

Book Reviews

Mahendra Lawoti and Anup Kumar Pahari, eds. 2010. *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*. London/New York: Routledge.

Revolving around the debate on relations between peace and development, *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal* edited by Mahendra Lawoti and Anup Pahari offers fifteen chapters covering four important aspects of the Nepali Maoist movement – organizational, military, ethnic and developmental. Published within three years of the conclusion of the Maoist insurgency, it is a very timely investigation into the Maoist conundrum in Nepal. The flipside of the coin is that it probably is still too early to fully explain and theorize the causes and consequences of this decade-long insurgency. Nevertheless, laden with primary and secondary information on Nepal and on revolutions elsewhere, this book will serve Nepal researchers as an essential reference.

This book is an account of the contemporary Maoist politics. The stage is set in Chapter 1 of Part I where Mahendra Lawoti introduces the Nepali Maoists as extremist communists who made their presence felt in Nepali politics through the armed rebellion launched on 4 February 1996. The half century long history of the Nepali communist movement before the Maoists launched their armed struggle is recounted in six brief paragraphs and Lawoti says relatively little about how inexorably intertwined the Nepali communist movement has been with its democratic politics. Several subsequent chapters in Part II add to the notion of contemporariness and claim that Nepal analysts were “surprised” by the rise of the communists. For example, Kristine Eck’s chapter on Maoist indoctrination (Chapter 2) argues that while grievances over inequalities are long-standing, it is the newness of their recruitment strategy in the face of the economic and political vacuum left by the state in remote areas that allowed the Maoists to capitalize on these grievances. It is followed by Monica Mottin’s discussion of the role of popular performing art in Maoist mobilization (Chapter 3). Amanda Snellinger’s ethnography of the student union movements (Chapter 4) focuses on the glaring inconsistencies in the messages being sent out to its grassroots associations before and after signing the peace agreement. Madhav Joshi’s work (Chapter 5) serves to justify Eck’s assertion that grievances

about economic inequalities provided the Maoists a new path to revolution, but that, having chosen to follow this path, the Maoists are now obliged dutifully to implement an ambitious economic reform program which may or may not be within their capacity to deliver.

Part II is commended for its coverage of a wide range of topics associated with the Maoist movement as well as for its multi-disciplinary approach that spans statistical modelling and ethnographic accounts. But some questions remain on the content. Eck, for example, alludes to a few primary interviews conducted in April 2008 while formulating her rather far-reaching conclusion that the Maoists were successful because they were the first group to appeal to villagers' class discontents. While several secondary narratives from the early 2000s are extracted liberally, Eck's arguments are not always informed by original scholarly reasoning. For example, Pettigrew and Schneiderman's (2004) account which Eck cites liberally, actually suggests that becoming Maoist was to assume an alternative national identity in the rural villages that were peripheral to national discourse of development. Similarly, Sharma and Prasain's (2004) argument is that engendering and ethnicization have been as necessary elements of the Maoist activism as class-based struggle. These are somewhat overlooked when the author concludes that the Maoist indoctrination of rural villagers was possible because of poverty and inequality, and the absence of effective governance.

Monica Mottin concludes her Chapter 3 with a prescient sentence, "how Maoist culture and art will open, communicate, blend or perhaps confront and transform mainstream 'Nepali' culture is a fascinating scenario that awaits us" (p. 67). The underground 'progressive' (to mean subversive) cultural movement is not a new phenomenon in Nepal but one that has engaged at least two generations of Nepalis. Mottin talks about (perhaps less relevant) examples of religious subversion, e.g., Yogamaya's ascetic *hajurbāñī* and ritualistic *tij* songs as evidence that subversion has always informed Nepali cultural performances, but does not refer to the nationally significant movements among literary and performing artists since the time of Rana regime. Nepali poets such as Siddhicharan Shrestha, Dharanidhar Koirala, Gopal Prasad Rimal have all left behind a rich legacy of subaltern literature that confronted the Rana regime. When a new autocracy Panchayat replaced the Rana regime, subversion among artists morphed into movements such as *Rālphā*, which functioned as the cultural wing of the Nepali communist movement in the 1970s. Mottin does make a passing comment to one of the *Rālphā* songs *gāñ gāñ bāta uṭha* (rise from every village) in a footnote (but without the

correct date and creative attribution). Otherwise the chapter ignores half a century long history of subversive art movement in Nepal which, as she foretold about the Maoist art movement, has indeed gone through the journey of initially confronting, then blending into, and ultimately transforming mainstream Nepali culture.

Are subversive artists pragmatic activists or idealistic individuals? *Rālphā* artists said of themselves that they made a life-long commitment to ‘rise above the genre of ordinary love songs’ and to refrain from participating in the ‘bourgeois channels’ aired by state radio and television stations.¹ Such longstanding commitments are not what characterize the progressive singers in Mottin’s ethnography; she describes them as pragmatic activists rather than devoted artists, “When the police were nearby, cultural workers sang folk or love songs, but once the police left, the repertoire switched to what they called ‘progressive’ songs” (p. 56). It is true that there is bound to be more than one view and practice in a broad movement, and Mottin’s ethnography may have documented one of the several subgenres of revolutionary art movement, but this needs to be clearly signposted. Her account will benefit from a differentiation of the subgenres of revolutionary art in terms of quality of the content, organization of the performances, and ideologies of the artists.

