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Book review of 'Rejoinders: Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion' edited by Michael Hutt

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HIMALAYAN PEOPLE'S WAR: NEPAL'S MAOIST REBELLION

MICHAEL HUTT, EDITOR

REVIEWED BY JOHN METZ

If you can figure out the full causes, career, and consequences of the Maoist movement in Nepal, you have mastered knowledge about contemporary Nepali history and society.

So notes Pratyoush Onta (p.137) in his contribution to this detailed and wide-ranging assessment of the Maoist civil war in Nepal. Onta admits, as would the other authors, that he has not yet attained such expertise. None of us has, but this volume provides the reader with a broad and deep set of insights into the numerous political, social, economic, and geographic processes that have interwoven to create Nepal's current crisis.

The book consists of an Introduction by editor Michael Hutt and 12 revised papers that were initially presented at a conference on 2-3 November 2001 at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Hence, except for some updating footnotes from the end of 2002, as the book went to print, the articles are based on information gathered by the middle of 2002. A lot has occurred since then, but these papers still provide important background information as well as descriptions of conditions up to that stage of the Maoist rebellion.

The main strength that I see in the book is the breadth of perspectives the papers include and the high level of detail that they provide. Illustrating the thoroughness of the volume are its three appendices: Baburam Bhattarai's Forty Point Demands of the United People's Front released just before the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN-Maoist] initiated its civil war in February 1996; Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's message to the nation following the King's declaring an Emergency on 26 November 2001; and the address King Gyanendra made to his subjects on 4 October 2002, following his suspension of Deuba's government, his appointment of his own Prime Minister,

and his postponement of the November 2002 elections.

Editor Hutt has organized the papers into four groups:

PART I: THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

1. Radicalism and the Emergence of the Maoists, by Deepak Thapa
2. The Maoist Movement: An Evolutionary Perspective, by Sudheer Sharma
3. The Nepali State and the Maoist Insurgency, 1996-2001, by Krishna Hachhethu

PART II: THE MAOISTS AND THE PEOPLE

4. The Path to Jan Sarkar in Dolakha District: Towards an Ethnography of the Maoist Movement, by Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin
5. Ethnic Demands within Maoism: Questions of Magar Territorial Autonomy, Nationality, and Class, by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine
6. Democracy and Duplicity: The Maoists and their Interlocutors in Nepal, by Pratyoush Onta
7. Gender Dimensions of the People's War: some Reflections on the Experiences of Rural Women, by Mandira Sharma and Dinesh Prasain

PART III: GEOPOLITICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

8. High Expectations, Deep Disappointments: Politics, State, and Society in Nepal after 1990, by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka
9. A Himalayan Red Herring? Maoist Revolution in the Shadow of the Legacy Raj, by Saubhagya Shah
10. Maoism in Nepal: Towards a Comparative Perspective, by Philippe Ramirez

PART IV: AFTERWARDS

11. The Emergency and the Army in Rural Nepal, by Hari Roka
12. Living Between the Maoists and the Army in Rural Nepal, by Judith Pettigrew

As I read the papers, I see several areas of con-

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Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion

Michael Hutt, ed.

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cern emerging repeatedly from them, so I will organize this review around these issues.

1. Evolution of Communist Politics, leading to the CPN (Maoist) and its revolution (papers by Hutt, Thapa, Sharma, Ramirez).

2. The failures of the post 1990 Democratic State (Sharma, Hachhethu, Onto, Pfaff-Czarnecka).

3. The dilemmas the Maoist civil war creates for uncommitted citizens and for ethnic and gender activists (Shneiderman/Turin, Lecomte-Tillouine, Sharma/Prasain, Pettigrew).

4. Political duplicity in the interactions between the Nepal's three contending groups (Palace, Politicians, Maoists) and in the actions of the Indian state (Sharma, Hachhethu, Shah, Roka).

Underlying virtually all these papers is the question: how did the Maobadi become such a threat?

Evolution of Maoist Politics

Michael Hutt's Introduction provides an historical overview of Nepal since it emerged in the 18th century, with a focus on the events connected to the recent emergence of the Maoists. This sets the stage for Deepak Thapa's detailed account of the ideological and personal antagonisms that created the many splits, alliances, and occasional reunifications within Nepal's leftist parties. Knowing the details of this complicated history is necessary to understand Ramirez's explanation of why the revolution began in Rolpa/Rukum. One of the persistently most radical leaders of Nepal's communists, Mohan Bikram Singh, was from Pyuthan, but spent years as a young man working with farmers in neighboring Rukum and Rolpa to develop a communist base. When the government indiscriminately oppressed these dissident farmers, it consolidated their commitment to radical politics. This became the base area of the revolution when one of the last splits veered away from Mohan Bikram and led to the CPN (Maoist). An improvement I would have liked Thapa to include is a flow diagram (which I eventually constructed for myself) of the emergence, divisions, and subdivision of the many left wing parties.

