

Back on the Burma front



BURMA: DOUBLE GAMBLE MAP FROM TIME, 1944.

A month and a half after Man Bahadur Rai (right) and the rest of the retreating Gurkhas left Burma they reach Nagpur in India. They are delighted with fresh rations, new uniforms and their first bath since they began their march. Rai estimates that nearly 10 Gurkha battalions have been wiped out. His story is part of *Lahurey ko Katha*, a collection of memoirs based on oral testimonies of 13 retired Gurkha soldiers, translated from Nepali by Dev Bahadur Thapa.

We descended three or four miles down the Indian border when we saw the road leading to Manipur. We could see a caravan of human beings and mules below. A group of British soldiers were on the march with their belongings laden on the animals. When we finally arrived in Manipur we had to beg for food as the government had made no arrangements for rations. We somehow managed to procure food from one place or the other in the village. Some did not wait for the rice to cook and ate it raw. This led to another problem: diarrhoea. I, for one, escaped it.

A gate had been put up at the 105-mile post where high-ranking officers such as colonels and captains conducted verifications. As soldiers poured in, they checked identification cards to make sure no one with false papers came inside. They let in those who had genuine ID cards and threw out those who did not have them, even though they were army personnel.

All sorts of people came there: Gurkhas, Indians and scores of others. In Burma, there were Bahun, Chhetri, Rai and Limbu villages and so women and children were also in the camp, although they were put aside. On arrival, everyone was given two meagre handfuls

of ration. There was no shelter even for the troops. Those who died there were buried in shallow holes and covered with sal leaves. The smell was unbearable and we feared the possibility of a cholera epidemic.

As the troops arrived, people fled, leaving behind cows, buffaloes and goats. It's likely that our forerunners had done some looting. Quite a few of the troops, on the pretext of killing stags, killed buffaloes for meat. The buffalo meat caused dysentery. We went down to Dimapur in groups and then after that to Nagpur. There we finally felt a regimental atmosphere. We were provided with government scale rations. They provided us one uniform jacket, clothes, books and so on. There was a small stream and since we were issued soap we decided to bathe before we wore our new uniforms. Afterwards, there was a layer of lice in the water because after our departure from Burma we had no chance to bathe or wash our clothes. It had taken a month-and-a-half to get here.

There were approximately 1,000 troops at Nagpur at the time of our arrival. The number was only 375 as we approached the gate but once we got in, the personnel from other units were also taken in and our numbers swelled. All the hardships we had undergone became a matter of the

past. Everything including mugs, towels and plates were all new. We were given a full mug of tea each. A song blared from the loudspeakers and each of us was given a packet of biscuits that was eaten with relish.

We spent about 15 days there. Since no tents were provided for, we had to sleep under the sal tree. All of a sudden we were shifted from Nagpur to Hoshiyarpur in Punjab where we were posted for three years. Survivors from the Burma war came in waves of sometimes 15, once 100. From 12 battalions we were barely enough to raise two. I have no idea how many people perished in the Burma front. From the Gurkhas alone, my estimate comes to the equivalent of 10 battalions.

After another three-year training we were once again sent to Burma. En route we came to know that the Japanese had taken prisoner 1,400 of our troops. Meanwhile, the Americans had broken through and some of our old comrades were among those who escaped. When they came out they were beyond recognition even though some of them were in the same company as us in the past. Food, including meat, was taken from Dumdum airport in Calcutta and air dropped to the troops. Some of it was intact but others were damaged when the packages broke during landing.



Japanese planes were a menace, the paratropping had to be done on the sly.

Once we broke through the lines, we started marauding the Japanese. Yet in a sense we refrained ourselves from killing. We cleared the jungle of those hiding inside and finally reached Burma. We cleared Burma of all these infiltrators and then retreated. Clean sweeping of the Japanese would not have materialised. A significant thing happened in the meantime. King Hirohito of Japan, in view of the destruction caused by the dropping of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in order to check further killing, broadcast their surrender. We heard about it later. We also heard that the top ranking Japanese officers including generals and colonels had committed suicide. (*Concluding chapter next fortnight.*)

BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN



Under siege

Everything you wanted to know about Nepal's Maoist insurgency. So far.