In Chapter 4, when discussing urban and post-conflict Maoist activism, Amanda Snellinger successfully portrays how the Maoist student movement is caught between its revolutionary past and reconciliatory present. This ethnographic account offers original materials from her recent fieldwork and will be of interest to scholars of grassroots politics. The next step for research on grassroots movement may be to situate the Maoist student politics within the broader student union movement – a large part of which still lies under the non-Maoist banners including Nepali Congress and moderate communist groups. For example, there have been recurrent clashes between the cadres of the Maoist and non-Maoist factions after the former joined mainstream politics. What do these clashes say about the future trajectories of grassroots activism in Nepal? How does this inform her narrative on the Maoist leaders’ attempt to moderate their cadres after having proselytized them on extremist values? Events are unfolding fast in this area. The rich

¹ Based on a speech by M. Manjul on 19 May 2007 at a *Paleti* series event, Kathmandu.

and analytical ethnographic account presented in this chapter provides an excellent platform on which to theorize some of these new developments.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's standalone chapter which makes Part III of this book is a seminal ethnography of a Maoist "model village" in mid-western Nepal. It is a powerful account of the long term strategies adopted by the people in remote villages under Maoist control, and it investigates the causes and manifestations of the inherent contradictions in the way issues of social reform, cultural neutralization and economic rationalization are negotiated. Faced with a new Maoist governing apparatus, the villagers in Deurali offered no arguments to protect their traditions ("superstitions" as villagers called them) while they were far more defensive of decisions concerning the use of their natural and economic resources (the Maoists did not "know the village," villagers argued). In elaborating on these necessary tradeoffs, this chapter informs readers about the everyday changes being introduced, contested and negotiated between the Maoists and the villagers in rural areas involving symbolic freedom (cultural performances, lifecycle rituals, etc.) and material (polygamy, schooling, alcohol consumption, caste based discrimination, use of individual, communal and collective resources, etc.). This chapter differentiates itself squarely from the proliferating formalist studies on Maoist movement in its appetite to take on the issue of complexity.

The two chapters within Part IV continue the analysis of the inherent contradictions in the way the Maoist movement has lately evolved, e.g., ethnic federalization versus class struggle and indigenous movement of the hill people versus the interests of the Madhesis. Mahendra Lawoti's Chapter 7 suffers from some degree of binarism – Peru, India and Nepal are supposed to be either similar or different for being either democratic or undemocratic, having high or low GNP per capita, having 'positive' or 'negative' state attitudes towards the indigenous people, and eventually about having 'high' or 'low' indigenous participation in the insurgency. This chapter ends with a policy recommendation which emphasizes that "governments should not alienate and exclude specific ethnic groups, particularly indigenous groups, and that they should formulate policies that address their particular problems and grievances" (p. 151). This chapter is followed by Pramod Kantha's Chapter 8 which attributes the Maoist-Madhesi confrontation to the former's persistent opposition to the latter's negotiation with the state on regional autonomy.

The succeeding sections V and VI grapple with the contentious issues of the army, external engagement and the parallels between the

Indian and Nepali Maoist movements. It is fair to argue – as Ashok K. Mehta and Lawoti do in Chapter 9 – that despite not being defeated militarily, the symbolic loss of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) came from its misplaced political support for the royal coup. This assertion somewhat contradicts Anup Pahari's India-Nepal comparison in Chapter 10 where he argues that the state could and should have decided whether the Maoists could have been militarily defeated or should instead be absorbed into the existing socio-political system. Had the outcome of the RNA mobilization been successful, would the Nepali Maoists have had the same fate as the Indian Naxalites in the hands of Indira Gandhi in 1975? In the absence of counter-evidence, such a statement is hypothetical. Pahari goes on to predict that although the neo-Naxalites have advanced “quite a bit” beyond the preceding generation, they will still be militarily crushed by the all powerful Indian state. Even if that turns out to be true in India, the chapter does not clarify what is the relevance of such an argument for Nepal which is currently faced with a very different set of dilemmas about Nepali nationalism, geopolitics and development. The overt militaristic assertions of this chapter contradict the developmental and reconciliatory solutions discussed in several other chapters.

The following Parts VII and VIII cover discussions on the process of state-Maoist reconciliation. Chapter 12 by Bishwa Nath Upreti on the “multi-track” approach of foreign nations towards the Nepali peace process is interesting, but perhaps restates the obvious. Data presented in Chapter 13 by Avidit Acharya on the economic costs of the insurgency could have usefully underpinned some of the earlier chapters. Mahendra Lawoti argues in the succeeding Chapter 14 that the Maoists won the constituent assembly elections through cajoling and coercion but he does not acknowledge a dozen or so international and local election monitors who have stated otherwise.

“How did the conflict affect the society, polity and economy” (p. 304)? This is a relevant if somewhat ambitious question which launches the concluding chapter written by the two editors. The “report card” laid out in less than ten pages is perhaps rather short and sketchy: It reports the abuse of human rights, the checks on democratic freedom and the economic stagnation which are the inevitable consequences of civil war. The following claim that formal dynastic politics has weakened with the end of the monarchy is true about the royal dynasty but contestable at other levels. Further, it may be too early to say that the Maoists have achieved ethnic and social inclusion, as the debate on ethnic

federalization has not really taken off. It is also too early to announce a verdict on either success or failure of Maoist mainstreaming into peaceful politics. When read against the Introduction by Lawoti, which clearly lays out the development-peace nexus as the explanatory framework for the Maoist conundrum in Nepal, it comes as a surprise that the ‘Conclusion’ chapter cautions the reader somewhat apocalyptically against the military consequences of a potential communist establishment. Somewhat disjointedly it states that 30 million peasants were killed in Mao’s revolution and 14 million in Stalin’s, giving the reader the impression that the Nepali Maoist movement is on par with its Chinese and Russian counterparts while its current position as reflected in the Maoists’ choice to be mainstreamed into competitive politics would rather suggest their entertaining lesser ideological ambitions.

References

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