

Baral, Ajit, Bela Malik, DR Pant, Jagannath Adhikari, Purna Basnet, and Usha Titikshu. 2008. *By the Way: Travels through Nepal's Conflict*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

This book of 119 pages, comprises five chapters plus an introduction. It is written by an eclectic bunch of authors, a student of English literature, an editor, two journalists, two social scientists, and a photographer. The varied authorship is reflected in the diversity of the topics covered. The book opens with a chapter by Jagannath Adhikari, a lively description of the experience of living and travelling in Bhojpur in the Eastern region of Nepal, just before a major attack in 2004. The main focus is on

development and how the insurgency setback the development process. It details the difficulties faced by people in conducting their day to day activities; reports on the views of a wide range of people, the elderly, the poor, women, office workers, Dalit, Janajati. Adhikari also documents his reaction as he travels outside the district headquarters. The following chapter by DR Pant describes the pitiful situation of inhabitants of villages in Far Western Nepal, as they found themselves caught between the Maoist and the then Royal Nepal Army (RNA). He writes of the desolation of families with members disappeared or killed; the forced donations to the Maoist; the arbitrary arrests and the general misbehaviour of army personnel towards local people; all of which compounds the suffering of communities in this remote part of the country.

Bela Malik and Usha Titikshu then turn the gaze back on themselves, as they chronicle their experience of travelling from Kathmandu to Biratnagar to participate in a peace rally and then move on to other districts to visit a health project. As previous chapters, they relate 'war stories' told them during their travels. Here stories centre on women and their encounters with security personnel and Maoist combatants. They also touch upon NGO working conditions in war zones. Next, Purna Basnet takes us on a journey through Dolpa with several American researchers and development professionals. He discusses the September 2000 attack on Dunai, an event notorious "for providing clear evidence of the royal Nepal army's loyalty to the monarchy rather than to the democratically elected government" (p. 11). He highlights the contrast between life in the headquarters and that of surrounding areas. The final chapter is by Ajit Baral, who recounts his trip with a British photojournalist in Maoist controlled areas. The highlight of the chapter is Ajit's discussion of the journalist's expectations and reactions and his interaction with Maoist cadres. The whole is prefaced by an introduction by Jagannath Adhikari and Bhaskar Gautam which summarises the chapters and also very succinctly situates the contents of the book historically. They write of the launch of the people's war, the gradual erosion of political, human and democratic rights, and the economic, social and psychological costs of the war. They also locate the volume within the broader literature on the insurgency.

The book, as the introduction reminds us on several occasions, is not an academic piece of work. It was intended as a "small attempt to supplement the current literature on the insurgency and its effects. The accounts of people's lives are anecdotal" (p. 6), they tell us, which "some may consider ... unacademic or unanalytical" (p. 8). *By the way*, does not,

indeed, seek to *explain* the conflict. Nor does it delve in depth in any specific aspect of the experience of the insurgency. A limited number of the themes that are touched upon here have received more elaborate treatment elsewhere. For example, the implications of the insurgency for NGO work and NGO workers (appearing in chapters by Jagannath Adhikari and Bela Malik and Usha Titikshu), is the subject of a full length article by Jagannath Adhikari (2003); while women's engagement with the war (in Bela Malik and Usha Titikshu) has been explored, *inter alia*, by Gautam, Banskot and Manchanda (2003) and Sharma and Prasain (2004). However, these few articles and chapters notwithstanding, works that deal with the experience of the conflict, the 'culture of the warzone' and the impacts of the insurgency on everyday life—which are crucial in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the conflict—are still relatively rare. It is in elucidating these aspects of the war that the richly descriptive contents of this book has some contribution to make to existing accounts of the insurgency.

The experiential focus of the chapters and the wealth of detail allows a more nuanced view of the conflict to emerge: it shows how conflict dwells in the traces and invisible presences – in the slogans, the destroyed buildings that are depicted in so many of the chapters. This also reminds the reader that the insurgency, as so many wars, was a period of uneasy peace marked by occasional eruptions of violence (for example, Richards 2005), as also illustrated in Ajit Baral's chapter. He recounts how their long waits "for something to happen" (p. 110) was abruptly ended by an army raid onto the village in which they were staying. Forty men with sub-machine guns descended on the cluster, gun shots were fired, shutters went down, orders shouted at villagers to go inside their houses. They seem to disappear as fast as they'd appeared, Baral and the photojournalist accompanying him only finding out the source of the commotion later on.

Reading across the chapters, one also catches glimpses of how the conflict transformed everyday life; how it turned upside down the taken-for-granted world; how, for example, simple actions such as going to the toilet became risky expeditions, as in Jagannath Adhikari's account. He recalls: "we were told not to leave the house after curfew, and not to use a torch if we were outside. This caused something of a problem for us since the toilet was a few meters away from the house. When we asked the office staff about this the next day they said it was a general problem and told a couple of rather frightening stories...." (p. 23).

