

Understanding the Complexity of Armed Conflicts in South Asia

VIJAY K NAGARAJ

The study of armed conflicts and civil wars in South Asia has tended to situate them within frameworks such as ethnic nationalism, state fragility, aborted modernisation or, more generally, looks to isolate particular precipitating factors and causes. Notwithstanding their relevance, privileging contested and marginalised identities, disputed sovereignty or crises in the legitimacy and capacities of the state has often been at the cost of a fine-grained political economic analysis of the structure and dynamics of the underlying conflicts.

Truth of Multiple Conflicts

The truth is that civil wars in South Asia more often than not have multiple conflicts nested within them and rarely, if ever, conform to the “two sides” narrative even if two parties may well appear to be the main protagonists. The most important contribution of the volume in question is that it offers much-needed alternative framings and ways of considering some of South Asia’s old and more recent armed conflicts.

The point, it is worth stressing at the outset, is not whether these framings—be it Rajesh Venugopal’s analysis of military fiscalism in Sri Lanka or Antonio Donini and Jeevan Raj Sharma’s analysis of the aid-conflict dynamics in Nepal or Haris Gazdar, Yasser Kureshi and Asad Sayeed’s account of divided sovereignty in Pakistan’s tribal areas—render exhaustive and sufficient explanations of the conflicts and wars in question. Looking for that is to miss the point but it also reflects the preoccupation with smooth

Civil Wars in South Asia: State, Sovereignty, Development edited by Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar; Sage, 2014; pp viii + 273, Rs 850, hardback.

explanations that can translate into glib policy prescriptions. Rather the value of the analyses in this volume lies precisely in that they can generate a different kind of discussion and debate concerning conflicts and wars, including a more nuanced political, economic understanding of their anatomies.

The second important contribution of the volume is perhaps captured in the argument of the editors in the introduction that the “study of the state can be enhanced by studying the state in the context of war” (p 5). In South Asia, to paraphrase Charles Tilly (cited in Venugopal), how the state makes war is perhaps much better understood than how war makes the state. As such, a focus on ethnic nationalisms, contested identities or sovereignties and even crises

of state legitimacy and capacity can take the state and its character for granted and cease to problematise it. Most essays in the book, and indeed the introduction, seek to problematise the state by considering different dimensions of conflict and sovereignty.

The problem of “citizenship” in the time-space of divided sovereignty is perhaps one of the most interesting dimensions in the book. The implications of the violent inscribing of citizenship in such contexts as in South Asia in terms of rights, freedoms and well-being is known. But we certainly could do with more of the kind of analysis that is in the volume; for example, the analysis of the structure and dynamics of citizenship and sovereignty, through a genealogy of the legal and institutional legacies of South Asian states, such as the ones presented by Sanjib Baruah on India’s Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) or on governance through the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by Gazdar, Kureshi and Sayeed.

Not Peripheral

In a sense, both these accounts actually challenge and offer a corrective to the standard narrative regarding these

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areas as being peripheral in some absolute sense. Borderlands and even marginalised they might be in terms of the relations of extraction and distribution of surplus, but the struggle of the state to exercise its sovereignty over these areas—be it the North East or Kashmir in India or FATA in Pakistan—has been central to the development of the character of the postcolonial South Asian state. Hence, we have Baruah’s “routine emergency”—the tendency and capacity of the state to perpetrate excessive violence is hardwired into its logic, its habits and its institutional practices.

Conflicts and wars in Afghanistan or in the tribal areas of Pakistan or in Sri Lanka have more often than not tended to be seen in terms of essentialised and overbearing ethno-religious identities. But as Gazdar, Kureshi and Sayeed show, the rise of Jihadi militancy and the dynamics of ethno-religious identity and power in FATA were also shaped by its economic transformation. This, as they argue, goes back to development schemes in the 1960s, emigration to the Middle East in the 1970s and the beginning of the full-scale shift from a largely subsistence and agro-pastoral economy to a war economy driven by arms trading and manufacturing, and poppy cultivation in the shadow of the Afghan War since 1979.

Such thick descriptions of dispersion and shifts in economic power and how they alter structures and relations of political power, including within or in relation to the state and its institutions, in turn refracting ethno-religious identity, are critical to understanding how identities are positioned. Another instructive essay in the volume in this regard is Campbell’s analysis of how grievances are articulated by Karen civilians in south-eastern Myanmar.

