

Muni, S.D. 2003. *Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: The Challenge and Response*. Delhi: Rupa & Co. in association with Observer Research Foundation. 134 pp., price: IRs 195.

As the Maoist insurgency entered its second and more violent phase in Nepal (1999-2000) a number of scholars and journalists in Nepal and abroad started taking greater interest in the conflict that has claimed over 10,000 lives in the past nine years. Interestingly, Indian media in general seems to pay little attention to the insurgency except for carrying stories—filed by international news agencies—of major Maoist assaults in Nepal that could have severe implications on the Indian side of the border.

Perhaps the first book on the subject by an Indian scholar, Prof. S.D. Muni's *Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: the Challenge and the Response* hence attains a greater significance. Considered an authority on Nepali political affairs and Nepal-India relations, Muni teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi where a senior Maoist leader, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, also studied.

Muni begins his book by looking at the roots of the insurgency, its support base, responses to it (by both the Nepali government and the international community), and, perhaps most importantly, the implications of the conflict for India. He traces the roots of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) all the way to the setting up of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) in 1949 and the subsequent divisions in the Nepali communist movement. He then discusses the support base and political goals of the Nepali Maoists. Saying that the western mid-hills of Nepal are the insurgency's base, Muni claims that "the headquarters of the 'Maoist government' established in November 2001, is in (mid-western district of) Rolpa" (p. 12). Those watching the recent army operations in Nepal say that there is no basis for such statements and that perhaps Muni may have been swayed by Maoist propaganda.

What is noteworthy is that Muni, right from the beginning, seems to be inclined to legitimise and portray the rebels as a nationalist force. He writes, "We must clearly keep in mind that the Nepalese uprising is largely and authentically nationalist and the Nepalese Maoists are the most motivated, organised and powerful among their fraternal groups in South Asia" (p. 23). Often it seems Muni is trying to respond to allegations that the Maoist insurgency is no more than a "proxy war" being waged by foreign forces in Nepal and that India has been playing a dubious role in the context of the insurgency. Ignoring the cross-border

activities of the Nepali insurgents, Muni declares that, "There is no evidence available that shows that the Maoists have either been prompted, encouraged or funded by any outside forces." He also gives the Maoists a clean chit against some reports in the Indian media linking them to the ISI, the intelligence agency of Pakistan. Maoists are aware that their association with the ISI can prove counter-productive and suicidal for them, he says.

Despite emphatic support by academics like Muni, recent events and broad, analytical write-ups by a number of Nepali writers point towards what many call India's less than clear role vis-à-vis the Nepali Maoists. To be fair, Muni states that "(the Maoists) are conscious and politically sensitive to the fact that India is a critical factor not only in winning their struggle but also afterwards. Any substantial Indian intervention against their people's war can frustrate their goal of capturing power in Nepal and even after their capture of power, they may not be able to either stabilize themselves or carry out their political and economic programme without India's cooperation" (p. 31).

This brings India into the centre of the conflict that has emerged as the biggest political crisis in Nepal. It is interesting, therefore, to look at Maoists' attitude towards India and vice versa since they launched their war in February 1996. Five of the 40-point demands presented by a pro-Maoist outfit before the launch of the people's war were related to India. But the rebels have since toned down their anti-India rhetoric significantly perhaps, to quote Muni, "to seek shelter, medical help, supply of arms and ammunition, publicity and even financial support" (p. 23).

While looking at the first seven years of the insurgency, Muni discusses at length the strategies used by the rebels to utilise differences within the country's new ruling elite and the palace in their own favour. Referring to the so-called tactical understanding and tacit cooperation between the rebels and late King Birendra (p. 29), he seems to be ignoring the circumstances that led to the resignation of Prime Minister G.P. Koirala in 2001. Koirala later said he had to resign after, according to him, the Royal Nepali Army did not fulfill its pledge of pursuing the rebels who had abducted around seventy police personnel from Holeri of Rolpa district. The Nepali government declared a state of emergency, labeled the rebels terrorists, and mobilised the army for the first time against the Maoists in November 2001 only after they unilaterally pulled out of peace talks and attacked an army barrack in Dang in west Nepal.

In the chapter entitled “International Response,” Muni declares once again that, “In many significant ways, the Maoists are not terrorists to be covered under the ‘war against global terrorism’” (p. 49). After describing Nepali Maoists as international rebels, Muni makes an inaccurate statement by saying that China calls them “revolutionaries” instead of terrorists. The fact is that China does not use the term Maoists for Nepali rebels and refers to them as “anti-government forces.” Nepal’s northern neighbour has often expressed its disappointment over what it says amounts to misuse of the name of its great leader in creating terror and perpetrating violence in Nepal.

According to Muni, the US involvement in Nepal has been more active, visible, and unprecedented in the wake of the Maoist insurgency. He says that the possibility of the US having long-term interests of a strategic nature in Nepal cannot be ruled out. He also takes account of the Maoist protests against what they call the US’s intervention in Nepal’s domestic matters. But Muni once again fails to mention India’s unease over the growing influence of the US in its backyard and that India is also not in favour of the United Nations mediating between the Nepali government and rebels.

In the chapter “India and the Maoist challenge” Muni plays down Indian interest in the ever-expanding violent conflict in the Himalayan kingdom by saying that “India (also) woke up to the Maoists’ challenge in Nepal after the escalation of violence in November 2001.” The fact is that the then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (during his visit to Delhi early in the same year) had raised the issue of the Nepali Maoists using Indian soil against Nepal and sought cooperation from the Indian authorities.

According to Muni, there are two serious problems in India’s Nepal policy (p. 61): one, India’s insistence that constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy are two pillars of stability in Nepal; and two, India has failed to make a balanced and dispassionate assessment of the Maoists. He, however, does not explain what he means by such an assessment. The author’s argument has been that monarchy as an institution has done precious little in accommodating India’s legitimate security and economic concerns and interests in Nepal. Suggesting policy revisions in terms of the Maoists, Muni—who is said to be close to the South Block—argues that “A more realistic alternative for the Indian policy in Nepal is to alter its two-pillar policy of supporting the King and democratic parties.... India needs to bring the Maoists and the political

parties together which, in the process will also moderate the extremist stance and use of violent methods” (p. 66).

Drawing upon his vast experience, Muni concludes that India will not let its stakes be eroded in Nepal (p. 77). But he also mentions that the US would not allow the Maoists to prevail even in a negotiated settlement. The author discusses the prospects of the peace process between the Nepali government and rebels (that started in January 2003 and broke off in August 2003) and suggests that the best course (to resolve the insurgency) would be “the evolution of a package of political reforms in Nepal that accommodates constructive concerns of all the three principal forces, viz., the Maoists, the king and the political parties” (p. 78).

Despite such good-natured advice, the greatest drawback of the book is that it fails to discuss the immense strategic and other interests of India in Nepal and India’s deep influence in the overall political developments in the country. The book also fails to mention widespread human rights abuses committed by the rebels and similar violations by security forces during their counter-insurgency operations. It also simply ignores the almost unrestricted use of Indian territory by the Nepali rebels as part of their strategy. The arrest of three politburo members of CPN (Maoist) in India also proves this point. The most disappointing fact remains that the author neither denounces the violent means adopted by the rebels to fulfill their political goals, nor points towards the severe implications of the insurgency on the polity and sovereignty of Nepal. A serious lapse, indeed, on the part of a respected Indian scholar.

Bhagirath Yogi
BBC Nepali Service, London