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- ★ FORMATION, GROWTH AND BREAKDOWN OF IMMIGRANT VOTE BANKS OF CONGRESS IN ASSAM
- ★ FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: POPULAR PROTESTS IN LATIN AMERICA DURING 2011-2015
- ★ COLONIAL INDIRECT RULE AND THE MAOIST INSURGENCY IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA
- ★ REINTERPRETING BODO LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM IN ASSAM
- ★ A BRIEF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IDEA OF INDIGENEITY
- ★ THE PLEASURES OF BEING A 'KANIYA': THE POLITICS OF 'LAZINESS' IN COLONIAL ASSAM (C. 1854-1930)
- ★ OPEN VERSUS CLOSED BORDER: INDIA-BANGLADESH BORDER IN THE 21ST CENTURY
- ★ NORTH EAST REGION IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY: ISSUES AND CONCERN OF CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS
- ★ GLOBALIZATION, TEA INDUSTRY AND TRADE UNIONISM: AN OVERVIEW WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM CHAH KARMACHARI SANGHA (ACKS)
- ★ CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER AND CHINESE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM
- ★ POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUP: A FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING
- ★ GENDER AND IDENTITY IN LITERATURE FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST
- ★ THE MAKING OF JORHAT: UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERNS OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT (2500 BC TO 1947AD)
- ★ DAM(N)ED THE KOPILI: REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
- ★ ROLE OF STATE IN ENABLING HEALTHCARE COORDINATION IN INDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC
- ★ MAKING OF TRADITIONAL RICE BEER AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNALITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO 'HOR-ALANG' OF THE KARBI COMMUNITY
- ★ PROSPECTS OF GANDHIAN WORLD ORDER IN A VIOLENCE- STRICKEN WORLD
- ★ TROUBLED PERIPHERY - CRISIS OF INDIA'S NORTH EAST BY SUBIR BHAUMIK, NEW DELHI: SAGE PUBLICATIONS INDIA PVT. LTD., PAPERBACK EDITION, 2015; PP 305'

COLONIAL INDIRECT RULE AND THE MAOIST INSURGENCY IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract

In "Colonial Institutions and Civil War: Indirect Rule and Maoist Insurgency in India" (2021) Shivaji Mukherjee, puts into historical perspective the Maoist insurgency in post-colonial India. While poverty, caste oppression and other kinds of marginalization are common across India, Maoist problems persist only in certain districts and states of the country. Mukherji asserts that the areas in India where the Maoist insurgency problem persists are those where colonial indirect rule was imposed. In British India where there was direct colonial rule, the state apparatus was strong but in areas where princely states were operating, the state apparatus was relatively weaker. Moreover, Shivaji also expands the idea of colonial indirect rule and incorporates the permanently settled areas in this administrative category. In such areas the zamindari class was powerful which provided foundational fodder for a class based struggle such as Maoism to emerge.

Keywords: *land, revenue, colonial state, insurgencies, state formation*

Introduction

Recent literature has sought to unearth the link between the colonial state formation process and its administrative structure with the recurrent post colonial disturbances and insurgencies of India. Conflict in the post colonial period in terms of demands of autonomy leading to insurgency is endemic in certain parts of India such as Kashmir, North East and for some years in Punjab. Another recurring problem for the Indian state for the last several decades is the Maoist upsurge in certain areas of eastern, central India and in parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. One pertinent question which is important to understand the manifestations of these unrests in different parts of India is the role of political and administrative institutions which evolved in the colonial period. In a recent book, “Colonial Institutions and Civil War: Indirect Rule and Maoist Insurgency in India” (2021) by Shivaji Mukherjee has tried to explain the impact of colonial governance in the emergence of proximate causes of insurgency in certain regions of India. He asked a very important question- are there deeper process of colonial state formation, so far ignored by scholars of civil war, that have created structural and ethnic fault line within states that have erupted into ethnic conflict and rebellion in the post colonial period years. Mukherjee (2016) also reconceptualizes colonial indirect rule and provides new data on ‘rebel control and precolonial rebellions.’

Historical Roots of Maoist Insurgency

Mukherjee (2021) explains that ethnic movements in North east states of India such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur can be explained and traced back in the context of the discontentment and identity formation emerging from polices of indirect rule and chieftaincy system set up by the British. He also suggests that the long terms effects of such colonial indirect rule should be investigated properly. According to him the effects of past institutions influence many of the insurgent movements but these are yet to be adequately explored as a result of the long term legacies of the historical institutions shaped during the colonial rule.

