports and in official communications (Shreya Khemani 2025).

Analyzing this discrepancy in the state's reports on the loss of lives of young Adivasis and the youths' ecological struggles that center life, I examine how the discourses, practices, and experiences of development and violence shape Indigenous children in the interlocking framings of future and threat. On the one hand, they are envisioned to become responsible citizens through multiple developmental programs, and on the other hand, they appear to be marked as a "threat" to the nation. Adivasi childhoods, fraught with the notions of threat and futurity, exist at the intersections of geographical, historical, and political contexts. In explicating the political and geographical terrain within which Adivasi childhoods are tethered to the politics of time, I argue that in the children's struggle today, there is an emerging politics of life. Foregrounding life, especially for the young victims of the conflict in the already existing articulation of protecting the ecology of water, land, and forest, is central to Adivasi childhoods. Adding life (*jeevan*) to the old slogan of struggle over water (*jal*) forest (*jungle*) and land (*jameen*), the Adivasi youth rearticulate the urgency and the entanglement of their lives and childhoods with the natural ecology.

Based on thirteen-month ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines how the discourses, practices, and experiences of development and violence shape Indigenous children in the interlocking framings of future and threat, where on the one hand, they are envisioned to become responsible citizens, and on the other hand, they appear to be marked as a "threat" to the nation. This paper starts with describing the events observed during rallies and sit-in protests of Save First Peoples Forum (SFPF)[1] in south central India across two subsequent years between 2021 and 2022 and analyzes the relationships of Adivasi communities with the state. The first section situates the experience of interdependent forms of violence articulated by the youths. I argue that this is experienced as a "continuum of violence" from the time

[1] The names of the youths, and organizations have been changed to protect their identities.

of the British colonial rule to the present Indian administration over the areas inhabited by Indigenous peoples. The paper highlights the central role of Indigenous youth within the dynamics of violence and development, arguing that the state perpetuates and regulates violence as a means of asserting its power. The state continually seeks to shape youth into national subjects through various institutions, such as schools, hostels, medical systems, and scholarships. In the second section, I analyze youths' struggle for their lives as entangled with natural ecology. More importantly, in their resistance to state violence, Indigenous youth engage in a process of negotiating and redefining their identities as both Adivasi and Indians. Through these negotiations and redefinitions, new political movements emerge among the youth, where they emphasize their childhood and innocence to assert their right to protection against violence and, consequently, their right to life.

The paper draws from Nādirah Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān's, (2019: 4) *Incarcerated childhood and the politics of unchilding* to examine the politics of childhood and analyzes the contemporary forms of "violence against children as a site of political inquiry". Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān writes about the Palestininin children who are often at the receiving end of colonial and settler-colonial "demonizing, dehumanizing, securitized discourse of the child as "born-terrorist" (Nādirah Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān 2019: 1) Two contradictory ideologies simultaneously work in the "colonial and settler-colonial project of Israel in Gaza. The ideologies vacillate between the "civilizing" narrative which justifies the (ostensibly humanist) attempts to "save" native children from their communities" and the securitist discourse where children are violently displaced from their families, classified as "infiltrator[s]," and put in prison (Nādirah Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān 2019: 2) I show a similar ideology of "threat" and "future" working in the lives of Adivasi children. These interlocking framing of Adivasi children is sustained by the state that performs, "everyday structural violence as a constant and even normalizes (and often … gets) punctuated by incidents of special ferocity" (Itty Abraham, Edward Newman, and Meredith Leigh Weiss 2010: 3) I demonstrate that several forms of violence – spectacular, symbolic, slow, and epistemic– are interconnected experiences in the lives of Adivasi youth.

More importantly, the paper highlights an ever-urgent need to center life, and especially the lives of Indigenous children like Mangali, whose precarious existence threatens the capitalist machinery. It is this new and intentional naming of genocide in their protests and demanding for a dignified survival (Audre Lorde 1978) that defines the Adivasi children's struggle. While it is not life but peace that becomes central to Angela Jill Lederach's 2023 book *Feel the grass grow: ecologies of slow peace in Colombia,* I find commonalities in the Adivasi community's sustained movement for survival with Colombian grassroots or *campesinos'* struggle for peace that is slow, relational and is "a social practice that mobilizes political action, shapes subjectivities, and acts on the world" (Angela Jill Lederach 2023: 11). Adivasi youths' centering of life is not for the mere survival but demands a dignified life affirming their deep connection with their natural ecology. Their demands call for an end to the genocidal violence perpetrated by the state and paramilitary forces, as well as an end to sexual violence committed by the police in the province. They seek the closure of military camps in the area, accountability for police involved in acts

of violence, and proper implementation of the provisions outlined in the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act-1996, that stipulates relative autonomy to villages listed as Scheduled V and predominantly inhabited by Adivasi communities.

