

Sudheer Sharma. 2013. *Prayogśālā: Nepālī Saṅkramaṅmā Dillī, Darbār ra Māobādī*. Kathmandu: Fine Print.

*Prayogśālā*, a book written on the decade-long Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006), revolves round the three ‘major players’ – India, the monarchy, and the Maoists. In the book it is the subterfuges, both open and secret, contrived by these actors to meet their respective goals which ultimately thrusts the Himalayan country into a state of wilderness.

The author Sudheer Sharma, who is also the editor of Nepal’s largest-selling newspaper *Kāntipur*, visited insurgency-hit areas, interviewed some of the major actors, and had access to many sources of information. He has

come up with a 418-page volume that gives a macro picture of the insurgency that ended in a political settlement in 2006.

The book is complex and full of interesting nuances but is also simple enough in essence: India, the 'hegemonic' regional player, achieved its 'strategic' goals by using the Maoist rebels against the third actor – the monarchy. The latter stood against India's 'vital' interests in Nepal which was the major, and perhaps the only reason behind the political turmoil and the subsequent regime change in 2006.

While the author convincingly argues that India was indeed a major actor in changing the political landscape of Nepal, he fails to convince the readers that the regime change was indeed an Indian design. Additionally his fixation with, and exaggeration of, Indian roles in Nepal leads him to miss the other key factors behind the regime change.

Sharma begins the book by giving a blow-by-blow account of his encounter with Sanjeev Tripathi, the then Chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), in a five-star hotel in Kathmandu just a few days before the Constituent Assembly-1 was dissolved without delivering a constitution in May 2012. The prologue perfectly sets the stage for what is to come in the subsequent chapters: the Indian intelligence agency's involvement in shaping the political course of Nepal following the onset of the Maoist insurgency in 1996. The rest of the book gives intriguing details of the major political incidents after 1996 and the changing political matrix in the Himalayan country.

The second chapter (the author says the book begins from this chapter), presents the Maoist rebels as rational actors who studied the longstanding 'contradictions' of Nepali society just like 'political scientists' and 'sociologists,' before launching the insurgency in early 1996 (p. 32). To begin with, the rebels took advantage of the rivalry between the army and police, both of which were trying to outsmart each other for financial interests (p. 24) and clout. Sidelined by the government, the king-led army began to 'sympathize' with the Maoists and declined to fight the insurgents.

The royal palace enters the scene with the return of Dharendra Shah, the king's brother, to Nepal from his exile in the United Kingdom. It was around the time of the Maoist attack on Dolpa district headquarters Dunai in 2000, the first major offensive on the state by the insurgents. Dharendra and some army officials played a major role in forging an 'informal alliance' between the royal palace and the Maoist rebels to safeguard 'national sovereignty'

against the political parties that ‘aligned with India’ in 1990 and forced the monarchy to concede power (p. 54).

India visibly enters the stage in 2001, especially after the Holeri incident in which the army did not fight the rebels ignoring the then prime minister’s directive (p. 92). The southern neighbor expresses its dissatisfaction over the king’s refusal to mobilize the army in Holeri.

According to the author the Maoists had, however, begun to take shelter in India three months after the insurgency began in 1996. To prove India’s hand in the insurgency, the author cites the connections between some Indian academics and officials to Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai, ‘cultivated’ while the latter was a student at India’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in the 1980s.

The southern neighbor, the author argues, began to encourage both the state and Maoist rebels after Gyanendra’s visit to India in June 2002. India saw it as an opportunity to capitalize on the contradictions in Nepali society when the former king sought India’s backing for a takeover (p. 123). It also formally established relations with the Maoists after Gyanendra sacked the democratically elected Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in October 2002.

Gyanendra’s relation with India however deteriorated after the royal putsch of 1 February 2005. Instead of compromising on national sovereignty to fulfil Indian “‘security interests,’ Gyanendra began to play the ‘China card’” to force India to support his takeover. But the king’s move backfired. India facilitated the signing of the 12-point agreement between the Maoists and the political parties that cornered Gyanendra, and the monarchy collapsed under the collective protest by the political parties and the Maoists (p. 198). The rest of the chapters go on minutely chronicling growing Indian interference in the young republic and the ensuing political turmoil.

The author also succinctly outlines the motives of each of the major actors, the monarchy, India and the Maoists. According to him, the Maoists initially wanted the monarch to simulate the ‘revolutionary’ role played by the king of Cambodia (p. 64) and after being sidelined by the monarch following the royal massacre in June 2001, they tried to use India against the monarch in their quest for power (p. 69).

