

India's Concerns

A profitable relationship between India and Nepal's Maoists might not have a very healthy influence on China's own Maoists, who are the original product, comments *Pran Chopra*. They might like to become a third leg in a possible trans-Himalayan tripod



A pro-democracy march in Kathmandu

India is no stranger to a disturbed neighbourhood. In fact, all its neighbours are seriously disturbed in one way or another.

Directly to the west is Pakistan, where the head of state, General Musharraf, is facing a legal challenge in the Supreme Court, a political threat from Benazir Bhutto, and a security threat to his government from armed rebellions by various groups. In the south is Sri Lanka, where Tamils and Lankans have been fighting a civil war for over two decades, which also agitates the Tamils of South India. In the east is Bangladesh, which has not seen even a year of settled peace since it became an independent nation-state in 1971.

In the north is Nepal, the subject of the present comment, which nature has inserted like a wedge between two geographical heavyweights, China and India. Any wedge which helps to keep two stones in place has to be watched closely to see which way it may be shifting. But Nepal has to be watched with particular care because in its role as a wedge it is also politically charged, being courted on one side by

communist China and on the other side by democratic India.

Probably the smallest of India's neighbours, Nepal is the least afflicted by domestic or external violence as it advances on the road to constitutionalism instead of retreating on it. It is also the most friendly towards India and potentially the most beneficial for it. But that is the very context in which Nepal has lately become a focus of anxious speculation in India.

For most of its political life Nepal was a monarchy, either absolute or one constrained by some barons, the Ranas. But India's example and persuasion began to nudge it towards becoming a parliamentary democracy, either under a constitutional monarch or a sovereign parliament. However, just as this process began to gather speed, another began to close in on it under the curious banner of 'Maoism', particularly during the past decade or so.

The banner was curious for two reasons. First, it was not what the world knows as communism. s the

Nepal has had the familiar kind of 'communist party' for many years. As in many countries, including India, there is the main party and there are some breakaway factions. But Nepal also has a 'Maoist' party which has added something new to the political dictionary of Nepal, just as the Maoists have done in India though they have not yet become a political party.

'Maoism' sprouted in Nepal, as it did in India, after Mao died and not long after his name ceased to be venerated even in China. It was like 'Titoism' becoming a banner after the break-up of Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, 'Maoism' was a warning both to Nepal and to India that discontent and other conditions continued to be ripe in both countries which could promote the emergence of revolutionary regimes.

Complications can emerge in Nepal if the events of the past few years become a major theme of the politics of Nepal in the next few years, and all the more so if the 'Maoism' of Nepal becomes an offshoot of the erstwhile ruling philosophy of China.

With support and encouragement from India, Nepal had slowly been moving towards a constitutional monarchy until the process was brought to a bloody halt in June 2001 by a slaughter in the palace of the royal family. The ensuing years of uncertainty made the country the breeding ground for a more venturesome brand of 'Maoism'. That shook the country's steady progress in evolutionary politics and woke the main political parties out of disarray.

Some of the main leaders of parliamentary politics were too aged to put on their boots very fast, but they were jolted further. The Maoists not only walked out of the coalition they had formed with the main political party, the Nepali Congress, but also announced a boycott of impending negotiations which were to lead to the renewal of the coalition and the election of a new government and a constituent assembly.

Politicians and political analysts differ on the reasons why the Maoists (not the communists yet!) have continued to dither on their return to the electoral arena. Their critics believe that recent soundings and events have made the Maoists realise that perhaps they had overestimated the electoral support for them at the grassroots level. They themselves say they want a more substantial political agenda for a mass-based democracy, such as abolition of he



Maoist leader Prachanda

the monarchy and not merely clipping of its wings.

The Nepali Congress says it is not rejecting the agenda favoured by the Maoists but it wants such decisions to be taken by the Constituent Assembly, which is to be elected, and not by a coterie of political parties before the elections. According to the Nepali Congress the Maoists apprehend that they will not get a good enough majority in the Assembly and may then have to reach compromises with more moderate parties.

For India, a wider issue concerns how the outcome of the elections, particularly a sweep by the Maoists in Nepal, will affect the fortunes of the Indian Maoists, who control substantial pockets in the rural and very backward belts of the Indian states south of Nepal. Another issue concerns

such chance as India might still have to be allowed to harness the large flow of river waters that come down to India from Nepal. Harnessed well they can be a major source of controlled irrigation as well as hydropower. At present they mostly cause huge and devastating floods in the plains of the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which lie immediately south of Nepal.

India's relations with Nepal have not been cordial enough as yet for such large-scale mutual cooperation. A profitable relationship between India and Nepal's Maoists might not have a very healthy influence on China's own Maoists, who are the original product. They might like to become a third leg in a possible trans-Himalayan tripod.

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