The paper by Sudheer Sharma clearly presents the organizational structure of the Maoist movement. Three arms of the People's War move it forward: the party, the People's Army, and the United Front, which operates above ground to make propaganda and win friends for the party. Sharma describes the organization of the party, of the army, and of the Front. He also describes conditions within the Maoist base areas, including the ways they are organizing their People's Governments at the village, region, and district levels. Finally, Sharma describes the sequence of strategies the Maoists have adopted through the first 6 years of their revolution.

Part of the paper by Shneiderman and Turin tells how

the Maoists have created a People's Government in Dolakha district, just east of Kathmandu. Here a history of police oppression and radical politics made many open to the Maoists' message. The policies of seizing and redistributing the land and wealth of class enemies, of using cultural symbols and elements in revolutionary mass meetings and traditional festivals has won significant local support.

Failures of the Democratic State

Many papers condemn the post 1990 state for its corruption and ineptitude. Krishna Hachhethu condemns the elected governments for considering the Maoist insurgency simply a "law and order" issue rather than a political one. The government relied on the ill equipped and poorly paid police to fight the Maobadi, and when the police were defeated the governments withdrew from contested areas, creating a vacuum which the Maoists were only too willing to fill. Like Sharma, Hachhethu provides summarizing Tables which clearly arrange complicated information about the State Responses to Maoist Violence (Table 1) and about "The Parties' Prescriptions for the Resolution of the Maoist Problem" (Table 2).

The most penetrating study of the Democratic State is that of Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka. Despite its ultimate failure, the 1990 Movement for the Restoration of Democracy made significant advances: the King became a constitutional monarch; free and fair elections were held; basic human rights of speech and assembly were guaranteed. Nevertheless, fundamental failures blocked effective action. The state has come to be the main source of financial resources and services to the people because the market is so poorly developed. State functionaries, therefore, become gatekeepers who withhold these resources from citizens, creating scarcities. Citizens therefore gain access to resources by making personal contributions to the officials. In addition, political leaders gain control over resource flows into their districts. Political leaders have "dense webs" of kinship, friendship, patron-client relationships with local populations. "Simultaneously they form alliances with political superiors" and others who are outside the local arena (pp.181-83). The result is distributional coalitions whose goal is to divert resources from their rightful recipients. All this is possible because no horizontal or vertical systems of accountability exist. Horizontal accountability can come from "governmental agencies exerting control over each other" or from professional standards. Vertical accountability should come from superiors supervising their underlings and from the courts. These systems of accountability, Pfaff-Czarnecka notes, are essential elements of operating democracies, and so are further evidence that Nepal's democratic failure. Citizens confronted with these conditions have the dilemma of voting for an honest candidate, who will be unable to link to superiors who supply



resources, or for a corrupt candidate who will be able to provide some help to his clients.

Pratyoush Onta identifies the failures of the elected governments, the King, the commercial sector, and civil society, as duplicity, a failure that has provided fertile grounds for the growth of the Maoist movement (p.137). The political parties were duplicitous in that while they clamored for democracy, they failed to structure democratic processes within their own organizations. Moreover, they did not enact laws which would render party finances transparent, but used party money as if it were the personal property of the leaders. The King was duplicitous in his inability or unwillingness to curb excesses of some members of the royal family. Further, he failed to make clear that he was only the symbolic head of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). Civil Society, meaning the NGOs, are virtually all lacking in professional competence, financial independence from the state, and moral integrity (p.143). The media has been intimidated by the Maoists into reporting favorably on their activities.

Dilemmas Faced by Uncommitted Citizens and Non-Political Activists

The expanding power of the Maoists has forced many Nepalis to make choices from a list without any good alternatives. Judith Pettigrew's paper very effectively shows how Gurung villagers have changed their personal and group practices to minimize their exposure to the dangers emanating from the state and from the Maoists, as the insurgents circulate through their villages. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine explores the ways the Maoist successes have altered the strategies of the Magar ethnic activists. Partly as a result of the freedom of expression after 1990, the Magar Liberation Front, like similar Fronts for most of the Janajati groups, has emerged and claimed that the Magars should have a territory all their own. Point 20 of the Forty Point Program the Maoists released just before beginning their Peoples' War demands Autonomy for ethnic groups that are in the majority. The Maoist presence has forced Magar ethnic nationalists to decide whether throwing their lot in with the Maoists will bring them the resources, power, and respect they see as their right. Lecomte-Tilouine illustrated this point by tracing the emergence and competition between two nationalist Magar groups: the Magarant Liberation Front (MLF) and the Magarant National Liberation Front (MNLf). The MLF seeks an autonomous region for Magars within which all upper caste "invaders" would be ethnically cleansed. The MNLf is affiliated with the Maoists and seeks to eliminate the complaints of the Magar ethnic activists (the absence of power and respect) through the Maoist revolution.