The writer explores the historical roots of maoists insurgency in India by focusing on the colonial origin of the problem. In this thesis the writer explores the historical connection in terms of colonial indirect rule and how the administrative structure created at the time of colonial indirect rule had strong political ramification even in the post colonial period. According to him the ethnic secessionist insurgencies which emerged in North East, Kashmir and Punjab can also be analysed in the prevalent British indirect rule in these states.

Understanding Maoist Insurgency of Today

To prove his thesis of the origin of maoist insurgency in the colonial indirect rule the writer collects data from 2005 to 2012 from the different provinces and districts that witnessed Maoists insurgency. As maoists insurgency is spread in different parts of India the sub national variation helped the writer to understand the maoist insurgency in a comparative context. Moreover maoist insurgency also had greater policy related implications as it was termed as the greatest threat to Indian democracy by former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005.

The maoist insurgency in the early 21st century has to be understood in the context of the unification of Maoist Communist Centre in Bihar, the People's War Group in Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and the People's Unity operating in Jharkhand and Bihar. These factions came together to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and very soon their struggle of guerrilla warfare expanded its geographical zone of influence and could touch more than 150 districts of India. This new wave of insurgency was perceived to be the greatest challenge to Indian democracy by successive governments.

According to the author, "The long term effects of colonial indirect rule are very visible in the Maoist insurgency case, since the descendants of the zamindars from colonial times in Bihar and Chhattisgarh started various vigilante groups like the Ranvir Sena, Salwa Judum which led to the human rights violation against under privileged ethnic groups like dalits and adivasis. The land inequality created

through Deshmukhs who collected land revenue under the Nizam of Hyderabad was difficult for the post colonial Indian Government to reverse through land reforms and created ideal structural conditions for the maoists rebels. The direct policy significance of the colonial indirect rule for the current Indian state is clear both for counter insurgency and land reforms.” He basically asked one important question why insurgency emerged and consolidates along certain territories along central eastern part of India and not in other parts. He asked again is it because the tribes and the lower castes faced their horizontal inequalities in these regions due to the colonial administrative structure created by indirect rule? But the same inequality and the similar terrain are there in many parts of India which has witnessed no similar left wing extremism and insurgency.

Implications of Colonial Indirect Rule

The crucial omitted variable in the study of maoist insurgency in India, in the analysis of the author is colonial indirect rule which was not adequately explored in most of the analysis. According to him different forms of colonial indirect rule – whether informal indirect rule through landlord based zamindari land revenue system or more formal indirect rule through certain type of native princely states created long term persistent effects conducive to leftist ideological insurgency in India. The North epicentre of this insurgency is situated near the conjunction of the Bihar, Bengal and Jharkhand and here the informal indirect rule was through the permanent settlement which created the zamindari settlement. “In these areas, the zamindari land revenue system based on local political aid like landlords (zamindars) required less expansion of the colonial bureaucracy than the ryotwary land revenue system in Bombay and Madras presidencies in which the colonial state directly collected tax and revenue from the villagers or riots”(p. 10).This system of permanent settlement helped in the creation and promotion of local intermediaries who were entrusted with the duty to collect the revenue from the common people but this also created the weakness of the state mechanism which continued even in the post colonial period. The local intermediaries dominated the

ruling dispensation in the post colonial period as well hindering effective land reform regulations to empower the weaker section of the society. The southern epicentre of maoist insurgency is situated in the borders of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Southern Orissa. The author emphasises that, ‘In this area the formal type of indirect rule was established through princess/native rulers in the form of the large princely state of Hyderabad and the smaller feudatory states of Chhattisgarh and Orissa and Eastern State Agencies’(p. 10). Intermediaries in terms of revenue collection were part of the structural indirect rule in these areas which faced left wing insurgency in the post independent period. In the areas of erstwhile smaller feudatory states of Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Eastern State Agencies inhabited mostly by the tribal people there was exploitation of the natural resources which happened mostly through colonial forest policies. The same structure of development policies mostly continued in the post colonial period in these areas of central India where the local indigenous people were not accommodated within the development paradigm. In the princely state of Hyderabad, the Nizam appointed Deshmukhs for collection of land revenue and these revenue collectors can be compared with the zamindars of Bihar and Bengal. This process of indirect rule created land and caste inequalities and also promoted horizontal inter growth of inequalities. According to the author the maoists guerrillas later used this land/ethnic inequalities and ethnicgrievances.

