

Book Reviews

Michael Hutt, ed. 2004. *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

The news of Communism's death has been exaggerated, at least in Nepal, where the world's last major communist insurgency continues to flourish nine years after it began. This collection of papers, originally presented at a conference in London, sets out to contextualize the insurgency and explain its origins. Within the limitations of this genre (for explaining an on-going and rapidly moving phenomenon is always a tricky business), it succeeds admirably and without doubt is a substantial contribution to the emerging literature on Nepal's Maoist insurgency. Despite its origins as disparate conference papers, the volume hangs together remarkably well to provide the reader with a coherent narrative and analysis of the insurgency.

The book is organized in four parts with appendices and an introduction by Michael Hutt, the book's editor. Hutt gives the reader a concise narrative of recent political events in Nepal since the People's Movement of 1990. Subsequent essays in Part I go into greater depth on the political and historical background. The first couple of chapters, by Deepak Thapa and Sudheer Sharma, discuss the emergence of the Maoist movement in Nepal and its organization, while in the third Krishna Hachhethu explains the attempts of the Nepali state to contain the insurgency between 1996 and 2001 (the period covered by this book). An examination of the relations between the Maoists and various segments of Nepali society is the subject of Part II, and in Part III the insurgency is placed in its geopolitical context. Part IV consists of two papers and is labeled an "afterword." The appendices consist of the Forty Point Demand of the United Peoples Front in 1996, the text of Prime Minister Deuba's Message to the Nation in November 2001, and King Gyanendra's address to the nation in October 2002.

The second part contains four essays that deal with the impact of the insurgency on civil and civilian society in Nepal. I use civil society here to refer to non-state institutions such as the Magar organizations discussed by Lecomte-Tilouine and the business and media organizations that are the focus of Onta's paper. "Civilian society" is my shorthand for

the non-combatant and mostly rural majority who are caught between the combatants.

Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin describe how ordinary villagers understood and responded to the Maoists and how Maoists organized their activities at the village level in one area in eastern Nepal. The analysis is limited, for as they themselves acknowledge, it is largely based on interviews with one individual and their reading of the media coverage of events in Dolakha, with their own experience as ethnographic fieldworkers in the area brought to bear on the material. But that reflects the difficulties of fieldwork in a war zone, a fact that comes across even more clearly in Pettigrew's essay on how her mostly middle-aged and female informants in a village in Nepal cope with violence and terror. Shneiderman and Turin give us some insight into what motivates the Maoist cadre, who are recruited from villages like the one the authors describe, and how the insurgents establish themselves in the village community – in this case, a region that becomes their first base area in the east. The Maoists target certain kinds of population groups for recruitment: marginalized and exploited by the higher castes, they comprise “a number of susceptible communities, none of which was sufficiently networked with other communities to resist Maoist influences, yet which, if converted to the cause, could together form a substantial bedrock of support” (p. 102). Here, as in many parts of Nepal, class and ethnic issues coincide; those most likely to benefit from the economic reforms advocated by the Maoists are members of marginalized ethnic groups, and ethnic issues thus become the basis on which support can be obtained – at least in the early stages of the insurgency. Villagers are by and large sympathetic to the Maoists, who treat them well and whose agenda appeals to village sentiments. The authors conclude by noting however, “The initial enthusiasm for the movement in Dolakha was based on an expectation of positive social change. It remains to be seen whether villagers will at a later date feel they have been let down, once again, by empty political promises” (p. 103).