Campbell shows that reductionist narratives of resistance, capitulation or collaboration belie the complex ways in which the Karens—subject to their location and personal experiences with Burmans as well as exploitative local power-holders—articulate their grievances and alignments with the Karen National Union or the ethnic-Burman


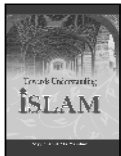

state. Campbell’s emphasis on situating individual experiences in the local context, which provide “validity even to otherwise opposing responses” (p 258), can help generate important insights and help understand the dynamics of conflicts and war from the bottom-up, so to speak.

Gowhar Fazili’s essay also speaks to the exercise of agency in times of war and conflict and the local mobilisation of globally circulating frames in the context of contesting the routine violence of the Indian security forces in Bomai and Shopian in Kashmir. A micro-sociological approach casts invaluable light on how communities frame, negotiate and speak of militarism and its excesses through ideas such as human rights or the vocabulary of law. The seemingly contradictory impulses in this mobilisation such as appealing to very legal and law enforcement system that is seen as alien and hegemonic,


throw light on how notions of sovereignty are strategically negotiated and deployed. The accounts of Campbell and Fazili may also be seen as accounts of how war makes social relations and communities. At the same time, the latter underlines that the gendered nature of war also shapes such mobilisations and means that women’s roles and speech may be mediated and framed by male concerns.

Fazili’s essay underlines the importance of how an understanding of place—seen as a network of social relations rather than a local setting for events—can provide insights into both the dynamics and effects of conflicts. The assessments by Campbell and Fazili can also offer important correctives to studies in the peacebuilding literature that tend to adopt a more instrumental or functionalist view of communities and community organisations and their dynamics.

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Important Corrective

Like the local, the transnational dimension of the political economy of conflicts and wars is another important preoccupation of the volume. The essays on Afghanistan and Nepal by Alessandro Monsutti and by Donini and Sharma, respectively, are important insofar as they internalise humanitarian and development aid in framing the political economy of the conflict. The former's account of the conflicts in Afghanistan being shaped by the flows involving trading (smuggling and drugs), armed, migratory and humanitarian networks is important for its highlighting of how particular forms of regional and global integration reproduce conflicts and wars.

This is an important corrective to dominant notions of conflicts in Asia, Africa and the Americas that tend to frame them as being driven or characterised by inward-looking, primordial tendencies and affiliations. A misrecognition of these tendencies and affiliations, which are tactically embraced by those seeking recognition and power, as historically determined rather than as contingent and constituted by dynamic local, translocal and transnational flows, is at the heart of much misguided interventionism by various international actors.

Donini and Sharma's account of Nepal considers how transnational governmentalities of aid, development, peacebuilding and reconstruction alter states of sovereignty or refashion sovereignty in developmental terms. In other words, the state is not displaced but in fact becomes a locus of competing accounts of the insurgency and the conflict, which are folded into narratives of the "failure" and "success" of development. Their linking of how aid flows are implicated in shaping the conflict resonates with Amartya Sen's idea of anti-poverty measures being characterised by micro successes and macro failures.

Yet, perhaps more interesting than the links the essay makes between technical and structural flaws in the way donors constructed the development project is their suggestion towards the end that the failure of the aid apparatus lay in its "epistemic organisation, one that served

the interests of the apparatus to maintain itself as well as the assemblage of the people and institutions that benefit from it" (p 138). Donini and Sharma's essay also points in a way to a key missing element in the volume, which is a critical perspective on how dominant neoclassical thinking, also nested within the international aid architecture, shapes the conflict-economy link within South Asia.

As Taghdisi Rad (2015: 4) argues, writing in the context of Palestine, to the extent that it treats "conflict as a temporary, exogenous factor," one that is "too exceptional," neoclassical economics assumes "that conflict implies a postponement of 'normal' economic activities, an abnormal operation of institutions, and a halt to the process of capital accumulation." In other words, it ignores the mechanisms through which conflict shapes economic relations and is "far too limited to incorporate a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between conflict and the economy" (p 15).

Major Contribution

The volume makes an important contribution in terms of its embrace of an ethnographic approach to the dynamics of actually existing sovereignty in times of conflicts and wars. It is perhaps best read as offering a range of multiple and much-needed modes of analysis in considering conflicts, civil wars and sovereignty in South Asia. Yet the value of the book is not limited or reducible to a methodological dimension. It is an important intervention in an epistemic context increasingly dominated by the narrow intellectual, and interest-based or programmatic preoccupations of think tanks and so-called policy-oriented research.

Vijay K Nagaraj (Vijayknagaraj@gmail.com) is affiliated to the Centre for Poverty Analysis, Colombo.

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