Such ‘anecdotes’ that the introduction sees as a weakness, a mark of the ‘unacademic’ nature of the work are revealing of how people made sense of and dealt with conflict. As shared information about war and living through war, these are crucial to an understanding of the realities of the insurgency. The significance of story telling for people in conflict areas is highlighted in Bela Malik and Usha Titikshu’s chapter: stories, they observe, were “told and retold, some printed in newspapers; a single prompt brought forth many stories from different quarters” (p. 76). Among the more shocking is that narrating the fate of the widow of a man killed by the RNA. Visited by soldiers dressed in civilian clothes and ‘looking like Maoists’, the unsuspecting widow spoke openly; after getting information they wanted, they took her to the army camp and raped her. Then made her dig her own grave and buried her alive in it.

A claim of the introduction is that the book’s contribution to the literature on the insurgency lies in its charting the experience of a wide range of communities and social groups. But more than this, the book is unique as a testimony of the professional middle-class experience of the conflict – as opposed to their opinions about it, which have appeared in several volumes on the insurgency such as Thapa (2003). For this privileged group, relatively protected from the ravages of the conflict, their journeys seem a sobering experience. DR Pant ends his account, with the following comment: “with heavy hearts we returned to the headquarters, leaving the villages to their sorrow, thinking of the excesses of the so-called people’s movement and the heartlessness of the so-called democratic government” (p. 70).

Here and there, the authors also provide instances of a topic as yet untouched in the accounts of the insurgency, namely, local efforts at conciliation and containment of violence during conflict. The small actions that usher in peace—for peace, as has been argued elsewhere, rarely starts with peace treaties (Nordstrom 2004)—are in evidence in several of the chapters. We have such an example in Purna Basnet’s description of the informal arrangements by the RNA and Maoist. As Basnet and his group arrive in Dunai, they are told by policemen and soldiers at the checkpoint of a cultural programme starring Kathmandu’s famous singer Komal Oli. “A dinner with Komal Oli and the accompanying artistes ended the event with a kind of Komal Oli evening. Oli sang more songs...people danced with her one at a time. Everyone was singing and dancing...the security unit’s key officers spent three or four hours in such a carefree manner to make it appear that there was no real security threat” (p. 94). The scene he depicts is incongruous enough –

but not as much as the description of the amicable relations between RNA and Maoist that follows: “no enmity exists between us and the Maoist. We are living cooperatively. They stay up in the hills and we stay down in Dunai. Safe in each other’s shelter” (p. 95).

Another unusual subject is broached by Ajit Baral. I was struck by his description of the relations between Maoists and journalists and how Maoists managed the media. He writes:

Adrian went on, asking how Nepal’s Maoists would counter the influence of capitalist/imperialist countries once their movement succeeded. Narayan told him that Prachanda Path would prevent capitalist and imperialist countries from influencing Nepal. He ignored another question... and when Adrian asked by what date the revolution would succeed, Narayan answered brusquely: “Communists don’t make such forecasts and I am not a fortuneteller”. He ended any further discussion by complaining that Adrian was asking only technical questions rather than ideological ones (p. 113).

A final, but disturbing theme is suggested by the accounts is that of the emergence of ‘conflict entrepreneurs’. Regular characters of the war zone, here they are not the black marketeers or the business people who profit from the upheaval of conflict – but the conflict advisors that flocked to Nepal during the insurgency. Bela Malik and Usha Titikshu point to the ironies of ‘peace programmes’ and ‘the peace industry’. They observe: “A peace rally followed, led by the Nepali flag, lest anyone doubt the leaders’ allegiance. That concluded the Shanti Abhyan of 550 people, all either flown or driven in, and costing about 8 lakh (approximately \$11,111), which the organisers could well treat as an investment toward procuring yet more funds from the conflict gravy train” (p. 74-75). “Conflict...seemed almost to be feted in five-star hotels” (p. 85), sums up their trenchant critique.

If the tone of the writing is at times biting, overall, the book offers balanced as well as nuanced accounts that does not shy from ambivalence. Bela Malik and Usha Titikshu provide a good example once again. They report on the peace rally’s participants reaction to the constant checks by army personnel: “We heard that suspected Maoists had killed two army personnel at the Lahan check post through which we had passed in the morning. The passengers gave way to unexpected mirth at the report, as though the news set to rest their ire and irritation” (p. 85).

All together, the book provides a nuanced, complex account of everyday life under the insurgency; it abounds in detail and insights that surprise. Richly evocative of the experience of war, and dealing with

unusual topics such as Maoist-journalist interactions or a peace rally, it offers a great 'light' and broad introduction to the insurgency. It is also useful in allowing for formulation of further questions and lines of inquiry about culture of war during insurgency. My only regret is that the book is not longer. As it stands, however, the book is a satisfying read as long as it is treated as a starting point for further exploration of Nepal's eleven-year people's war and its aftermath.

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