

Book Review: Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts

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Anuradha M. Chenoy and Kamal A. Mitra Chenoy, *Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011; pp.320; Paperback, Rs.350/-.

This is a high impact low fuss book. Within its covers the authors provide a remarkably comprehensive and lucidly written survey of the three geographical zones where armed conflicts are currently taking place within India – J& K, the Northeast trouble spots of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Bodoland, and the Maoist resistance in the central forested regions of the country – one sixth of the country's area in all. By the objective standards established by the Geneva Conventions these are all 'armed conflicts' but are never described as such by the Indian government. The preferred labels are insurgency, militancy, terrorism, etc., because otherwise New Delhi could be held much more strongly to account for its behavioural disregard for the norms and rules of warfare as laid down in these Conventions. That would not do any good to the image that elite India and the state that succours this elite would like to present to the world — of an India that is not only rising but which proudly declares itself as the largest and enduringly vibrant of democracies!

This volume provides a more sobering picture of Indian reality. In nine carefully wrought chapters the authors take up and critique various theoretical models claiming to generally explain such armed conflicts; explore the political economies of the three conflict zones pointing out similarities and dissimilarities (there is also an historical overview of the Khalistan movement); highlight the gender dimensions and implications of such conflicts; locate their root causes while also describing the history, organizational make-up and programmatic perspectives of the various armed groups confronting the Indian state. Finally, the iniquities and brutalities of the Indian state itself are faithfully recorded and succinctly analyzed. This is rich fare made highly accessible to both the serious scholar and the interested lay reader.

The vantage point from which this book is written reflects the intellectual and activist backgrounds of the authors. One is the co-author of what has become an established reference work elucidating and defending a human security approach in opposition to conventional/traditional conceptions of security and its pursuit that only serve to rationalize and justify a state's amoral pursuit of the 'national interest' externally, and of maintaining 'law and order at all costs' internally. The other is, besides his academic standing, a longstanding civil liberties activist who has participated in producing any number of reports detailing the violations of human rights by both state and non-state protagonists as well as describing and analyzing the realities on the ground in these zones of turbulence. This background of collective expertise and commitment has shaped the book blending the conceptual and the empirical in a way that makes the work quite distinctive.

Two widely accepted models claiming to provide general explanations of such armed conflicts are the 'greed' and 'grievance' models. The first suggests that the primary source of such conflicts which are actually resource wars is "loot seeking". The second claims that the motivating impulse is "justice seeking". The path to resolving such conflicts then is supposed to lie in the promotion of a

political order that is liberal democratic and an economic order that is strongly market based since the market is the mechanism whose 'foundational virtues' (much extolled by mainstream economic discourse today) is that it uniquely combines efficiency, freedom and justice. It is to the credit of the authors that they are singularly unimpressed by the much touted virtues of either the market or of democracies in their actual behavioural patterns either externally or internally. The 'democratic peace thesis' cannot disguise the brutalities of imperial and imperialist behaviour abroad by, for example, the world's oldest democracy, the US; nor the violent illegalities carried out domestically by, for example, the world's largest democracy, India.

Loot seeking is too limited a model for explaining the great range of such armed conflicts, and justice seeking is too loose a model incapable of explaining why some areas of institutionalized grievances are much more prone to erupting into serious, prolonged and violent forms of resistance while others do not. Both models also leave out larger geo-political factors that are all too often inputs into such conflict zones and, more damagingly, go nowhere far enough in highlighting state culpabilities in creating and sustaining such grievances – Kashmir where violent resistance emerged only in the late 1980s after decades of Central misbehaviour, deceit and misrule, is a classic example. In contrast a human security approach to explaining and seeking to resolve such conflicts would combine a variety of approaches. It would insist on looking at the development and other policies of the state, at geopolitical factors, at colonial legacies and their artificially constituted administrative-territorial boundaries (how many remember that representations to the British for Naga self-rule date back to 1929?), at ethnicity related historical exclusions and injustices, at the deepening of bitternesses caused by the very fact of prolonged military occupation by Central forces and the militarization thereby of everyday life in these zones.

