

BOOK REVIEW

Underdogs End Empires: A Memoir by I. P. Khosla, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India, 2010, 419 pp, Price Rs. 695.

The book *Underdogs End Empires: A Memoir* is a collection of memories and thoughts of Ambassador I. P. Khosla, former Indian External Affairs Secretary, who has been in many important positions in the Indian Foreign Service from 1960 to 1996. In the book, he recollects his first hand experiences and links up those with the changing milieu of international and regional political developments defining colonial, Cold War and post Cold War era. What is most striking in this respect is his attempt to see the power relations between the big powers and the small and marginalised countries from a subaltern viewpoint of history. From the complicated contours of historical struggles for power and position, he tries to portray the role of 'underdogs' in dismantling major colonial powers and later their struggle against the hegemons during the Cold War.

The central theme of the book is the history of imperialism and colonialism and the people who were subjugated into this overall development and how the dominant discourse in the contemporary world reflects Western conception of history denying the aspirations and contributions of the underdogs. Ambassador Khosla bases the entire analysis on his own experiences as a diplomat particularly in Algeria and Afghanistan. He also includes chapters on Vietnam and Afghanistan to assess his thesis in the Cold War setting. Finally, he touches upon the changing scenarios in the post Cold War period and the emergence of newer threats viz., the gradual rise of China as a substitute of US hegemony.

To set the context of the analysis of evolutionary power relations between underdogs and empires, Ambassador Khosla devotes a significant amount of concentration in underlining the theoretical construct of the empire-building process and how this culminates into the emergence of a nationalistic struggle both as a matter of reaction as well as struggle for political and economic freedom. Into the process of empire-building, he equalises power with empire and also their capacity to win wars. What he emphasises is that the rise of imperialism with the end of classical era and the beginning of colonial subjugation of the countries in Asia and Africa is a manifestation of the power hunger by the imperialistic forces, though the story of modernity depicts a benign face of colonialism as a welcoming force by the colonised people. In his theoretical underpinning, he also outlines the rise of nationalism as a force of struggle for freedom and as an outcome of the dramatic changes in the political discourses, economic forces and equally the relations between the underdogs and the empires.

The book employs two broad perspectives of the existing narratives prevalent in the academic discourse of international relations in order to see the entire gamut of the political history ranging from classical era to post Cold War period. The first one

is the traditional perspective which Ambassador Khosla calls 'traditional stories'. The traditional view underlies that the possession of power and the making of war are inseparable empirically, normatively and also from the power equation perspective. According to Khosla, international morality, institutions and regimes, economics, society or culture are the consequences of power equation. The second approach is based on the modern discourses that disapprove the destruction caused by war. The focus of this approach underlies the ambition for a perpetual peace by eliminating the causes of war. This discourse underestimates the role of power and war in acquisition of colonies and instead claims that indigenous people offered no resistance to the empire-makers. Under the microscope of these two perspectives, the author presents a comprehensive overview of the history of colonial domination versus anti-colonial struggle in the 20th century.

The book is mostly dedicated to trace, using both traditional and modern perspectives, the dynamics of the evolution of power relations between underdogs and empires, dividing the book into four broad time frames: pre-colonial era, colonial era, Cold War period, and post Cold War developments. In the pre-colonial period, wars were considered as the most substantive instrument of power and the victorious were regarded as the most powerful. Empire makers during that time had to rely on their capacity to win thereby to expand their reign of power. On the other hand, during the colonial period, the power of the empire makers depended on the possession of colonies. But unlike the modern portrayal of the colonised as the passive recipient of the historic progresses, the book asserts that, the power structure was more evenly balanced between the colonisers and the colonies.

Besides, the imperialistic forces had to face stiff and violent resistances and in the due course of time they had to retreat from colonies either being forced or at the prospect of inevitable defeat. The author brings examples from Asian and African anti-colonial movements and details out the trends by analysing the situation in Indonesia and Algeria. Arguing on the colonial history of the Indian Subcontinent from the traditional approach, the author identifies two reasons behind the independence of the Indian Subcontinent: 1) the violent opposition of the subaltern groups and the nationalistic upheavals against the imperial rule; and 2) the suspicion and the prospect of disobedience by the Indian army to carry out orders of the British Raj.