Experience of Development as Violence

Before I ventured on the hundred-mile-long motorbike ride to a site of active youth protest in south-central India, on August 3, 2021, I knew the hurdles I would encounter. Due to the inaccessible roads in the thick forests of south Bastar and flooding of rivers and streams over the mud tracks during monsoon, we decided to take the longer route by traveling through the districts with better road connectivity. The central and state security felt especially tense after crossing into the block that connected the different districts. The security checkpoints were set up every two miles by the Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF), deployed by the Indian government. At each of these checkpoints, we were required to produce our identity cards, state the purpose of the visit, and a permission letter authorized by the district authorities for my research.

A few months before my August visit there had been an ambush between the armed People's Left Guerrilla Army (PLGA) of the (banned) Communist Party of India (Maoist) and CRPF in April 2021. The ambush resulted in the death of 22 CRPF soldiers (Outlook 2023). This was followed by the death of four protestors in the police shooting in May 2021 which included a pregnant woman and a fourteen-year-old. Since then, the protest in this site had attracted many local and national journalists, and human rights activists. As the news and reports of police firing travelled across the country, security personal started restricting entry into the site as the patrolling and security at checkpoints heightened.

The patrolling, constant searches, arbitrary detentions, and undertrial imprisonment in south central India are part of the logic of keeping the body in a state of uncertainty as theorized by Jasbir Puar in the context of occupied Palestine. Writing about the temporality of checkpoints and profits made as "capturing time itself"‘ Puar states,

> Bodies in line at checkpoints contribute to the profit of the occupation not only because their nonlabor is completely tied up in the reproduction of their labor time but also because this division disappears through the fractalizing of the emotive, cognitive, physiological capacities of bodies toward the perceptual fields and sensorium of being occupied and the constant modulation of horizons of movement (Jasbir Puar 2021: 406).

The logic of checkpoints, according to Puar, is not just to make "the bodies too tired to resist" but to be in a "constant state of uncertainty" (Puar 2021: 407). In south central India this uncertainty forces the villagers to abandon the newly constructed roads to travel on foot through the forest tracks, crossing rivers, hills, and streams, often walking on bunds of agricultural fields. I was also suggested to take "jungle route" to reach the protest site as the police check post would deny entry through the newly constructed road. The uncertainty also extends to other parts of living when forest guards seize farming equipment like tractors, confiscate timbers procured from the community-owned forests and not returning them for months, causing

tremendous pressure on children and youth to migrate for jobs in informal sectors or join the police/military forces at lower ranks.

Before reaching the last checkpoint and before reaching the site of youth protest, we stopped to take shelter from a sudden monsoon downpour in a public storehouse for paddy crops. A few soldiers from a small patrolling party of CRPF approached and enquired about our visit. In our conversations, the platoon commander cautioned us about the possibility of blasts caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) placed by the PLGA on the side of roads. The commander told us:

> You can go further if you like but remember to stick to the tar road. This is a sensitive zone, and you do not understand the risk. You don't know where you have arrived. In a sensitive conflict area, you cannot get in without permission. And even if you have permission [as I had from the district education officers to interview school-going youth and teachers], this is not the place you would want to go. Land mines are everywhere, and the people you visit cannot be trusted. There is no Adivasi there. There are no women, men, old, young, and children. They are all Naxal (a colloquial term for the people associated with the CPI (Maoist)) and all of them are anti-state. They are all accomplices in the crimes of extremism. You should not interact with any of them. If you find a village person approaching you, honk, and we will be alerted. We will be there to protect you.

In contrast to this dehumanization of Adivasi children (and community) by the commander, the soldiers seemed more reflective in articulating that "The fault lies with the government. Look at this fertile land and these forests. The people who produce such valuable forest products should be the richest in India, but the government has neglected them for a long time. And now they are stuck in this violent situation and are easy audience for the Naxals". These narratives from the soldiers who are deployed to "bring peace" in the region convey two seemingly polarized messages. One, that the state-neglect has led to Adivasis being influenced by "extremist outsiders," (i.e. the Naxal or the CPI (Maoist)). The second is similar to what Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān explains as the "demonizing, dehumanizing, securitized discourse of the child as "born-terrorist" (Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān 2019: 1). It is this similar logic of military occupation that seems to operate and govern Adivasi childhoods in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. While the checkpoints function to extricate time from the people and coerce them away from the areas, the labeling of youth as "Naxal," "anti-state," and "dangerous" dehumanizes them. The assumptions and impressions that the soldiers stationed in these camps display are of hostility as they adultify the youth and children into rebels and portray the Adivasi as dangerous rebels while also constructing these children as vulnerable victims of the armed conflict. These assumptions and images are then utilized to both justify state violence against the Adivasi and to continue military occupation as a legitimate state response.

