

The Price of Neglect: From Resource Conflict to Maoist Insurgency in the Himalayan Kingdom

By Bishnu Raj Upreti

Kathmandu, Nepal: Bhrikuti Academic Publications, 2004. 446 pages.

Reviewed by SALEEM H. ALI

Although surrounded by conflict over the last two centuries, the Himalayan nation of Nepal has been resilient in the face of colonialism. Even during the British Raj, the feudal rulers of Nepal managed to stay relatively independent by offering diplomatic and military support to the British. However, for 10 years, contemporary Nepal was beset by a civil war that killed 13,000 people. A fragile peace agreement signed in 2006 led to historic elections in April 2008, but the years of internal strife exacted a serious toll on the country.

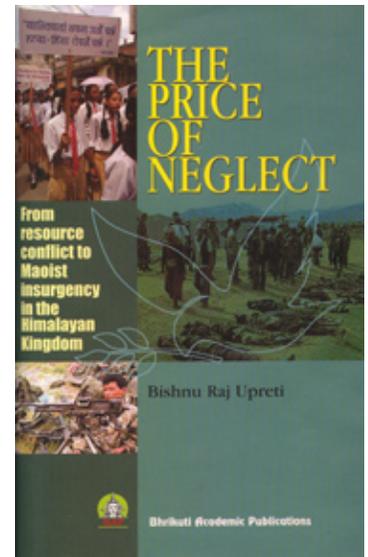
Overtly, the conflict began as an ideological clash between a monarchic system and a socialist egalitarian ideology influenced by the writings of the Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong. The Maoists differentiate themselves from classical communists because the strength of Nepal's proletariat lies with the rural peasantry rather than the urban working class. While many of the key Maoist leaders are highly educated intellectuals (including Baburam Bhattarai, who was trained in environmental planning), they clearly tapped key grassroots factors that supported the rise of this movement among the masses, such as elite corruption and marginalization of rural areas by the urban economy. It is particularly surprising that the movement gained traction at a time when most other communist states, including China and Vietnam, began tacitly moving towards a capitalist economic model, while retaining centralized political control.

Bishnu Upreti's book, *The Price of Neglect: From Resource Conflict to Maoist Insurgency in the Himalayan Kingdom* was published in 2004, just as the Maoist insurgency was reaching a fever pitch and violence was spreading to the

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capital, Kathmandu. In the book's first six chapters, Upreti offers an introduction to resource conflict, covering theories of conflict and their application to environmental resources such as water and forests. The author uses examples to demonstrate the importance of resource conflict's cultural context; for example, those seeking to understand the conflict over the Asian Development Bank-funded irrigation project in Andherikhola must consider the Hindu caste system, which is still prevalent in Nepal. South Asian graduate students will find this contextualized introduction to resource conflicts most useful—and affordable too, since the book was published in Nepal.

Upreti uses some rather unusual quotations to highlight the importance of environmental conflicts, such as Fidel Castro's speech at the 50th anniversary of the World Health Organization indicting the "blind and uncontrollable laws of the market" for environmental degradation. Yet he misses an opportunity to link such anecdotal references and quotations to the book's larger theme. Analyzing such rhetoric in the context of the Maoists' manifesto would have been illuminating; for example, it is ironic that Upreti



links the rebellion and resource depletion since Mao's own philosophy was deliberately anti-nature (Shapiro, 2001).

The last four chapters of *The Price of Neglect*, which are devoted to analyzing the role of resources in the Maoist conflict, are the most widely marketable. Upreti blames both the land tenure tradition of *guthi*, which is meant to be a trust but is often exploited by the culturally elevated elite, as well as the *panchayat* system of communal governance, for the Maoist uprising. A patriarchal kinship system, *guthi* is an important social structure among the Newar indigenous communities of the Kathmandu valley. Under the more widely practiced *panchayat* governance structure—found throughout South Asia—village elders act as a dispute-resolution council. However, the elders are often not selected by the community but rather through arcane preferences of family lineage.

Unfortunately, Upreti does not explore some of the more interesting environmental aspects of the rebellion. For example, how does forest degradation and overuse of land correlate with the Maoists' regional strengths? Some preliminary research in this regard by Jugal Bhurtel and myself (2009) could have been further developed in this book. Also, a detailed ethnographic analysis would have helped explain the potential linkages between resource degradation and conflict. In addition, Upreti does not address the possibility that the conflict itself has led to immense environmental damage, creating a negative feedback loop (Murphy et al., 2005).

Another missing element is India's perceived influence on Nepal—the diminution of which is an ardent part of the Maoist agenda. By leveraging environmental factors such as water availability and hydropower potential, Nepal could potentially increase its influence on India. This

strategic interdependence is not adequately discussed in the book and deserves greater attention by security scholars. As transboundary cooperation becomes even more of an ecological necessity, the shifting balance of power may provide a vent for social movements predicated on inequality.

The book's useful appendices provide a first-hand narration of Maoist demands and government counter-offers, as well as the correspondence between Baburam Bhattarai and the International Crisis Group. However, further analysis of these exchanges in the light of some of the earlier chapters of the book would have provided greater structural continuity to the text.

The Price of Neglect ends on an optimistic note, stating that the Maoist conflict was not related to ethnicity or territorial separatism and hence should be easy to resolve, since it is fundamentally about internal political reform. The 2006 treaty seems to prove Upreti right, but will the Maoist-led government maintain the peace? Despite the shortcomings outlined above, Upreti's book is a worthwhile effort at bringing local flavor to resource conflict discourse in South Asia.

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