Judith Pettigrew's paper on the way the insurgency is experienced by ordinary villagers caught between the Maoists and the military is placed in Part IV but it really belongs here, for it extends the discussion of the way the insurgency impacts on and shapes civilian society. Her narrative contrasts strikingly with Shneiderman and Turin's account, and paints a bleaker picture of villager-Maoist relations. But fear of the Maoists (p. 268) does not necessarily lead to support for the army, which is guilty of widespread atrocities (p. 277). Her essay adds the texture of concrete,

lived experience to this collection of essays that for the most part avoids the specificities of time and place (and that last remark is not a criticism; this book is not intended to be an ethnography of the conflict, but the occasional ethnographic insights do help us understand how real human beings bear its burden). She illuminates the structures of the culture of terror that has taken root in many areas of rural Nepal in her careful examination of the ways in which people adapt to a situation of unrelieved fear where they must confront the daily possibility of becoming a victim of the violence of the armed groups that dominate their lives.

The Maoists have sought to capitalize on the ethnic tensions that have surfaced in Nepal since the *jana āndolan*. In this context Marie Lecomte-Tilouine examines the relation between the Maoists and two Magar separatist movements in western Nepal. Her purpose is to elucidate the relationship between “the Magar project of autonomy and its connection with the people’s war” (p. 116), for while Magars are at the forefront of ethnic activism in Nepal, they are well represented both in the ranks of the Maoist cadres and among Nepal’s security forces. It is one of the many ironies of the struggle that while the Maoists reach out to Nepal’s *jana jāti* groups in part on the basis of their oppression at the hands of bahuns, “brahmanocracy (bahunvad) prevails in the central committee of the CPN (Maoist) just as much as it does in other parties” (p. 116).

In a different vein, Pratyoush Onta’s contribution is an indictment of Nepal’s political, commercial and civil society sectors in the post-People’s Movement period for what he terms their “pervasive duplicity” with respect to the Maoist movement. For example, he writes that some factions among the shards of Nepal’s splintered Communist party “wanted to turn a friendly face to the Maoists while simultaneously denouncing them for resorting to armed revolution before the ‘objective conditions were ready’” (p. 138). His concept of duplicity is sometimes loosely used; for instance the late King Birendra appears, in Onta’s account, to be more ineffectual than duplicitous in his inability to control the behavior of some members of his family, and his indictment of civil society institutions such as professional organizations has more to do with their corruption and incompetence than their “duplicity.” But this is to squabble over semantics. Onta’s larger point is well taken and surfaces in some of the other papers also. That is, these various structurally significant sectors of Nepali society, through their seeking of partisan advantage, and their double-dealing, incompetence and corruption, have failed to pose either a coherent challenge or alternative to the Maoist

insurgency and have conceded to it a political and moral space in which to organize.

Mandira Sharma and Dinesh Prasain focus on the role of women in the People's War. The authors claim that the proportion of women among the Maoist cadres is between 30 and 40 percent (p. 154). While participation in armed struggle is seen as an aspect of the liberation of women by the Maoists, their sympathizers and others with no vested interest in the movement, the experience of women combatants and activists in post-conflict situations is not encouraging; "traditional" cultural structures and expectations of gender roles have a way of reimposing themselves when the dust has settled as women who fought in the *mukti bāhini* and in Eritrea's struggle against Ethiopia have learned to their cost (see for instance Saikia 2004; Campbell 2005).

The third section of the volume provides a geopolitical and comparative perspective on the insurgency and consists of three papers by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Saubhagya Shah and Philippe Ramirez. Pfaff-Czarnecka highlights a common explanation for Nepal's crisis: "the existence of popular support for the Maoists is the widely discernible disillusionment with current political structures and processes" (p. 167). This argument appears in various guises in other papers in this volume as well (see the papers by Onta, Roka, Sharma and Prasain and by Shneiderman and Turin). This is a crucial part of the explanation, and must be read in tandem with the other analyses proffered: ethnic revivalism and separatism (Lecomte-Tilouine), the role of India (Shah), the ability of Maoist leaders to mobilize pre-existing political networks (Ramirez), economic deprivation, especially with respect to dalits and other marginalized groups (Roka) and, in accounting for the high levels of participation by women in the insurgency, the pervasive gender-based discrimination in every sphere in Nepal (Sharma and Prasain). These are all clearly interconnected. The failure of democracy in Nepal since the *jana āndolan* has led to widespread disillusionment among the people, and although the Maoist alternative is hardly viable, it is one of the few available (or perhaps even the only one available) on the immediate horizon.