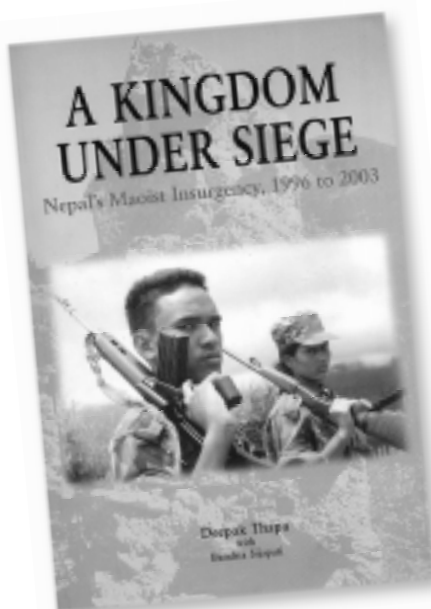
Just a few years ago, there was a time when uttering the word 'Maoist' at a gathering of Kathmandu's English-speaking elite would raise concerned eyebrows and usher in a moment of awkward silence. For many residents of the urban centre, this period was marked by fear of the unknown and incomprehension of the insurgency that was sweeping rural Nepal. The accomplished journalist and editor Deepak Thapa, together with a handful of notable others, can be credited with changing that.

In 2003, continuing to fill what was fast becoming a niche market, Thapa edited a collection of writings (most of which had been previously published) of wide-ranging perspectives on the Maoist insurrection, aptly titled *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*. The present book, *A Kingdom Under Siege*, was published during the second ceasefire in the eight-year old conflict (in the first half of 2003), and is Thapa's latest contribution to the growing body of literature which surveys the state of the movement and its historical origins. In this volume, with input from Bandita Sijapati, Thapa describes the Nepali state's neglect of many of its citizens, the instabilities of the polity and the rise of radical left politics in the mid-western region of Nepal, which quickly emerged as the Maoist heartland. Given all that has transpired since the most recent talks collapsed, Thapa may well be thinking

about a sequel.

Chapter One contains a short set of sobering anecdotes about individual lives affected by the insurgency and Chapter Seven addresses the state of play during the second ceasefire, and offers some concluding thoughts. In between, a long second chapter takes the reader on a tour of the history of modern Nepal, from the formation of the nation-state in 1768-69 to the first indications of Maoist insurrection in western Nepal in 1996. While the history is solid and undoubtedly of utility to readers wanting a potted account in under 40 pages, at times it plods along with an over-reliance on dates, names and facts that are not immediately relevant. The overview is useful, however, and well referenced to a set of primary texts and resources in the end notes for those interested in further reading.

The next chapter, *Understanding the Causes of the 'People's War'*, is by far the strongest in the book and makes for engaging reading. Thapa is at his best when providing prudent commentary on facts rather than presenting only facts themselves, and he starts in the right vein by noting that most of the Maoist demands are "reasonable and not dissimilar in spirit to the election manifestos of mainstream parties" (page 53). This chapter may also be read as a damning indictment on central government planning and the



development industry, noting as it does that poverty outpaces growth and lamenting the "economic dualism" (page 60) of the urban-rural split in Nepal. While Thapa's critique is hard-hitting and addresses the feelings of marginalisation and frustration among Nepal's half-educated rural youth, his suggestion that "much of the Maoist appeal lies not in the resonance of Marxist theory among poor and often illiterate villagers" (page 64) is questionable and

may contribute to the unfortunate misconception that rural villagers are ignorant of radical ideology and less than full political agents.

Chapter Four addresses the growth of the Maoist movement since 1996. Thapa deals in turn with the government's initial chaotic response, the little-known but fascinating Dhimi report, Kilo Sierra Two and the political and military actions of the police, Maoists and army. The following chapter, *Two Momentous Years of 2001 and 2002*, includes the Palace Massacre of June 2001, the emergence of "overground" Maoists and the hope for peace negotiations. The authors have chosen to box salient events, such as the Dang and Salleri attacks (Box 9, page 122) and the Arghakhanchi rout of September 2002 (Box 10, page 130). The effect is convincing and allows readers to pause momentarily on a single incident and reflect on its significance.

Chapter Six assesses the cost of the conflict to date, in both human and economic terms. The data are grave: profound contractions of GDP during the last years of the conflict, massive insurance claims, widespread destruction of infrastructure and a terrible loss of

human life. The presentation is cogent and the analysis carefully-worded, with such thoughtful asides as: "In a country where illiteracy, lack of proper health services and poverty are rampant, there is a strong debate about whether weapons will necessarily provide the country with security" (page 148).

The lack of polemic which characterises Thapa's journalistic style is genuinely refreshing and deserves special mention. The book's greatest shortfall is the regrettable lack of analysis, an absence which is all the more noticeable since, when the author does engage critically with the subject matter, his insights are always sharp and pertinent. The conclusion is a case in point: while no one could disagree with the suggestion that the only way to bring about a lasting peace is to build a state that is equally attentive to the interests of Nepal's diverse population groups, readers will have to wait for Thapa's next instalment for a compelling vision of how to get there. ♦

A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2003
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