Some independent Magar nationalists note that history seems to be repeating itself: in this war Magars are doing the killing and dying while their upper caste leaders create

strategy from the sidelines—just as they did for Prithvi Narayan Shah in the 18th century. The MNLf leaders respond that a Magar homeland without a Maoist revolution is totally unrealistic and that if the MLF were to succeed, the communalist violence their policies would unleash would block the peace their ideals seek.

Women are another group included in the Forty Point Program. The gender oppression of traditional society combined with Maoist rhetoric and policies, like banning alcohol, has convinced many women to support the Maoists, including the waging of war. Sharma and Prasain's paper explains why many women see the Maoists as the only hope for change, despite the absence of women from the Maoist decision-makers and negotiating team.

Political Duplicity at the National and Regional Scales

Several of the papers note the deceptions that all the three power groups in Nepal have employed against each other. The Palace allied to the RNA has purposely allowed the Maoists to expand in order to discredit the 1990 Constitution and the political parties it validates in order to create sufficient chaos to re-take the power it lost in 1990. The opposition parties have used successes of the Maoist rebellion to discredit their governing opponents. Credible reports claim that the UML contributed Rs800,000 to the Maoists prior to the 1999 elections to create problems that would defeat Congress. The parties were so involved in political intrigue that they couldn't take the rebellion as a serious threat. So, the political parties have used the Maoist threat against each other. The King has used the Maoist successes to discredit the entire democratic structure. During all this "misuse" of the Maoists, they have expanded and consolidated their positions.

Saubhagya Shah's paper expands the political manipulators beyond Nepal's borders. He reviews the contradiction within India's ruling elites: "they are both anti colonial heroes on the one hand and heirs of the British Raj on the other" (p195). Their desire to replace the British and take their "rightful" place among the leading nations of the world has, according to Shah, created most of the problems in the region. The "Legacy Raj Syndrome" is evident in India's primary goal: to gain regional and external acceptance of India's hegemonic position over South Asia. India can accomplish this by keeping the other states weak. India's game, therefore, is to support secretly opposition groups within its neighboring states. When the opposition expands, the neighboring state becomes weaker and less able to assert its sovereignty. It may even need assistance from India itself to contain its rebels. Such assistance will, of course, not come without concessions to India which compromise sovereignty. The discovery that Maoists were operating freely in India in 2002 caused considerable embarrassment to all sides, but

it does suggest that Shah's analysis is accurate.

Additional scales of power emanate from the US. Structural Adjustment policies of the Development Banks and USAID forced both Congress and the Communist Parties, when they were in power, to abandon their redistribution programs, which might have begun to fulfill their campaign promises. Hence, the conditions donors place on their aid contribute to failure and discredit the political parties. Lastly, the US calling the People's Army "international terrorists" has opened the US military aid tap to the government. It seems likely that US support may convince the Nepali state that it can win the war without negotiations. If this proves true, the war is likely to consume many more of Nepal's citizens.

Afterword

No comprehensive explanation of the success of the People's War has yet been written. My belief is that Nepal's

crisis, like other complex issues, can best be understood by combining analyses at a series of scales organized as a nested hierarchy. We must start with a thorough examination of processes at the local level. But how are these local forces related to forces operating at the regional and national scale? Do national policies reinforce or undermine local processes and trends? Similarly, international actors at both the regional and global scales can set the contingencies to which the national, regional, and local groups must respond. Specifying precisely how these forces interact is beyond me now and probably will be forever. Nevertheless, *Himalayan People's War* provides a wealth of insights and has expanded my understanding enormously. It is a book that students of the Himalayan region should read carefully and thoroughly.

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Himalayan Herders

a film by

John & Naomi Bishop

A classic ethnographic portrait of a temple village in the Yolmo Valley of central Nepal filmed in 1986 to 1993 as the herding and farming subsistence economy was competing with wage labor outside the village. The film pays particular attention to the material culture, knowledge, and skills of mountain pastoralists, while observing the changes that come from incorporation into a National Park, infusion of capital from international wage labor, and political changes in Nepal.

The DVD includes two extra videos, MAKING HIMALAYAN HERDERS and UPDATE 2002, an article about making the film and the complete text of the book, An Ever-Changing Place. The DVD is programmed so that the film can be shown in two or three parts. Individual scenes are quickly located with on-screen menus and a printable transcript. Topics such as herding, agriculture, religion, and culture change are playable as individual segments, using on-screen menus.

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