

Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday life in Nepal's civil war

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Reviewed by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

Maoists at the Hearth, by Judith Pettigrew, synthesises several of her earlier publications on the Maoist movement in Nepal. Written entirely in the first person, one could view the book as the field journal of an anthropologist working in a politically troubled context. As a matter of fact, the narrative makes room for her observations in airport waiting rooms, on dinners in Kathmandu and for hesitations about which dress is most suited to the political situation in rural areas. But if it gives a lot of space to the anthropologist, the aim of the book is primarily to offer an account of the years of the Maoist armed movement in Nepal through the prism of a village community. Both the anthropologist's and the village community's views and experiences converge in a specific place, conventionally named Kwei Nasa, which the author knows intimately. The site of her research before the start of the conflict, Kwei Nasa is a farming community that is predominantly populated by Tamu (one of the indigenous peoples of Nepal, also known as Gurung) and located near the town of Pokhara, in the highlands of central Nepal. The author made several prolonged visits to Kwei Nasa during the years of the People's War, sometimes alone and sometimes with an assistant.

In the space of six elegantly written chapters, which blend descriptions, events, facts and analyses, Pettigrew paints six scenes of the locality, and of Nepal, at various stages of its revolutionary history. These scenes, starting with the years 1991-92, which saw the return of multi-party politics, proceeding to the Second People's Movement in 2006 and concluding with the elections for the Constituent Assembly in the spring of 2008, document various phases of the intensification of the movement as they were experienced by Kwei Nasa villagers.

Over many situations or events, such as the encounter with Maoist armed fighters, that the author herself experienced and observed while in the field or those that have been narrated to her on the spot by some of her relations, Pettigrew attempts to describe and account for the impact

of what she calls 'structural violence'—a form of violence expressed in terms of deprivation, fear, and humiliation, as she explains in the introduction. There is indeed no question of acute violence in the locality under study, which is located away from the Maoist Base Region and the main sites of hostilities and on the periphery of an urban centre where a large contingent of the Royal Army is posted, but of a climate of intense fear punctuated by visits of Maoist activists who profoundly disrupt the lives of villagers.

Judith Pettigrew's observations focus on the villagers' daily life, and on the disruption of their basic daily tasks, such as grazing cattle or cooking dinner. As she shows, these are deeply disturbed by the context of structural violence, and undergo profound transformation from their status of virtually automatic, repetitive acts that are seldom reflected upon to become 'challenging tasks', charged with a vital dimension, which not only mobilise the villagers' energy, but also prompt them to reflect upon their actions under these new settings.

It is in this register, to my eyes, that the anthropology of wartime undertaken by Judith Pettigrew is particularly inspiring. The importance of studying daily tasks in a context of structural violence is no doubt the central thesis of *Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday life in Nepal's civil war*. Exposed in the introduction, and amply illustrated throughout the book, her anthropological approach to a context of political violence through the study of changes in routine tasks opens a fruitful path so far little explored, which will certainly attract the attention it deserves.