The author compares the situation with southern and western states of India where the British established direct rule. Moreover the British also established ryotwary agrarian revenue system and collected the land revenue through the revenue officials appointed directly by the colonial state in western and southern India. According to the author, ‘These areas were both de-facto and de-jure direct rule and had higher levels of development and lower levels of land inequality and no maoists insurgency’(p. 7). These states also had large forest terrains and presence of adivasis and dalits. But as these areas were not indirectly ruled, historically these areas didnot have ‘high levels of land inequality and no maoist insurgency and state weakness.’ Through comparative framework of the maoist insurgency

having sub regional variation, the author arrives at the conclusion that, “almost all areas that experienced maoist insurgency had been previously exposed to some form of indirect rule which make it a necessary condition for maoist insurgency” (p. 11).

In the recent years some scholars had explored these relationships but arrived at a different conclusion that the princely states had better development outcomes. Even Verghese stated that though Bastar was a princely state, it faced maoist conflict as it was more directly ruled by the British with frequent internal interventions. But Shivaji shows that Verghese had empirical and conceptual flaws as they fail to explain why Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu did not witness maoist insurgency though these were directly ruled by the British.

Earlier which dealt with insurgency focussed on either ethnic grievances or rebel opportunities whereas the question of ethnic exclusion of certain communities or groups from the power arrangement was not properly contextualised (Narayan 2014, Mukherji 2012). Recent studies have started to emphasise on this aspect of ethnic exclusion which are historically constituted leading to grievances and insurgency. Mukherjee, in his explanation of maoist insurgency in India the author explains that in the context of this left wing insurgency both rebel opportunity and ethnic grievances are “possibly endogenous to the long term process of state formation triggered by colonial choices and institutions”(p.12). The existing literature on causes and spread of insurgency mostly overlooked the colonial historical intuitions which had strong functional presence even in the post colonial framework (Verghese 2016, Singh 2016, Roy 2016). Emphasising the importance of such colonial institutions, the author through his comparative framework, states that the character of the post colonial state and its capacity to deal with issues of structural inequality were determined by the colonial residues and also by the structural continuity which shaped the post colonial period. This overlooked or omitted variable, according to the author is important to understand why certain parts of India witnessed Maoist insurgency whereas the other parts with similar

rebel opportunities and grievances did not witness similar insurgency. According to the author, “By including such omitted variables that are causally prior to the more proximate processes of weak state capacity, or exploitation of natural resources, or creation of ethnic grievances into explanations of civil war, it may be possible to reduce some of the endogeneity issues and have a more holistic explanation for conflict”(Mukherjee 2021 pp. 13-14).

Conclusion

Though some scholars have explained the impact and long terms dynamics of this problem of colonial indirect rule to explain the issues of development, nationalism and the power of the state but the historical linkage of colonial indirect rule with insurgency in the post colonial period was not properly addressed. In the recent years some scholars had explored these relationships but arrived at a different conclusion that the princely states had better development outcomes. Verghese (2016) stated that though Bastar was a princely state, it faced maoist conflict as it was more directly ruled by the British with frequent internal interventions. But Shivaji shows that Verghese had empirical and conceptual flaws as they fail to explain why Maharastra and Tamil Nadu did not witness maoist insurgency though these were directly ruled by the British. Shivaji states that though the earlier authors who also used the direct rule and indirect rule paradigm could not explain why the Southern epicentre of this problem was situated around Bastar and Telengana areas which were indirectly ruled by the British. Moreover he also shows that earlier authors did not properly conceptualise the zamindari system of Bengal and Bihar as these were explained as directly ruled areas. According to the present author, the zamindari areas were characterised as “a different shade of indirect rule in which rulers depend on intermediaries to collect land revenue” though these areas were under the British administered areas. In his approach the question of direct rule and indirect rule in India cannot simply be perceived as binary concept as the same had more regional variations within these categories themselves. In this new analysis the author extends the category of indirect rule – “the more formal type of

indirect rule through princely or native states and also the informal type of indirect rule through zamindars in Bengal and Bihar provinces in the east.” Moreover the present author also shows that the princely state of Baster and Orissa had rulers from outside these areas and this “resulted in despotic extraction and maoist insurgency while warrior/conquests princely states in Travancore and Mysore that challenged the British had lower levels of land exploitation and more state capacity and less successful maoist insurgency” (Mukherjee, p.19).

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