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# Maoist Movement in Nepal: A Sociological Perspective by Uddhab Prasad Pyakurel

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### **Book Reviews:**

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Pyakurel, Uddhab Prasad. 2007. *Maoist Movement in Nepal: A Sociological Perspective*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers. NRs 450. 228 pages.

Review authors: Prakash Adhikari and James D. Timberlake\*

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Pyakurel's book addresses the causes of the ongoing civil conflict in Nepal. The author examines both the social cleavages and the processes by which Nepali and Hinduism became the favored state language and religion, respectively, to explain the emergence of the Maoist movement in the mid-1990s. By analyzing the structural and historical institutional factors through which Nepali society became polarized, Pyakurel contributes to the ongoing debate on regionalism and federalism in response to the politics of ethnicity in Nepal. Pyakurel outlines the history of Nepal from pre-unification to the most recent breakdown of democracy through the lens of conflicted state-building processes. He shows that the institutionalization of Nepali society has been based on a discriminatory Hindu caste system derived from the Vedic culture, which he refers to as 'Hinduization', and the imposition of Nepali (Gorkha) as the official state language, referred to as 'Nepalization'.

While the author is in the right direction in searching for the roots of the Maoist movement in the historical relationship between elite and subaltern groups, the book exhibits several theoretical and methodological limitations. First, the book lacks a central thesis and does not develop a testable hypothesis. It is unclear whether he considers the above-mentioned structural and institutional factors as separately sufficient or jointly necessary conditions for the emergence of the Maoist movement. His theoretical argument, therefore, needs to be made more explicit, perhaps with the aid of a diagram.

It is debatable how complete a conjunctive theory, which links social cleavages and state-building processes to the Maoist movement, is because it leaves many questions unanswered. Why, for example,

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did such a movement not arise during the Unification, when the necessary conditions seem to have been met? Why did the Maoists decide to join the parliament after the 1990 Peoples' Movement (*Jana andolan*) and take up arms five years later? One needs to consider the possibility that omitted variables have had an effect on the outcome of contentious politics in Nepal. For example, India's interest in Nepal may have played a decisive role concerning the Maoist movement. It may also be useful to consider Maoist ideology as an exogenous variable. Pyakurel's exclusive focus on domestic factors without considering the international environment could have rendered his theory underspecified.

A more fundamental problem with the book is that the dependent variable is unclear. Is he interested in explaining the timing and duration of the "Peoples' War" or rather which 'repertoires of contention' the movement exhibits (i.e. the tactical and strategic use of violence, the particular ideology used to mobilize marginalized groups, &c.)? Furthermore, his independent variables could have been better operationalized. This may even bring into question just how variable social cleavages have been in Nepali history. Perhaps most surprising is that after setting out to provide "a sociological perspective" to the origin of the Maoist movement, the author ends up emphasizing state oppression, rough terrain, and weak state institutions as the principal causes of the conflict (à la Fearon and Laitin). Because his argument is not well established at the beginning, the core of the text (Chapter 3) lacks theoretical focus; he simply fails to prove a causal link between the dependent and independent variables. His description of the chronology of Nepali politics ends up being stronger than his analysis of the sociological and institutional forces behind the Maoist movement. Finally, the book has several grammatical and spelling mistakes that should be corrected before publication of the next edition.

Despite these limitations, it would be worthwhile for future studies to test a more coherent model of the structural and institutional forces behind the Maoist movement. This could have useful policy implications for Nepal and other societies striving for a more balanced state-building approach.