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*Rebels from the Mud Houses: Dalits and the Making of the Maoist Revolution in Bihar*, by George Kunnath. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. 2012. Pp. xviii+247. $54.75 (hb). ISBN-13: 978-81-87358-52-7 and ISBN: 81-87358-52-7.

In the typical commentary on Maoism in India, tribals (Adivasis) and ex-untouchables (Dalits) are presented as victims of state neglect and rebel violence. According to a former-Maoist-turned-civil-society-activist, Maoism in India is ‘not a movement of landless peasants and tribals seeking to overthrow state power. It is a project defined as such by those who are neither peasants nor workers nor tribals, but who claim to represent their interests’ (Simeon 2010). For another leftist intellectual with a similar personal history, ‘the voice of the revolutionary is almost always that of a Brahman/upper caste…So we have a Maoist-aligned intelligentsia vicariously playing out their revolutionary fantasies through the lives of *adivasis*, while the people actually dying in battle are almost all *adivasis*’(Nigam 2010). Against these armchair condemnations of Maoist revolution, George Kunnath’s *Rebels from the Mud Houses* [henceforth RMH] is a whiff of fresh air from the rebel strongholds of rural south Bihar. Kunnath reaches his conclusions after a painstaking ethnographic study of the relationship between Dalits and Maoists, and emphasizes the agency of Dalits in making war on their landed superiors in an intensely polarized caste society. He neither romanticizes their predicament nor represents them as hapless victims. Instead, he carefully chronicles the changing circumstances of Dalit labourers, and their contingent choice to participate in a violent class conflict and then demobilize. This is no ordinary book: it is a deeply empathetic account of the struggles of one of the most marginalized sections of a poor democracy, and is the product of arduous field research, long-term friendship and trust between the researcher and his interlocutors, and a commitment to representing the poor and oppressed as sophisticated political actors striving for dignity.

*RMH* stands out for its ability to generate penetrating theoretical insights about subaltern agency from its intimate understanding of agrarian politics in south Bihar. Three of these insights are particularly worthy of our attention here. Firstly, Kunnath dispels the popular academic myth that treats subaltern actors as victims of ‘dual violence’ (Stoll 1993, 20; cf. Kalyvas 2006). The Dalits of Dumari village are, he shows, anything but ‘rebels against their will…coerced by the guerillas as well as the [state]’ (ibid., xi). Secondly, *RMH* challenges the received wisdom among students of agrarian politics that sees landholding middle peasants as the key to rebellion and revolution (Wolf 1969, Scott 1977). Landless labourers, explains Kunnath, were, in fact, the principal political agents in the Maoist revolution in south Bihar. Thirdly, *RMH* avoids facile ahistorical characterizations of Dalits as permanent rebels or victims. Instead, it draws on Sidney Tarrow’s (1994) notion of a ‘protest cycle’ to conceptualize Dalit participation in Maoist revolution as highly contingent insofar as it was succeeded by demobilization and a turn to new forms of subaltern resistance vis-à-vis the state. In the rest of this review, I critically examine each of these three insights, and highlight George Kunnath’s distinctive contribution to the study of subaltern politics and social revolutions.

Let us first examine Kunnath’s insistence on subaltern agency in the Maoist movement in India. *RMH* challenges the popular academic notion of subalterns as victims caught between the state and insurgents. It relies on recorded memories of Dalit participation and ‘pleasure of agency’ (Wood 2003) in the Maoist struggle. The Dalits of Dumari village, where Kunnath conducted his fieldwork, did not object to the militant character of the Maoist campaign against their landlords and the local state. In fact, they ‘wanted the Maoist armed squads to remain in the area as they feared that the landlords would re-establish their domination if the Maoist arms were withdrawn’ (p. 205). Given the lack of jungles and mountains in and around Dumari, Dalit participation remained critical for the Maoists’ success there. Not only did Dalits join Maoist ranks as active participants, they also provided ‘protection, shelter and food’ to the rebel army as it combated the ‘counter-revolutionary actions and alliances of the state and caste militias’ of their landlords (p. 214). These agentive acts cannot be reduced simply to a set of rational cost-benefit calculations or external factors such as a weak state. Dalits in Dumari are best understood as agents ‘engaged in a dynamic process of contesting and altering the conditions of their subordination, especially based on caste’ (p. 195). Yet not all Dalit castes participated equally or uncritically or at all times: firstly, Doms sided with the landed elite in Dumari, whereas Musahars and Dusadhs were at the forefront of the movement (pp. 87-93); secondly, the latter grew increasingly critical of the revolutionary party as it expanded its social bases by inducting better off middle-caste peasants into its organization and began to act against Dalit interests (pp. 137-49); thirdly, Dalits in Dumari were not immune to the social transformation wrought by electoral democracy in rural India, and even when they participated in Maoist revolution, they also asserted their caste identity in other political arenas (pp. 150-66). Over time, the lack of caste-specific Maoist agendas and the forging of cross-caste alliances led Dalits to exercise their agency to demobilize and become passive supporters of the party. Subordinated groups were, therefore, anything but hapless victims caught in crossfires between the state and insurgents.