Chapter treatments more or less reflect these stated focal points of concern. While the Indian state's repeated recourse to brutal practices (*salwa judum*, encounter killings, torture, etc.) and its slew of undemocratic laws (Disturbed Areas Act, TADA, AFSPA, etc.) to maintain its control come in for sharp criticism and indictment, the authors have no hesitation in condemning the use of child cadres/combatants by the Maoists and its use of coercive tactics to maintain 'loyalties'. They also point out that though the Maoists base themselves among the poorest sections of India society and do strive in some significant measure to address their needs, they often hold hostage the immediate needs of their social base in deference to their own longer term strategic needs. They also make their own compromises with "class enemies" for this is the only way they can acquire the necessary funds to sustain an armed struggle strategy for ultimate overthrow of the Indian state. The authors suggest political negotiations between the Maoists and the Indian state in which civil society organizations and activists can play a useful mediating role. This is certainly better than the existing confrontation in which far too many civilians and security personnel are killed and maimed, not to speak of other forms of repression and insecurity. But as things stand, on both sides this is likely to be used as a tactic for gaining some breathing space while Maoists continue to prepare for long term armed conflict; and the Indian state, which demonizes Naxalites as "enemy number one" at the same time as it does little or nothing about confronting the far greater danger to Indian democracy posed by Hindutva forces, will continue to pursue its own strategy of seeking the enemy's physical extermination.

Even-handed condemnation of the brutalities of the state and that of Maoists must not, however, be allowed to hide the fact that state illegalities and unwarranted forms of coercion are always the greater threat to the Indian polity and society precisely because the state is the culprit and there is no higher authority that can check or punish this behaviour adequately. What is more, the state is in cahoots with those vested interests responsible for depriving large sections of Indian peasantry and thereby creating the conditions for armed resistance to secure basic livelihood needs. It is a former secretary to the government, D. Bandyopadhyay who points out the five-pronged attack on this

peasantry: (i) corporate land grab with most state governments changing land ceiling laws to favour such accumulation; (ii) introduction of contract farming; (iii) rising indebtedness levels; (iv) introduction of GM seeds thus giving greater control to corporate suppliers; (v) farmer displacement as a result of government sponsored or executed policies.

Turning to the Northeast, what is perhaps not sufficiently stressed by the authors is that the Indian state from its point of view sees little reason to change its current policies because it can very well argue that these have succeeded. The very prolongation over years and decades of armed confrontation between the militarily stronger state and its much weaker opponents has effectively played into the hands of the former. War weariness, the emergence of factional divides abetted and promoted by New Delhi's carrot-and-stick policies, means that original ambitions for independence by Nagas or by some Manipuri groups or by an earlier undivided ULFA are now effectively off the agenda. An unhappy status quo in which the basic and historical grievances of different ethnic groups in the Northeast remain largely unaddressed, is something that New Delhi can continue to live with fairly comfortably.

Kashmir presents a different problem. It is widely known that over 500,000 armed forces personnel of all kinds (some say close to 600,000) are posted to supposedly protect a population of roughly 13 million against some 3000-4000 militants (currently less than a 1000). This makes Kashmir's ratio of armed personnel to civilians the highest in the world. It does not take a genius to recognize that this is deemed a necessity to hold a population clamouring for 'azadi', and therefore against its will, to the Indian Union. Between 1989 and 2009 an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 people are believed to have been killed, mostly civilians. According to the authors, from 2004-05 figures there are some 30,000-40,000 young widows and about the same number of orphans. But how many know that since 1989 the Army has acquired 51,459 acres of private land as well as 205 sq. kilometers of government land? Clearly Indian military occupation is going to remain for the foreseeable future.

The authors are to be congratulated for showing another side to the dominant and self-serving picture that the Indian elite most assiduously wishes to portray. India may well be on the march since it is certainly trampling many an unfortunate underfoot.

Achin Vanaik (Professor, Political Science, Delhi University)

P.S.

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