Chhattisgarh state boasts of being endowed with 28 major minerals like bauxite, China clay, coal, dolomite, and iron ore (hematite). Further, it is the sole producer of tin ore (about 36%), first in coal (17%), and dolomite (11%) production, and second in iron ore production (about 18%) (Chhattisgarh State Industrial Development Corporations 2023). The major mining operations by national, and private partnership mineral developers like National Mining Development Cooperation (NMDC) Adani Group, Tata Iron ore mines, and Bharat Aluminum Company Limited (BALCO) (a subsidiary of the Vedanta Limited) have seen many resistances from the local

Adivasi communities, and from the CPI (Maoist). Most of these resistances have been against displacement of communities and felling of trees for coal-mining in Hasdeo forest (Astha Rajvanshi 2023; Pragathi Ravi 2022), against the desecration of faith and nature gods residing in Nandraj hill of the Bailadilla hill-range (Ritesh Mishra 2019), against the displacement and for the unfulfilled promises of resettlement and rehabilitation of families affected in Bauxite mining in Sarguja (Siddhant Kalra, Anmol Gupta, and Anupa Kujur 2017), and against coal-mine expansion in Korba. Some of these protests have been successful in cancelling the mine-expansion. However, the informal channels of felling trees, dumping of mining waste, pollutants and ecological compromises, forced environmental clearances, and forced Gram Sabha consents have continued to impact the lives and livelihoods of the local Adivasi communities (Ankur Paliwal 2022).

The violence caused by development projects – such as mining of tin, dolomite, iron ores, coal, and bauxite, among others, and many hydroelectrical projects – have caused multiple forms of violence in this region and other parts of India and the world inhabited by peasant and Indigenous communities (Joan Martinez-Alier 2002; Rob Nixon 2013). Violent actors include State, non-State, and private corporations. On the one hand, there is the spectacular violence of the ongoing civil war involving the exploitation of natural resources. On the other hand, there is also the slow violence of health hazards and sicknesses caused by the mining waste, polluted soil and water bodies, displacement-induced illnesses, and low living conditions. The visible violence of the armed conflict between the Indian State the CPI (Maoist) has been well documented, while the slow violence has received limited attention.

Yet, for the Adivasi communities, forests are not just the source of livelihoods but also form a part of the social, cultural and religious ecology of their lives. Many religious rituals, marriages, and festivals are celebrated around and under trees or sacred grooves. With mines opening up in the forested land, Adivasi lose their sacred connections with the forests (Survival International 2022). During my visit, I met youth representatives from seventeen movements with environmental concerns of felling trees in Hasdeo forests, and militarization and corporatization in other districts. Children and youth are instrumental in protesting and calling out discrepancies and violations in the developmental projects including displacement without compensation, forced appropriation of sacred lands and groves, forcefully obtained consents of the village council on the acquisition of forested lands in Schedule V areas, and the everyday harassment and exploitation of military occupation.

Present-day south-central India exemplifies this continuum where violence manifests in structural, physical, symbolic, and slow forms whose impact is experienced daily by the communities. The normalization of violence is apparent in the responses of Adivasi youth like Kosa (as mentioned to me in one of the phone calls after the fieldwork had ended), who say, “The rallies and violence have become so common that the last month’s (in September 2023) protest march against the killing and burning the bodies of two Adivasi youths felt like a routine occurrence”.

The Spectacle of Violence

Following the "jungle route", I reached the SFPF protest site first with the help of children who silently took us to Bhime, a middle-aged woman, who was my host during my seven-day stay in 2021. Bhime recounted that she had lost her land in the proposed road site and the newly constructed camp. "It was right before the rains that they cut the trees and poured *murum* (sandy gravel) over the area. My land falls on the other side of the road where the paramilitary camp is constructed," says Bhime. She shared that she did not give her consent for the CRPF camps to be constructed on her land, which is in violation of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) of 1996. Bhime readily arranged for two youths who could take us to the protest.

My visit to the SFPF protest site coincided with the World Indigenous People's (WIP) Day, and youth had been very persuasive about extending my stay until the celebration and the festivities of Vishwa Adivasi Diwas, as they call it, ended. The celebration itself was a form of resistance to the locally stationed state police and federal paramilitary forces, and the youth organizing the festivities also a called for solidarity from the elder and leaders from the larger Adivasi organizations. As WIP Day approached, we closely witnessed youths' frustrations in organizing the events around it. Due to their alleged (by the police department) connection with the banned Naxal group, none of the other Indigenous organizations were willing to collaborate with them in planning WIP Day. The different Adivasi organizations had planned WIP Day celebrations across the province. SFPF hoped to collaborate with a few of these organizers to secure support for their movement. Although they restricted their visit to the protest site and shied away from directly supporting the protest against militarization, individual members of several organizations expressed their concerns and support to SFPF youth in my meetings with them. In a separate event, the larger Adivasi organization included demands for monetary compensation for the deaths of the protestors in their letter to the Chief Minister of the state.