Two papers round off Part III. In an insightful and persuasive analysis, Saubhagya Shah insists that we place the insurgency in the geopolitical context of Nepal's relations with India. India's aims which it has hitherto failed to realize, is to establish some type of protectorate over Nepal, or at least to make Nepal toe a line that India has drawn. India has not hesitated to use internal conflicts in Nepal as a lever to this end, in

much the same way as, in the eighties, it tried to use Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka to bring the Sri Lankan state under its influence (see Gunaratna 1994). According to Shah, “the Maoist insurgency now provides a convenient leverage against the Nepali state to assist the Indian government in its pursuit of the strategic objectives contained in the treaty proposal of 1990” (p. 205).

Ramirez’s paper takes up two questions in a comparative framework: what accounts for the location of the base areas and how does one interpret violence in terms of various Maoists ideologies as well as local political culture? His answer to the first is that “the most favorable terrain for Maoist insurgencies appears to exist at the interface between individual-centered networks and peripheral areas and groups” (p. 230) which would account for the initial emergence of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal in districts that are not economically the most deprived. They are however, among the more remote, with large concentrations of marginalized ethnic groups, and pre-existing political networks into which the CPN (Maoist) could insert itself. Ramirez’s is also the only paper to specifically take up the question of the logic of violence; his discussion of the vocabulary of killing (pp. 236-237) is chillingly insightful.

A key question for observers of Nepal’s civil war is the extent of support enjoyed by the Maoists. A number of papers cast light on this issue. In the initial phases of the war, the Maoists’ agenda appealed to a broad range of people, but the movement has grown so large so fast that the center, on Baburam Bhattarai’s own admission, has lost control of its militia (p. 48), and their tactics have begun to alienate the people on whom they ultimately depend. Roka notes that even in an election held by the Maoists in their base areas, “the Maoists were able to secure only between twenty-five and thirty-five percent of the votes;” the UML and the Nepali Congress got the rest (p. 255). And Sudheer Sharma writes, “Instead of ideas leading the guns, guns appear to be showing the way to ideas. The victims are the general public who initially welcomed the rebels as a welcome alternative to police excesses, but the distinction between the rebels and the police they displaced is becoming blurred” (p. 47).

Democracy in Nepal is threatened not only because the Maoists have no commitment to it, but because the democratic political parties have little commitment to it either, while the *ancien regime*, which has no use for democracy of any kind, sees an opportunity in the insurgency to weaken Nepal’s brittle democratic structures, points Hari Roka makes in

his essay in Part IV. He and Pfaff-Czarnecka both draw attention to the role of political networks (or distributional coalitions) in aggravating the conditions that gave rise to the insurgency. Only members of these networks have access to political power and resources, and the means to siphon off resources meant for “development.” The result is disaffection and discontent on the part of the people, which the political parties are unable to address. Roka ends on a bleak note: “After twelve years of liberal democracy, the majority in Nepal does not want a system that resembles the panchayat autocracy of the past, nor the watered down version of liberal democracy that the state has failed to protect. Nor does it wish to absorb the pointless suicidal politics of the Maoists” (p. 260). With the ethnic genie out of the bottle, he sees a very real possibility that the country will break up into ethnic enclaves, which would be a tragedy of immense proportions.

This volume is a significant contribution to the literature on modern Nepali politics, and, because of its relative conciseness and coherence of organization, a more accessible introduction to the People’s War, its origins and its impact than some of the other collections available. If one knows nothing of Nepali Maoism and little of Nepal, this is the book with which to start. Those who are better informed will still find this book well worth their while. The book succeeds admirably in its aims, and should be part of any library on Nepal.

References

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