

A complex nexus in Nepal



BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewing a book that deals with events in which one has been involved in some measure is always a risk. As India's ambassador in Nepal during 2002-2004 and later as foreign secretary from 2004-2006, I was called upon to deal with many of the events described in Sudheer Sharma's *The Nepal Nexus*. I understood them differently from the author. This does not detract from his impressive grasp of the tortuous and complex political manoeuvrings, which have marked Nepal's transition from an auto-

cratic monarchy to a multi-party democracy. The book also tells the story of India's relationship with Nepal but focuses narrowly on the political dimension, neglecting the many parallel layers of engagement that suggest a more complex picture than presented in the book.

The book offers an interpretation of events, which unfolded from the start of the Maoist revolt in 1996 to the present. It reinforces long-held Nepali elite assumptions about the role of political parties and their leaders, the monarchy and above all, India. Political parties and leaders are presented as self-serving, opportunistic and ready to accept foreign (read Indian) meddling to advance their personal ambitions. And yet it is these very parties who have delivered durable peace after a decade of violence and insecurity. For all its failings, the monarchy is seen as redeemed by its nationalistic credentials (as asserted, against Indian "hegemony").

The author is convinced of a consistent Indian strategy of keeping Nepal in a perennial state of "controlled instability". All Indian action in Nepal, including seemingly contradictory ones, is seen as serving its "neo-colonial" purpose. This leads inevitably to discerning an Indian conspiracy behind every major turn of events and the author resorts to dark innuendos if facts are not forthcoming. His account of the palace massacre in 2001 sets the tone — there must have been a foreign hand which "instigated" the Crown Prince to murder his parents and family. Some well chosen interlocutors are then trotted out to point the finger at India, including the supposedly pro-Indian Maoist leader, Baburam Bhattarai.

About India's relations with the Nepali Maoists, Mr Sharma makes the illogical claim that because India was afraid that the left wing insurgency "could spill over from the Nepal hills into the sub-continen-

tal plains and destabilise the entire region....It could be managed only through the mainstreaming of Nepali Maoists." India was deeply concerned about the reported links between the Nepali Maoists and Indian Naxalites and our intelligence agencies constantly raised the frightening prospect of a red corridor extending from Nepal all the way down to Andhra Pradesh. This explained Indian policy to help Nepal defeat the Maoist insurgency through supply of weapons, training of personnel and intelligence sharing. When I was sent to Nepal as ambassador, my mandate was to try and encourage a united front among mainstream political parties and the monarchy to isolate the Maoists both militarily and politically. This remained our position until February 2005, when King Gyanendra carried out a coup, arresting political party leaders and assuming all authority in his hands. This is when Indian focus shifted to promoting a united front of the political parties and the Maoists to compel the king to restore multi-party democracy. Several constituencies on the Indian side did not favour this shift pre-

cisely because of fears that "mainstreaming" the Maoists would exacerbate the Naxalite challenge. Those of us who supported an understanding between the Nepali political parties and the Maoists felt that the latter had come to accept that they would not be able to prevail militarily and hence having a share of political power would be a more realistic aim. Our support was contingent on the Maoist leadership committing itself to joining the mainstream as a civilian political party without an armed force and ready to test its popularity at the hustings.

Mr Sharma is right to point out that the India-Nepal relationship has lacked the kind of high-level political attention on the Indian side which a neighbour of strategic importance should have. The personal relationships that existed between G P Koirala and Ganesh Man Singh on the Nepali side and Chandra Shekhar on the Indian side are now missing. The role of the bureaucracy and the intelligence agencies has become more important. This should change. But relations at the political level appear disconnected from the much

stronger and enduring relations at the people-to-people level, and the extensive network of Nepali ex-servicemen of the Indian Army. There are several million Nepali citizens who live and work in India and no one brands them as illegal immigrants.

The book creates the impression that the Madhesi issue is somehow created by India and that it flows from the ethnic links of the people of the Nepal Terai and those living across the border in UP and Bihar. However, there are several million Indian citizens of Nepali origin especially in Uttarakhand, West Bengal and Assam and they are all from the hill districts of Nepal. Mr Sharma could have at least acknowledged some of these additional and significant dimensions of the relationship between the two countries.

The writer is a former foreign secretary and served as India's ambassador to Nepal, 2002-04

THE NEPAL NEXUS

Sudheer Sharma

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