As the youth failed to secure a representation of SFPF at any of the more significant events in the district headquarters, they planned for a local celebration, including a long march from the protest site to another site of police violence where a fake encounter by the police had killed 17 villagers in 2012 (The Indian Express 2022). On the eve of WIP day, the organizers were informed that the two young men who had traveled to obtain police permission for the march had been detained. Their motorbike was seized, and they were held at the police station for several hours without any explanation. Only later that night, after making several calls to the district administration and local politicians, were they sent back with the required permission to hold the rally.

However, the following day, they were met with heavy barricades of concertina wires and a platoon of armed CRPF soldiers, restricting them from continuing their march. The tension among the protestors was palpable. As the youth organizers negotiated unsuccessfully with the CRPF camp officials who were citing "orders from higher-up authority" for the barricades, the protestors sat on the gravel, waiting impatiently and sloganeering loudly. After two hours of failed attempts at convincing and negotiating over the permission letter, the youth returned to the protest site with

feelings of pain, anger, and frustration. On our way back eighteen-year-old, Susheela, a youth member of the SFPF, shared that "this behavior of the police is not new. They constantly harass us. They constantly change their words by telling us that they have received orders. They want us to be trapped in this land by restricting our mobility on the very roads they have constructed for us".

While Susheela's words remind us of what Puar has described as the "constant state of uncertainty" (Puar 2019: 406), they also highlight the paradox that Amy Allen (2014) discusses as inherent in the practice and theory of development. This is namely, "how development ostensibly aims to improve the lives of poor people and countries – by increasing their income and wealth, but also by enhancing their health, access to education, and other aspects of human flourishing – but has served only to disempower and impoverish them further (Allen 2014: 250).

In the book "*Body on the Barricades: Life, Art, and Resistance in Contemporary India*," Brahma Prakash (2023: 18) writes that people on streets created barricades to defend themselves against armies, but today, barricades have "become an instrument in the hand of police and armies to curtail movement." Prakash shows that the relationship between body and barricades is a layered one – in one layer, the barricades used by the police and army push the body away, and in the other layers where bodies erect barricades to push the authority away or find security from domination. Yet, there is another level where the body becomes a barricade (Prakash 2023). The experience around barricades is of both resistance and violence. The barricades of concertina wires show the Adivasi youth's bodies negotiating with the authorities to hold a rally. The bodies of youth on this barricade show a constant negotiation over life and everyday experiences of violence.

The everyday experience of physical and sexual violence informs and shapes youth's distrust of State-driven development projects and their resistance to them. Most youth with whom I interacted during my stay and subsequent visits have experienced or have been witnesses to visible and spectacular violence since a very young age. Susheela and a sixth grader (twelve-years -old) Chamanthi, on our way to the river one morning after the rally, narrated how they feared going alone anywhere as the patrolling forces often encroached in the village spaces. Chamanthi, although from a neighboring village, was enrolled in a girls' residential school on the southern edge of the district, about 50 kilometers from the protest site. She had come home due to COVID-19 closures when she joined the SFPF to protest the killing of her teenage relative, Uike Pandu. During our walk to the river in the mornings, she narrated many instances of sexual violence that soldiers from the paramilitary force perpetrated upon women. Chamanthi says:

> The in-charge of this police station knows me by name now because I was there shouting slogans when my uncle died. If I go alone anywhere near the station, I am sure he will pick me up. They may not arrest me, but they will harass me, for sure. They don't leave any woman, they raped Hidme.

She was referring to Kawasi Hidme who was first arrested when she was only 15. She was raped and tortured in jail for over seven years. Eighteen-year-old Susheela, who had been nodding along in agreement added:

> If they find a woman alone, they (paramilitary soldiers) sexually harass them, and even rape, and if a man goes out alone, they start asking questions, take their belongings, check their phones. They would have arrested me by now if I were alone here today. It is not just here at the dharna sthal (protest site) that they harass women. They patrol in my village, which is further to the west from here, and harass villagers who work on their farms, or are in the jungle collecting firewood, or when they go to graze cattle and sheep. Sometimes they also enter our houses. Women are afraid to even go to the river to take a piss or a bath. The forces are everywhere.

Susheela and Chamanthi narrate a common experience shared by girls and women of South Bastar. The violence perpetrated by the state-supported civil vigilantism and counter-insurgency operations went unreported until several human rights reports (Human Rights Watch 2008; Save the Children 2013; Ejaz Kaisar 2017) documented narratives of women survivors in 2016 and reported rape and the impunity of sexual violence (Freny Manecksha 2016) as "a weapon of the State against tribal women" (Brinda Karat 2016). The National Human Rights Commission, in a 2016 report, confirmed and issued notices to the Chhattisgarh government regarding accounts of rape, sexual and physical assault of Adivasi women in South Bastar by security forces that occurred in 2015.

