July 2015

Review of 'Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday Life in Nepal’s Civil War' by Judith Pettigrew

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Colopy’s work, often meditative and lyrical, humanizes the region, its people and their daily struggles in the face of rapidly changing natural environment along the Ganges basin.

_Sagar Rijal on Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia’s Water Crisis_
Kwei Nasa, a Tamang village located in central Nepal, was in an area during the conflict that was neither entirely under Maoist or government control. Therefore, the villagers had to navigate between competing and conflicting demands and pressures. According to Pettigrew, for example, villagers were very careful to identify any soldiers in the vicinity of the village, and to not be associated with either the Maoist or Nepal Army, due to assumed negative consequences. The book focuses on the everyday to illuminate and explore how ideas of normality were sustained and replicated at a time of conflict that was far from normal in Kwei Nasa. The rich detail of the everyday prior to, during, and after the conflict provides insights into the necessary adaptations the villagers in Kwei Nasa made during the Maoist insurgency. Specifically, Pettigrew focuses on the adaptations made by villagers and changing relationships and interactions with Maoist cadre when they were in the village. During these times Pettigrew explores the complex and evolving negotiation of alternative forms of authority between villagers and the Maoist cadre. The focus on the lived experience of the conflict, including some of the human rights abuses experienced by the villagers, provides important and often overlooked consequences of the insurgency for villages such as Kwei Nasa.

Pettigrew’s focus throughout on the agency of the villagers is also welcome, and this is examined through a consideration of the strategies and creativity of the villagers in often very challenging situations. For example, this manifested in new expectations around when to talk and when to be silent, as well as subtle changes in the meaning of familiar symbols and associated meanings in the village. For example, because Gurungs constituted a significant proportion of the Maoist cadre, knowing who to trust became increasingly complicated in the village. Furthermore, simple things such as having polished boots were taken as an indication that the person wearing them was most likely associated with the Nepal Army.

The detailed focus on everyday life during the Maoist insurgency constitutes an important contribution to scholarship on the consequences and lived experiences of war. However, this does mean that there is relatively little detailed analysis of the reasons and motivations for many Nepalis who joined the insurgency. This remains a particularly important question, given the strong support for the Maoists particularly in rural areas. Furthermore, a more detailed description of the historical evolution of the Maoist movement in Nepal would have further strengthened the understanding of the multiple reasons why the Maoists received significant support in rural Nepal.

Given that Pettigrew’s knowledge and engagement with everyday life within Kwei Nasa significantly predates the start of the Maoist insurgency in 1996, she is able to contextualize both the continuity and change the village exhibits during and after the decade long insurgency. Based on several decades of fieldwork, this is a landmark book that will shape discussions and analysis of this crucial period in Nepal’s history for many years. This book makes an important contribution to both Nepali and South Asian scholarship both in Anthropology and Conflict Studies, examining in rich and compelling detail the implications of the Maoist movement in Nepal.

Matthew Maycock completed his PhD thesis from the University of East Anglia in 2012, focusing on masculinities in post-conflict Nepal, specifically considering the experiences of a group of recently freed bonded labourers. This complements a long held interest in research on masculinity with a particular focus on South Asia and especially Nepal. His current research focuses on masculinity and health in a number of Scottish prisons.