Similarly, India after shaking off the yoke of British colonial masters had always sought a pliant regime in Nepal like that in Bhutan, and the emergence of the Maoists as a dominant force in the late 1990s gave it a unique opportunity to implement its design (p. 387). The author argues that the

Maoists who wanted to use India to grab power finally ended up being used by India. He cites former Indian envoy to Nepal Shiv Shankar Mukharjee and also former JNU professor SD Muni in many places stating that the monarchy had become an ‘outdated institution’ in Nepal (e.g., p. 188). By arguing that India’s political leadership came to know about RAW’s covert operation in Sikkim only in the final hours, the author hints that the same might have happened in Nepal too.

But the overthrow of the monarchy doesn’t seem to be the choice of the Indian establishment though some Indian officials and academics might have wanted to turn the Hindu kingdom into a republic. The chain of events such as the Indian government’s support to the first royal proclamation in 2006 and Karan Singh’s Nepal visit reiterating India’s twin policy of constitutional monarchy and democracy do not support the writer’s thesis. Moreover, the author himself says that RAW wanted to retain a ceremonial monarchy and play a major role in conflict resolution (p. 223). Put simply, the chain of events only shows that India was only one of the major actors and not the decisive one.

Interestingly, while India might well have planned to seek concessions from the old regime by supporting the anti-regime forces, the events chronicled in the book only show India in positive light. For example: the intelligence agency lent its support to the Maoists after the latter formally wrote a letter to the Indian government in 2002 ‘convincing’ the latter that they wanted “positive changes” in Nepali society; it facilitated the “historic” 12-point agreement in 2005; it intervened in the Madhes movement and ‘subdued’ it in 2007; it “prepared the ground for a republic” in 2007 for the sake of “peace” and it played a role in the forming of a Chief Justice-led election government in 2013. Going by the author’s account, the Indian intelligence had also played a positive role in constitution drafting just before the Constituent Assembly-1 lapsed in May 2012, but these initiatives were foiled by some Madhesi activists who incited Madhesi people (p. 12).

How should we then evaluate the Indian role in the recent political changes in Nepal? The reason for the apparent paradox is that both Nepali revolutionaries and Indian actors shared the same mission: weaken the Nepali state to meet their respective goals. Since the overthrow of monarchy was neither the agenda of India nor the Maoists before 2006, the author should have looked beyond the Indian design to understand this complex phenomenon called regime change.

Interestingly, the author seems to have underestimated the role of ‘civil society’ and its global nexus. ‘Civil society’ legitimized the insurgency by locating its causes in ‘grievances.’ Moreover, Gyanendra antagonized the bourgeoisie by his return to monarchical rule in 2005. Thus the urban middle class actively participated in the mass movement of 2006 even as the discredited political parties were hugely unpopular. And the people did not relent even after India supported a ceremonial monarchy when the 2006 movement was in a full swing. The author, for reasons unknown, omits the monarchy’s failure to adapt to new values shaped by the forces of globalization. And contrary to the author’s claim, the real beneficiary of the regime change has been the Maoist leadership and not India.

The Indian officials claimed they played ‘decisive’ roles in the regime change in Nepal, but find themselves in an ‘embarrassing’ situation today as they are confused about their actual roles in the political transition. And by playing ‘major roles’ in the regime change, they also inadvertently invited China to India’s ‘sphere of influence.’

Furthermore, the author relies heavily on the former military secretary Bibek Shah’s book *Maile Dekheko Darbār* (2067 v.s.) and KV Rajan’s *The Ambassador’s Club* (2012) to bolster his conspiracy angle with respect to the 2001 royal massacre. The author has, for reasons unknown, omitted the fact that former Queen Komal had also sustained bullet wounds in the that incident but elaborates at length the various prevailing conspiracy theories. Shah seems to be the only source for the author’s depictions of the royal palace. The citation heavy book also does not cite some of the facts the author presents. For example, the writer outlines King Birendra’s strategy for solving the Maoist problem, restoring the monarch’s power lost in 1990 and decreasing dependence on India (p. 69). But he does not cite any source for this. Likewise, he states that RAW wanted to solve the Maoist problem and retain a ceremonial monarchy but no citations are given for this information.

Some shortcomings aside, the author has done a commendable job by describing the political changes in Nepal since 1996. *Prayogśālā* is full of citations and rich in data which can be valuable for researchers. The book is simple in style and easily accessible for readers who do not closely follow Nepali politics.

**Post Bahadur Basnet**  
Kathmandu