There are two dominant scholarships on sexual violence during conflict times. One that focuses on the military's strategic deployment of sexual violence during the times of war and unrest (Sophie Ryan 2020). In 2009, citing examples of conflict-related sexual violence in Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Bosnia, and Rwanda, United Nations resolution 1820 and 1888 called for an end to the perpetration of CRSV as war-tactic (Anne-Marie Goetz 2009). However, feminist scholarship on gender, peace and transnational securities contend that CRSV is not exceptional to the times of crisis and war. This forms the second conceptualization, according to which sustained armed conflict exposes underlying gender inequality and patriarchal structure as the cause of increased sexual violence against women and minority people (Anne Kathrin Kreft 2020). Kreft argues that conflict-related sexual violence and everyday gender-based violence are on a continuum. Kreft explains this in the case of women victims of sexual violence, during the protracted armed conflict in Colombia, who "see it as grounded in patriarchal structures that are deeply embedded in Colombian society. Armed conflict exacerbates this violence to imbue it with certain strategic objectives" (Kreft 2020: 459).

Physical and sexual violence have been ongoing since the time of Salwa Judum – a civil vigilante uprising against the CPI (Maoist) during early 2000s. These militia of the Salwa Judum were led by ex-guerrilla turned Special Police Officers (SPO) during the counterinsurgency operations between 2005 and 2007 (Sundar 2016). The memory of the violence experienced since that period shapes youth interaction with the State and their commitment to the resistance movements. Among the many accounts of violence narrated to me by the SFPF youths, one that stuck with me was the first conversation I had with Oonga. Oonga, a youth in his early twenties, had a scar under his right eye and through the right side of his face. Oonga told me that this was caused by a gunshot when he was in primary school. Oonga, who is in his early twenties now, shared, "those goons from Judum who have now become the police [Special Police Forces] fired at my face. I was this young [making a hand

gesture to indicate a height of about 3 feet]. I must have been in class four or five. I left studying after that incident. It took a lot of time to heal. Yes, I was personally attacked. And it is not just that. Later, they also picked me up. I was in jail for about 2-3 months before my villagers could get bail". I am not sure about how old he was when he was jailed.

Adding to this, Lakmu shared his experience of violence during the Salwa Judum years,

> Around 2005, 06, 07, 08, and 09 in Sukma, the entire district was under Salwa Judum. I was in my village and there was only conflict, which meant our entire village camped in the forest. We lived there, in the forest, for about 11 years. We did everything there, like eating and everything, while living in tents [gestures towards the blue tarpaulin tent pitched on the left side of the verandah where the interview took place]. In the forest! We had taken our animals, cows, roosters, and everything. Like, the entire village had shifted to forest, on the hills. Everyone and everything that you see here. Even in this village, people lived on those hills [gesturing to the hills on the southwest side]. Until 2012 we all lived like this; when Salwa Judum weakened, we slowly came back to the village. At that time, whoever [people participating in the Judum] met us would take us with them and would beat us. Our houses were burnt down and looted. If the police came, they would also pick us up and beat us. They would come in groups of 8 to 10 people and ask us to cook chicken or goat. That was our situation. This was why we lived in the forest and came down here to farm. We would work on the farm and go back to the forest.

The written accounts of this spectacular violence in the region have primarily focused on the struggles between the State and the non-State actors resulting in injuries, deaths, destructions, and displacements. These explanations draw twofold conclusions. First, that Adivasi communities get reduced to mere statistics (often nameless victims) in the reports on the casualties and destruction incurred due to the spectacular events of political violence. Secondly, that spectacular political violence (of state-sponsored civil vigilantism like the Salwa Judum, or hyper-militarization under counter-insurgency programs like the operation green-hunt) are seen as an "aberration" to the public order. This assumes that a non-violent and peaceful public order is the norm of democratic State politics (Abraham, Newman, and Weiss 2010). Furthermore, children are reported as mere casualties or collateral damage in the larger schema of violence. However, many events of political violence in the region are not merely unusual one-off events; instead, they are "[a]ct(s) … which cannot be separated from the state's desire to monopolize the production of social violence as a condition of its maintenance, expressed as public order, the rule of law and other conditions of normal state behavior" (Abraham, Newman, and Weiss 2010: 4). In other words, violence becomes an integral part and a prerequisite to establishing and maintaining a democratic State of which children become the primary targets. In all the accounts narrated to me by SFPF members, they recount experiencing violence in their childhood. Both Oonga and Lakmu speak about the experiencing violence as children. What these children and youth point is a kind of violence against children that are not result of an accident. Rather, they are acts of deliberate harm against children which, I argue are forms of "racialized violence" (Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān 2019: 2) against Adivasi children. Analyzing "violence against children as a site of political inquiry" (Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān 2019: 4) reveals a deeper politics of childhood that earlier colonial and now postcolonial state engage in order to govern through active dispossession and displacement.

