Bandits and the State

If clothes make the man then we can say that the clothes of bandits came in all shapes and sizes. There was no such thing as the typical bandit, no one size fits all. Some bandits neatly fit Eric Hobsbawm’s formula for social bandits who robbed the rich and gave to the poor and who lived among and protected peasant communities. Others, and probably most, simply looked out for themselves, plundering both rich and poor. Some bandits were career professionals, but most were simply amateurs who took up banditry as a part-time job to supplement meagre legitimate earnings. While some bandits formed large permanent gangs, even armies numbering into the thousands, other gangs were ad hoc and small, usually only numbering in the tens or twenties. Most small gangs disbanded after a few heists. Many of the larger, more permanent gangs tended to operate in remote areas far away from the seats of government, but some gangs, usually the smaller impermanent ones, also operated in densely populated core areas. Although some bandits had political ambitions and received recognition and legitimacy from the state, most simply remained thugs and criminals throughout their careers. None of these categories, however, were mutually exclusive, as roles – like clothes – often changed according to circumstances.

Unresolved Disputes in Southeast Asia

Unresolved Border, Land and Maritime Disputes in Southeast Asia is an edited volume containing 12 chapters including introduction and conclusion. Broadly speaking, this book recounts and analyses three intra-regional and extra-regional land and maritime border conflicts involving Southeast Asia, namely Preah Vihear spat between Thailand and Cambodia, Koh Tral island dispute between Vietnam and Cambodia and row over South China Sea islands, atolls and islets between China and multiple members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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MANY OF THE CONTRIBUTING authors of this book agree with one point which says, land and maritime border conflicts in Southeast Asia actually represent the remnants of the colonial period. The European masters who ruled most of the present-day Southeast Asia for centuries were not careful about the ethnic and linguistic lineages of the local populace and divided the region based on their own convenience and power sharing agreements and treaties. Throughout the book, it has been argued that before the arrival of the colonial rulers, the concept of border was unknown in the region. The Europeans even divided the seas and oceans which were earlier used freely by the local people for trading and transportation purposes. The chapters by Petra Andelova, Filip Kraus, Richard Turcsanyi (and Zdenek Kriz) and Maria Strasakova point out that the creation of artificial borders in the region have resulted in numerous conflicts including the one in Preah Vihear and the Koh Tral dispute. These authors have also spoken about the influences the domestic political situation practice to determine the contemporary characteristics of these conflicts. For instance, the chapter by Maria Strasakova explains how territorial border conflicts are used in Cambodian political scenario to influence the voters during election campaigns. Land is treated as a matter of national prestige in Cambodia, argued Maria Strasakova.

A number of the chapters of this book are contributed to elucidate the severity of the South China Sea dispute,
The Bengal famine of 1943 remains a relatively unexplored topic of the modern Indian history. Despite the insightful and thought-provoking works on the Bengal famine by Amartya Sen (Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Paul Greenough (Prosperity & Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), both of which were incidentally published in the early eighties, the famine has not been understood in its totality. The teleological nationalist history writing of India has exclusively focused, as Janam Mukherjee rightly notes, ‘on the nationalist struggle, negotiations for a transfer of power, the manoeuvring of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and/or the rise of communal rancor’ (p.2). Mukherjee in this work provides a disturbing, yet riveting account exclusively focused, as Janam Mukherjee rightly notes, ‘on the nationalist struggle, negotiations for a transfer of power, the manoeuvring of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and/or the rise of communal rancor’ (p.2). Mukherjee in this work provides a disturbing, yet riveting account of the Bengal famine of 1943, which was, as he aptly pointed out, not limited to the year 1943.

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This book offers few new arguments. First, besides the United States, China, United States is also responsible for the existing divisions within ASEAN as it often indulges itself in the great power rivalries in the region leaving little options for the smaller Southeast Asian countries except to be either with the United States or with China. The role of the United States in the great power game in the region however could have been expounded in a more comprehensive way. Second, in their co-authored chapter on Perh Vhi, Richard Turcany and Zdenek Kriz mentioned that ASEAN countries are complacent against China. While this logic sounds stimulating and optimistic, the author needs to put more efforts to clarify the reasons behind this particular thinking. Third, Padraig Lysaght, in his chapter, noted that the South China Sea disputes have almost become an anarchical situation, thanks to the roles played by the great powers. However, the book should be appreciated as a well-documented fact book containing historical information and analyses.

More specifically speaking, this book is cherished as it has explained the impacts of the mentioned conflicts for contemporary Asia-Pacific studies.

In Search of the Bengal Famine of 1943

Mukherjee treated the famine in a continuum, where it was preceded by malnutrition and succeeded by debilitation and disease. And thus he did not limit himself to one particular year, i.e., 1943, but traces the history of the Bengal famine before and after this period as well. Inspired by the works of James Scott (Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Ranajit Guha (Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983) on everyday life, Mukherjee forcefully argued that the victims of the Bengal famine did not ‘die without a murmur’, but in fact, they contested the famine at every step. For Mukherjee, the account of the Second World War is as proceeded in South Asia, particularly in the colonial Bengal; the British efforts to save Calcutta, while exposing the countryside to the famine, and the ongoing war, with the so-called ‘denial scheme’. Mukherjee also exposes the ‘benevolent’ nature of colonial rule, by giving the account of the activities of the colonial ‘priorities’ in tackling the famine and dealing with wartime shortages.

Japanese invasion, air raid damages and the riots of 1946 (followed by the Muslim League’s call for Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946) were aptly dealt with in this book. Linking the Calcutta riot and famine, Mukherjee argued that the Calcutta riots are to be understood within the context of cumulative violence that began with chronic, multi-generational poverty, compounded by war, and brought a catastrophic famine. And starvation implies poverty, but not vice versa.’

Mukherjee argued in this book that the history of the Bengal famine is the history of power and disempowerment. Exploding the myths around the Bengal famine, Mukherjee shows with great mastery over details, how during the period of the famine and the war, some powerful capitalists made fortunes and even influenced the negotiations for independence. Though the policies of the colonial rulers were responsible for the making of the Bengal famine, the nationalist leadership was also guilty. Although it is true that most of the Congress leaders were behind bars during 1942-1944, when finally out of prison, rather than tackling the issue of the Bengal famine in careful and sensitive manner, the nationalist leadership was quite busy negotiating the transfer of power, with the colonial rule. He also draws our attention towards the fact that the leaders of both the Congress and the Muslim League had close socio-economic and political relationship with the industrialist class of Calcutta, which further led them to overlook the problem of the Bengal famine.

Mukherjee rightly noted that as the end days of the Empire was within sight, ‘the national leadership circled around the pie of independence, failing even to notice that ... the population in Bengal were beginning to starve’ (p. 252). In the book, Mukherjee also presents a synchronised strategy to enhance its power in the region on the one hand and on the other hand, tries to keep the extra-regional powers at bay. Simultaneously, in an order to ensure dominance over the region, China tries to