

BOOK REVIEW

Colonial institutions and civil war: indirect rule and maoist insurgency in India, by Shivaji Mukherjee, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press, 2021, xviii+392 pp., Illus. Index. \$ 99.99

Q1
Q2

In *Colonial Institutions and Civil War*, Mukherjee identifies an important theoretical and empirical lacuna in the extant literature seeking to explain why civil war and insurgencies occur following decolonization in the wake of World War II. Namely, most accounts—particularly those that employ quantitative methodologies—almost exclusively ignore the possible role of historical institutions in fostering the very conditions that give rise to civil wars and insurgencies. In this volume, Mukherjee looks beyond the proximate causes of rebellion which tend to occupy most scholars of this subject and instead posits that the origins of intra-state conflict lie in British colonial institutions and processes. He uses the particular case of the Maoist insurgency in India to argue that both the opportunity to rebel as well as ethnic grievances are endogenous to the colonial patterns of British statebuilding in India. He finds that different forms of colonial indirect rule effectuated the structural conditions for rebellion. 5 10 15

The Maoist insurgency in India is a productive site of inquiry because it evidences how the varying forms of colonial indirect rule and revenue collection created both land and ethnic inequalities that have perdured and created the conditions for rebellion. The Maoist case is also methodologically distinct. Unlike India's other myriad insurgencies, which tend to be ethnic and rooted to specific geographies often within one province, the Maoist insurgency during the height of its expansion (2005–2010) spanned some ten provinces and affected 25 to 30% of districts in India. This distribution permits Mukherjee to exploit subnational variation across various districts and provinces, which is not possible with India's other insurgencies. 20 25

This geographical distribution also renders this conflict much more salient to the Indian state than the other conflicts. Because the Maoists rebels seek to mobilize the grievances of lower castes, tribes and other marginalized groups which have been neglected by the modern Indian state and which span numerous states, they not only constitute a serious security challenge across many of India's state, they also comprise an 'important internal threat to the very idea of a stable and "substantive" democracy' (p. 6). 30

Mukherjee observes that the long-lasting Maoist insurgency in India poses questions that conventional theories of civil war cannot answer satisfactorily. For example, Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that India's geography (forest cover and hilly terrain) coupled with weak state presence create opportunities for rebellion. Murshed and Gates (2005) dilate upon the rebellious tribes and oppressed lower caste residents in those terrains and the inequalities they suffer. Cederman, 35 40

Wimmer and Min (2010) argue that these same populations have been excluded from political power. Yet similar geographical and state conditions exist elsewhere which are also populated by socioeconomically deprived lower caste and tribal populations and yet Maoist insurgency did not develop in those areas. In fact, Maoists attempted to foment a rebellion in the hilly ridges of the Western Ghats in Karnataka but failed. Madhya Pradesh also offers a physical and human terrain which is similar to those of the Maoist redoubts of Chhattisgarh yet is not hospitable to the rebels. Clearly proximate measures of rebel opportunity and grievances are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain the spatial variation evidenced in India's Maoist rebellions.

Mukherjee contends that the key to understanding this variation in initial areas of Maoist control is a variable which has been omitted: colonial indirect rule (pp. 38–40). To test this theory, he uses sub-national qualitative and quantitative data from the Maoist rebellion to study varying forms of colonial indirect rule: informal indirect rule via the landlord-based *zamindar* land revenue system; and formal indirect rule through various types of so-called 'native princely states'. These forms of governance 'created long-term persistent and path-dependent effects conducive to leftist ideological insurgency in India' (p. 10). Specifically, these forms of indirect rule created both grievances centered around land and socio-political inequality and state weaknesses (pp. 41–55) that persisted well into modern India. In contrast, Indian states in the south and west (e.g. Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu) were annexed directly by the British who collected land revenue through colonial administrators. These areas of 'de facto and de jure direct rule ... had higher levels of development and lower levels of land inequality' and have produced no Maoist rebellion. Mukherjee presents evidence that in fact colonial indirect governance structures created conditions that are propitious for contemporary insurgency and argues for its inclusion in the understanding of both the onset of Maoist insurgency in India but also in expositing the lineaments of its spatial variation (p. 11).

His book is organized in three sections. In Chapter 2, he details his theoretical arguments. After laying out the general argument that colonial institutions are an important—but systematically overlooked—variable in explaining the onset of civil war and its geographical variation, in Chapter 3 he meticulously details the varied governance structures and the ways in which they persist in postcolonial India as well their posited role in fostering Maoist rebellion.

In the second part of the book, Mukherjee performs much of his qualitative and quantitative testing of his theory at an all-India level. In Chapter three, the reader has an opportunity to appreciate the author's systematic data collection which entailed field interviews as well as collection and exploitation of Maoist documents. Mukherjee observes that while the Maoists were very strategic in selecting areas in which to operate based upon 'local politics, terrain, ethnic composition, and economic development;' they were successful only in areas where the British employed indirect forms of governance (*zamindari* or certain kinds of princely states). This insight demonstrates that rebel agency is important but is constrained by historical institutions (p. 84). In Chapter 4, he presents his qualitative analysis of the insurgency which relies upon interviews and Maoist

document exploitation. In Chapter 5, he presents the results of his various regression models in which he identifies an important source of selection bias: namely, the British did not randomly select areas for direct and indirect governance. Areas which were agriculturally productive or had challenging terrain were selected for indirect governance whereas areas which were more easily controlled and agriculturally productive were under direct governance. To mitigate this potential source of bias, he uses a multi-method approach consisting of a comparative case study of two princely states using a Most Similar Systems research design, which he details at length in Chapter 6. 90 95

In the third section of this book (Chapters 7 and 8), he tests the limits of the generalizability of his thesis to explain Maoist partial successes in Kerala and Karnataka as well as rebellions in the other so-called frontiers of the British empire such as Pakistan and Myanmar.

He concludes this very useful volume by considering possible futures for the Maoist rebellion in India as well as potential limitations of his theory. Critically, he offers policy insights for the Indian state. His studies of Kerala and Karnataka are instructive because they demonstrate that colonial legacies can be overcome. In both states, progressive political parties were able to undertake land reforms and, in some considerable measure, mitigate the power of landed elites. The direct implications of his research suggest that the Indian state should move to bolster police capacity and competence in Maoist-afflicted areas while also promulgating programs and policies to diminish the immiseration of the populations on whose behalf Maoist mobilize. Indeed, in areas where Maoist violence has been attenuated, it appears as if state efforts to fortify police capabilities and competence while pursuing development-related initiatives may explain that diminution. 100 105 110

In summary, Mukherjee has done yeoman theoretical and empirical work, melding qualitative and quantitative methodologies, that should be of interest to a wide array of scholars with differing ontological commitments who want to understand why rebellions begin and how they spread over time and space with particular salience to post-colonial states. 115

C. Christine Fair
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University,
Washington, DC, USA

 Christine.Fair@georgetown.edu 120

© 2022 C. Christine Fair

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2051348>