A Politics of Neglect: The Continuum of Slow and Epistemic Violence

The counter-insurgency program against the activities of CPI (Maoist) in the last few decades in the Bastar area, elicited an intense militarization through CRPF camps, colloquially called police camps. Over 45 Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and 250 camps have been added since 2019 in the province, constituting an area of about ten thousand square miles – a camp every two miles. There is one security person to every nine civilians. With this kind of intense militarization, political violence has taken a different form. Although heavily armed, these camps promote their objective of regulating violence by explicitly displaying mottos like "peacekeepers of the nations," "a step towards non-violence", and "serving you, every step of the way". It is in this paradoxical presence of the State's work, which on one side spreads a message of "winning hearts and minds", on the other side is the apparent (anti) humanitarian presence of the armed forces that complicates the dichotomy of Adivasi as threat and future (Kumari 2025). With this message of serving the community and serving the nation, the armed aggression and subsequent oppression is couched in the language of care, development, and, in turn, the future of Adivasi communities, and protecting them and the nation from "extremism".

In the decade following 2006 and until 2017, although the state seized most of these areas under its control using militarization strategies, the healthcare access of rural communities continues to be very limited. This restricted access to a healthy life is an added challenge to the already existing protracted violence of neglect given the lack of basic infrastructure. Elsewhere in my analysis of the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and the interconnection between state-care and neglect experienced as violence, I argue that among the many crises that the Adivasi communities have faced over the years, understanding the impact of COVID-19 and its governance entails "recognizing the interconnectedness of various visible and invisible forms of violence" (Kumari 2025: 77).

Jasbir Puar (2021), frames this management and perpetration of certain forms of violence while maintaining a humanitarian stance as "moral violence". Explaining this "performance of moral violence" by the state, Puar writes that "disabling protestors as a means of hindering resistance while still claiming a humanitarian stance of sparing and preserving life is an enactment of what Lisa Bhungalia calls a 'performance of moral violence' by the Israel Defense Forces, which claims to be the 'most moral army in the world'" (Puar 2021: 395)[2]. In Bastar this can be seen in how paramilitary camps deploy children and youth images to gain legitimacy for their presence and for the developmental work they carry out. They organize National Children's Day events on November 14 of each year and attend annual events organized at the local schools. In addition, they participate in Raksha Bandhan[3] during which school children tie *rakhis* on the wrists of the soldiers. This patriarchal festival

[2] Calling this the "right to maim", in the case of injuring Palestinian protestors, Puar writes that the state of Israel moves across its "sovereign right to kill and the biopolitical project to let live" (2021: 396).

[3] It is a Hindu festival in which sisters tie a symbolic, ritualistic band on their brothers' wrist and brothers take a vow continually to protect their sisters.

takes on a symbolic significance in this conflict zone where Indigenous children, a "particularly vulnerable group," are expected to seek protection from the highly masculine figures in CRPF and other military organizations. In addition, their role in hindering resistance in Bastar is exercised through restricting access to health infrastructures and forcing this access only under military supervision, these strategies end up adding to the moral violence by the Indian state.

I argue that to understand ongoing civil war and contemporary resistance in south Chhattisgarh, one must look at different forms of violence as interdependent and of which there is a particular politics of childhood at play. Describing it as a continuum, I demonstrate that the state constitutes itself through violence by causing or regulating other forms of political collective violence. In this case, the State violence of neglect, forced displacement and oppression, the counter-insurgency program of curtailing Maoist violence, and even the slow violence of environmental degradation are all strategies to legitimize the State's domination. Adivasi children as a subject of State violence are dehumanized and often labeled as "Naxal", who then become the violent target of coercive State interventions and apathy. Further, this continuum of violence operates through a graded temporality where access to time is speeded up for capitalist development work and slowed down when the "rebellious" youth seek to access this development. Within this politics of space-time, the State constantly discursively produces Adivasi children as a threat to their futures. State machinery simultaneously frames Adivasi children as a subject of protection and as a "threat to national integrity". This form of subjectification, which entails both rendering childhood invisible and deploying it to gain national legitimacy, not only dehumanizes children as blank figures but also de-individualizes them into a homogenous mass. Juxtaposing the constant marking of Adivasi children as threat and hence justifying violence against them, as we saw in the previous section, with the discourses that center children as the future are the political tactics render Adivasi children as invisible and hyper-visible simultaneously (Shalhoūb-Kīfūrkiyān 2019).

