

Awadhesh C. Sinha. *Collaborators, Rebels and Traitors: Dissenters from Frontiers React to the Indian Union*. Manohar, New Delhi, 2024, 310p, Rs.1795 (Hardback).

Reviewing this book poses a moral dilemma for me, but reviewing it was not much of a choice left to myself. The author has been my co-editor for three books – first one on Northeast Indian Nepalis, the second on Indian Nepalis and the third on diasporic Nepalis – but otherwise he belongs to the generation of teachers who taught me. I address him as “Sir”. My help, whatever little it might have been, has been acknowledged by the author of this book. We have had an excellent relationship both in Shillong, where both of us taught at North-Eastern Hill University, albeit in different departments, and the same continued after retirement, first his, and 17 years later, mine. On my request, he donated in 2016 his entire collection of books and documents on Northeast India in general and Sikkim in particular to Sikkim University Library. So, without his access to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, as a National Fellow of the Indian Council of Social Research, he would not be able to write this book.

That he wrote this book as an octogenarian is something that needs to be commended. This is, however, only one of the books he wrote in the last couple of years and he continues to surprise me with a new book every now and then although he is now in the 83rd year of his life. Equally surprising is his first writing in longhand and typing it out himself, each book with about 0.1 million words. In fact, he does not know how to type nor does he hire a typist; what he does is wood-pecking with two index fingers and one thumb for spacing between words. He is usually not apologetic about making syntactical or typographical errors, even when such errors relate to proper nouns or quotations. His canvas is often broad and he writes with a certain level of confidence that one rarely finds in other authors on the Himalayas. He has excellent memory even at this age, which is a rare quality and a big asset for any author. He may condemn the government of the day in the most unparliamentary language, but he never fails to project and defend the Indian perspective on the frontiers and frontier people, including in the book under review.

I thought it prudent to provide this brief background on the author and, to a smaller extent, on myself, before I start with the review of this unique book on four unique personalities –

Zaphu Angami Phizo, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, Laldenga and Palden Thondup Namgyal – none of who agreed with the position of the government of India about the status of their little territories but none was powerful enough to withhold the integrating forces of India for long. Although trained as an anthropologist, he taught sociology for his entire life and often wrote more as a political scientist or an international relations person than as an anthropologist or a sociologist.

When I first read the title of the book, I did not like it. I thought the key words used on the title as well as the subtitle were directly borrowed from some colonial texts on Northeast India. One may recall, the colonial writers often used, rather unabashedly, the words used on the title and subtitle of this book and, more for this reason than the etymology of the words themselves, they have a negative ring about them.

But I read it, not only because I had committed myself to reviewing it for some journal or newspaper, but also because I was curious. Knowing the author personally for the past four decades or so and being amazed with his knowledge about the Eastern Himalayas, I read it word by word and line by line. Although the typos caused some irritation now and then the book captivated my full attention and I finished reading it within three days. When I did that, I was convinced that this book was a valuable contribution to understanding why some frontier leaders challenged the might of the Indian state and why the latter responded to their challenges in the manner it did.

The book has four parts and 12 chapters. In Part A, which consists of two chapters, he provides an excellent historical and geographical background to the frontiers, which is expected of a frontier expert that he is. In Part B, which comprises four chapters, he introduces the four locales from where the four frontier men rose and fought for their people. In Part C, also with four chapters, he provides biographical details of the four leaders and the organizations they created and led in four separate chapters. Part D, which has two chapters and which is titled as “Performance”, is actually the concluding chapter where he first describes how the Indian state responded to the challenges thrown by the four leaders, and second, he throws open the question whether the four dissenters were collaborators, rebels or traitors. But if I were to conclude this book, I would perhaps drop all these words and come up with some other words to describe the four leaders who were actually heroes to their respective constituencies then and to some extent are so even now.

This book provides an in-depth as well as broad understanding of frontier history and geography. It also presents a lucid analysis of the major events that unfolded during the colonial period and the times the four leaders lived and led their people. I am not sure if anyone else could have provided such depth and breadth of knowledge on Indian frontiers in such a readable

manner. One may disagree with the author on many counts, but one must appreciate the wisdom one gets from this book. Even his accounts of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah are much richer than one expected of a person who otherwise had spent his life studying the eastern frontiers of India.

This book would have been invaluable, and prove to be a bible on frontier studies, if only it was properly edited, proof-read, and formatted. Even the long quotes are not indented or printed in a font that is clearly distinguishable from the font used for the text. Typographical errors are galore, which could have been easily avoided by simply using Grammarly. For these shortcomings and more, the author alone is however not responsible; even the publisher is equally responsible for the quality of the books that he publishes. As far as this book is concerned the publisher clearly seems to have abdicated his responsibility in doing what he should have done.

Minus these production-related issues, the book is a treasure-house of knowledge on the frontier people and how the Indian state administers them. Reading this book has been an enriching experience for myself, as reading the author's other publications have been in the past. Whenever I have told him in the past about the issues raised here, he has never tried to defend himself nor is he going to be defensive about the book under review. He will say, "OK, fine, you go and do a better job of it!" And that is not easy, if not impossible. One might write a more readable book free from the kind of mistakes this book has but rarely can anyone write with such clarity and depth as the author does.

I think the book will be of interest to a wide range of scholars interested in the study of frontier societies, frontier history and geography, relationship between Indian state and the peripheral states, Indian federalism, and the role of colonial rule in frontier governance. It may not be taken very kindly or even sportingly by the descendants of the four leaders or by those who look at them differently from the prism used by the author, but they will find it difficult to deny what he has written.

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