A second insight of Kunnath’s book is its focus on landless labourers and poor peasants as the key agents driving the Maoist revolution in south Bihar. This insight invites us to revise our well-worn view of peasant rebellions being led by landholding middle peasants challenging the dominance of rich peasants or ‘kulaks’. In this regard, *RMH*’s biography of Rajubhai, the author’s host and principal informant, neatly illustrates the ‘achievements and contradictions of the Maoist inspired agency and ideology’ in this region (p. 108). Once a landless labourer bonded to a middle-caste landlord family in Dumari, Rajubhai grazed his master’s cattle in exchange for 25 rupees (less than half a dollar) per month and food. Daily ‘humiliation, overwork and abusive words’ were the staples on which he was compelled to subsist, yet he felt that ‘silence was the best option’ (p. 112). Once the Maoists arrived in the area, Rajubhai attended their secret meetings in the paddy fields, took the lead in mobilizing Dalits against a particularly oppressive landlord, and eventually became the commander of a Maoist armed squad (p. 113). The Maoist squad fought pitched battles with the Bhumi Sena (‘land army’) of the landlords, and though Rajubhai and other Dalits were compelled to leave their homes in Dumari for nearly two years, they were able to beat the landlords into submission and resettle in the village (pp. 113-15). Clearly, land ownership and the economic autonomy it provides did not prove to be a necessary condition for revolution here. By participating enthusiastically in Maoist activities, landless labourers and poor peasants were able to renegotiate their terms of service and/or tenure with their landlords and seek better lives for themselves and their children. By the time of the author’s fieldwork in 2002, Rajubhai worked as a sharecropper on one landlord’s farm and a contract labourer on another: although he was much better off than two decades earlier, Kunnath notes, ‘owning a plot of land still remained a dream for him’ (p. 117). Much was certainly achieved, but much also remained to be done in the long struggle for dignity and freedom of landless Dalit labourers in south Bihar. Yet we can readily appreciate how the agency of Rajubhai and his comrades remained critical for the successes of the Maoists in the region.

It may be tempting from the preceding discussion to fall into the trap of romanticizing Dalit agency in the Maoist movement in Bihar. This is, however, very far from Kunnath’s intent. *RMH* engages critically with Sidney Tarrow’s (1989, 9) thesis that ‘cycles of protest produce counter-movements, violence, and political backlash, new repressive strategies, and thence, mobilization’. Kunnath agrees that subaltern agency does not remain constant over a long period of time owing to ‘exhaustion, repression, and reform’ (Tarrow 1994, 26). Yet the shift from active to passive agency, criticism, and demobilization need not imply quiescence. When middle-caste landed groups such as Kurmis began entering the Maoist ranks, Dalits in Dumari expressed their displeasure with the party (pp. 138-41). Moreover, they resented the murder of a prominent leader whose ‘business interests happened to clash with those of a Maoist leader’s brother’ as well as the party’s demand for a ‘commission’ of 10,000 rupees during the construction of a government-sponsored community hall for Dalits in Dumari (pp. 142-43). Displeasure and resentment led Dalits to become passive supporters of the Maoist party by the time of the author’s fieldwork. It also led them to turn to other avenues of Dalit assertion such as egalitarian religious sects like the Kabir-panth, festivals and fairs in honor of historical Dalit icons such as Sant Ravidas, and the building of memorials and statues of mythical Dalit heroes such as Babu Chuharmal (pp. 150-66). Even Maoist martyrs were incorporated into these new forms of Dalit assertion (Jaoul 2011). Subaltern resistance to dominant power structures did not, therefore, end, but reworked itself into a ‘plurality of strategies…to alter the conditions of [Dalit] subordination’ locally (p. 170). Hence, as Kunnath rightly notes, ‘more protest cycles seem imminent’ in the near future (p. 217). We would do well to heed this valuable lesson on the afterlives of violent social revolutions across the world.

To sum up, *RMH* offers three powerful insights on subaltern agency in social revolutions, the participation of the poor and landless in these revolutions, and the myriad complementary forms of subaltern resistance that take shape during and after violent revolutions. These insights are certainly novel for students of agrarian politics in contemporary India, who typically focus on urban middle class and upper-caste activists protesting big dams (e.g., Nilsen 2010) or engaging in grassroots development (e.g., Sharma 2008). These insights also challenge popular academic and media descriptions of the ongoing Indian Maoist movement as a top-down imposition on subaltern victims; the urban middle class bias implicit in these descriptions are closely tied to contemporary sociological accounts that focus almost exclusively on activists and NGO workers in rural India. George Kunnath’s work is not only a much-needed corrective to the existing scholarship on contemporary rural India, it is also arguably the finest book written on rural politics in India since Amita Baviskar’s (1995) critical study of the Narmada anti-dam movement. As such, it deserves to be read widely alongside the best theoretical and empirical accounts of recent revolutionary movements in Nepal, Peru, El Salvador, Colombia and elsewhere.

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