Foregrounding Life – an Emerging Politics

In the scorching midday-sun, on May 16, 2022, I returned to Silinger. This time again I went through the "jungle route," half the distance had to be covered on mud tracks, crossing dried-up streams and rivers. Every village I crossed seemed to know about the protest site and the fact that it had attracted many "big people – journalists and researchers from abroad" (as related by a villager in 2022). One could hear drums and songs amid speeches made over the loudspeaker from a distance of two villages beyond the protest site. Looking for the organizers and any familiar face, I walked towards the stage and was greeted by Susheela and Paiki. In a green and blue half sari, Paiki embraced me with tears in her eyes and told me how she had thought about me many times since my last visit in August 2021. After asking how I arrived this far and if I had come alone, she instructed Susheela to take me for lunch. On our way from the protest celebration ground to the tarpaulin and thatched hut settlement, erected temporarily for the protest, I noticed the new green and white flags. Many children and youth sported this flag on their bicycles.

The stage was also decorated with green flags with an axe and a sickle (also a symbol of the communist party which sports a red flag with a sickle, hammer and star all drawn in yellow) painted in white in the middle of the flag. Susheela explained, "the pacchi (green) of the janda (flag) signifies our relationship with nature, our adavi (forest), the aakulu (leaves) of our chetlu (trees), our wari panta (paddy fields) are all green. The (goddali) axe and the (kodavali) sickle are weapons, but they are our ornaments". In this succinct description of the flag, in a few Telugu words, Susheela articulated the motivation of this 370 days-long ongoing protest by the SFPF and made explicit the interconnection between the ecological green and the axe-wielding Adivasi communities. I also noticed that the children of the cultural wing of the SFPF were wearing green saris and green shirts as they performed revolutionary songs and dances about the genocidal violence experienced by the Adivasi people of Bastar. The green movement perfectly blended into the day that was being celebrated as the Vijja pandum (a festival celebrating earth and seeds). On the way to the protest site, I had witnessed temporary barricades of bamboo erected to collect what the locals called earth taxes (*dandum*) for walking through the earth on the day that it is supposed to be worshiped. The barricades were manned by young children who giggled and spread their containers to collect money each time a person on a bicycle or a motorbike stopped at these barricades.

The life and laughter of these earth-tax collecting children was articulated by the SFPF youth as they add life (*jeevan*) to the already existing slogan – *struggle over the water, land, and forest (jal, jungle, and jameen)*. However, living with protracted state violence also propels Adivasi children and their communities towards various forms of Indigenous resistance. Foregrounding life, especially for the predominantly young victims of the conflict, in the already existing articulation of protecting the ecology of water, land, and forest is central to SFPF demands. Adding life to the old slogan of struggle over water-forest-land, the Adivasi youth rearticulate the urgency and the entanglement of life with the natural ecology. Their centering the green in literal and symbolic of nature is what Martinez-Alier has called environmentalism of the poor. This is a form of social justice movement where the Indigenous and peasant groups do not call for the "conservation of the pristine wilderness of nature" nor engage in economically efficient utility of the natural resources. Instead, these are local movements occurring globally where impoverished communities resist "environmental racism", by appealing for Indigenous groups' territorial rights over the forests, mountains, and rivers, and "articulate a sacredness of nature to defend and secure their livelihood" (Martinez-Alier 2002: 11).

Over the last century, and especially after World War II, human life became one of the central analytical points of critical scholarship, especially in the liberalist/humanist academic tradition. Although this chapter does not have the scope to delve deeper into the discussion surrounding humanism and human life, it is noteworthy to highlight here the contribution of Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and biopolitics. In his lectures, Michel Foucault defines governmentality as "how the conduct of groups of individuals has been increasingly involved in the exercise of the sovereign power" (Michel Foucault 2004: 374). Further, connecting governmentality and life, Foucault explained biopolitics as the practices of modern states in

regulating populations through an array of techniques that manage life processes. Foucault looks at life from the perspective of biopower and biopolitics. That is through conduct and disciplining regime exercised on individuals and technologies of normalizing populations. In this sense, Foucault focused on life, which was the homogenization of the population rather than individual lives (Didier Fassin 2009).

Further, life has also been theorized by Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe. Agamben extends the discussion on sovereign power over life through the act of killing specific populations like the ones in concentration camps. For Agamben, the sovereign power of the state is exercised through a state of exception when specific lives are excluded from the political and are subjected to death under extraordinary circumstances like genocides (Giorgio Agamben 2005).

Didier Fassin (2009: 48) extends biopolitics by conceptualizing "life as such to designate the biological existence of the living and its political extension as populations". Fassin goes beyond the dichotomies of single aspect definition of life as political (zoe) or biological (bios), life lived or the life of living matter, in which life is not defined a "priori but operated through discourses, programs, decisions, actions" (Didier Fassin 2009: 48). Deploying the concept of legitimacy, Fassin looks at the shift in the politics of life around the 1990s with the revised policies of controlling the refugee population through deterrence and granting asylum to the sick on medical grounds as humanitarianism. For Fassin, biopolitics and biolegitimacy are complementary concepts where biopolitics means the state's power over lives, and biolegitimacy implies the power of life. The central point of legitimacy emphasizes "the construction of the meaning and values of life instead of the exercise of forces and strategies to control it" (Didier Fassin 2009: 52). Looking at biopolitics as the politics of life and replacing biopower with legitimacy, Fassin writes, "What politics does to life – and lives – is not just a question of discourses and technologies, strategies and tactics. It is also a question of the concrete way in which individuals and groups are treated, under which principles and in the name of which morals, implying which inequalities and misrecognitions" (Didier Fassin 2009: 57).

In the last three years, since it started in May 2021, SFPF protest became an inspirational for as many as thirty-five similar protests and solidarity actions against the corporatization and militarization of the province. Beginning with a simple demand to stop the construction of yet another military camp to house the Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) and to start any new construction in consultation with the Gram Sabha (village council) the movement grew to include many alleged unconstitutional oppressions that the Adivasi community in general, and the surrounding villages, have faced. The initial days of the movement saw thousands of Adivasi sitting in protest on a cleared patch covered in gravel for the road to be laid. On May 17, 2021, the dharna (sit-in protest) attendees were fired upon by the police, killing four villagers, including a sixteen-year-old youth and a pregnant woman. The shooting of the eighth grader Uike Pandu compelled his sixth-grader niece Chamanthi to continue her stay at the protest site and join SFPF as a member. Chamanthi says, "My uncle was only a few years older than me. He was only a boy of 16. I couldn't leave from here until we find justice for him". The shooting took place five days after the "deceitful" construction of the camp. The construction had involved the

CRPF soldiers marching through the hamlets all night, and in the wee hours of the morning, they cut huge Mahua and Sal trees, burnt them, and left them by the side to clear a patch of land about the width of a four-lane highway. Their efforts to clear the land were naturally halted by the narrow river stream in Slinger. One of the protestors said, "Had it not been for the river, the road would already be here by the time we woke up".

The death of their kin and fellow villagers garnered more support, especially from the youth, who articulated that they needed to oppose this camp that kills their relatives and that the soldiers from the camp harass women both physically and sexually. The justice for the named victims of police violence was added to the list of chants along with a call to end the military violence against women and to penalize the alleged perpetrators who were police officers. Children and youth in South Bastar, born in the military regime of the area, are subjected to physical and sexual violence as they also experience epistemic violence of being labeled as 'naxal' – a member of the banned entity, the Communist Party of India (Maoist). This labeling further justifies their being punished, imprisoned, and eliminated by coercive state interventions.

Foregrounding life, especially for the young victims of the conflict, in the already existing articulation of protecting the ecology of water, land, and forest is central to SFPF demands. Adding life to the old slogan of struggle over water-forest-land, the Adivasi youth rearticulate the urgency and the entanglement of life with the natural ecology. Their centering the green in literal and symbolic of nature is what Martinez-Alier has called environmentalism of the poor. This is a form of social justice movement where the Indigenous and peasant groups do not call for the "conservation of the pristine wilderness of nature" nor engage in economically efficient utility of the natural resources. Instead, these are local movements occurring globally where impoverished communities resist "environmental racism," by appealing for Indigenous groups' territorial rights over the forests, mountains, and rivers, and "articulate a sacredness of nature to defend and secure their livelihood" (Joan Martinez-Alier 2002: 11). One of their sharpest articulations is of Adivasi identity as deeply and intimately entangled in land, water, and forests. In claiming this profound relation, youth articulate their belonging and the centrality of Adivasi lives within this natural ecology.

The SFPF youths' definition of 'life as such' is visible in the work of resistance, which is as much the everyday experience as the political violence. Yet, along with what otherwise would be extraordinary but has become routine experiences for these young people, life exists as labor, as care, in its biological vulnerabilities, in political action, and as a social celebration. Further, these youths centering Indigenous lives in the slogans against genocide signals an urgency of their experiences of protracted violence against children. For these youths, violence, resistance, and life are interconnected. They draw inspiration from past Adivasi rebellions while addressing environmental issues linked to militarized capitalist extraction. Organizing their movement involves understanding laws and fostering relationships based on care, friendships, and community interdependencies. The chapter illustrates how the youth perceive their activism as a responsibility to their villagers, protecting their elders and

ensuring that future generations do not witness the violence faced by the previous ones.

However, the demand of the SFPF, and justice for Mangali's and numerous children's lives remain to be met even after four and half years as several youth are incarcerated. A youth activist, who remains incarcerated now, narrated to me in 2022 that she has been protesting physical and sexual violence and the killing of innocent Adivasi since 2013 when she was a teenager. She shared, "What may look like a protest against the construction of road is a much larger movement. We have been fighting to protect our forests, lands, water, and lives. Our movement draws strength from nature's green to stand against relentless injustice. We have no other options but to be in the movement".

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