A big focus of the book was an ample discussion of the underdogs' resistance against the two superpowers during the Cold War period. Starting from the post 1945 breakdown of British and French colonial rule, the book exposes how smaller countries were gaining their self-determination by defying the empire-making abilities of the big powers gradually as exemplified in the Suez Canal Crisis, South Yemen War and nationalistic movements in Algeria. The author is not in agreement with the narrative of superpower rivalry during the Cold War, instead, he argues that a great degree of cooperation and understanding between the USA and the

USSR existed. Supporting the traditional interpretation, author views the Cold War as the continuation of struggles between the empires and the underdogs. He brings the examples of Vietnam in detail and other resistance movements in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Granada and so on. Vietnam's struggle for self-determination, first against the Chinese, then against the French and finally against American intervention, underlines the enduring resistance and pressure that justify the traditional interpretation of power struggle against foreign domination and exploitation. The Soviet failure in Afghanistan, according to author, has been a crucial factor in the breakdown of the communist bandwagon.

Similarly, the post Cold War stories are narrated in the book using the traditional viewpoint that considers US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in the pretext of 'War on Terror' as the manifestation of US control over the invaded countries but also in the greater Middle Eastern region. The author opines that projected objectives of the wars like eliminating Al Qaeda and Taliban and the so-called weapons of mass destruction are all minors, while the consolidation and expansion of US spheres of influence is the major. The book predicts that US will not be able to win in Afghanistan and Iraq which will mark the beginning of the end of US military supremacy and economic power. China, as the author opines, will replace USA as the future hegemon and like all other historic powers will pursue its influence by means of military preponderance over the underdogs in the coming decades.

The modern story has a very different version and vision of world political history. Unlike the traditional story, it considers colonial era as the interaction among the people and as the natural culmination of human relationship that was even expected by the colonised people. It attributes the rise of nationalism as a contribution of the nation building by the colonial masters in the colonies of Asia and Africa. Hence, the loss of empires are shown in the cost-benefit prism arguing that the high maintenance cost of colonies forces big powers to let the colonies to be independent. Similarly, the Cold War is considered as super-power rivalry between USA and USSR, ignoring the position and resistance by the smaller countries. US victory over USSR is seen as the reason why Soviets has to withdraw from Afghanistan. And finally, the post 9/11 US war on terror is projected as an attempt to eliminate transnational network of terrorists and promote security and stability for the international community. Ambassador Khosla ends his memoir discussing the post Cold War shifts of power and the newer forms of threats the world is and will be facing including nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Predicting an American decline and a Chinese rise as a substitute, he mentions contemporary threats as neither traditional nor modern which can provoke defensive exercise of power by victim countries like the United States and India.

The book *Underdogs End Empires: A Memoir* is an important contribution in the field of anti-colonial history that marks several exceptions compared to other prevailing perspectives. For instance, the author rejects the conception that empire-

building was an unintended offshoot of trade and asserts that empire-making was an avaricious struggle for domination. Likewise, he views the fall of empires as the result of incessant struggle by subjugated people against the breach of their freedom and rights, discarding the view that extraneous factors such as international pressure, economic decline or aftermath of world wars resulted in the dismantling of empires. He also questions the accreditation of the colonial masters as the father of nationalistic aspirations claiming that the struggle for self-rule was primarily and essentially subaltern in origin. Importantly, the book, unlike the conventional trend of portraying the nationalist struggles in the Marxist-Leninist terms of socio-economic discrepancy between the pivotal class and the marginal portion of the society, assesses anti-colonial movements as natural developments marking the entry of the developing world as a powerful force into the making of subsequent political history.

One of the key merits of the book underlies in its egalitarian position against the depiction of the evolution of national identity one-dimensionally by the historians and the political theories that ignore the subaltern version of history. The rich historiographical account of the book including Chanakya, Thucydides, Kant, Gibbon, Foucault and Hobsbawm as well as many scholarly references from Morgenthau, Kissinger, Kennedy, Schilling helps the author to anchor his thesis into the broader spectrum of scholarship on the study of political history and also to reinforce academic rigour and historic validity of his findings. The book not only presents compelling arguments to reorient the dominant interpretations of the history of power struggle, but also advances an egalitarian commitment in favour of rebalancing the distribution of power more evenly. It is quite convincing that modern stories have mystified the actual contributions that underdogs made in their constant confrontation with the empires to reshape the destiny of the millions of oppressed people worldwide.

Looking critically, the book simplifies many of the complex issues in a singular vista, reducing the complexity and diversity of perspectives that could have enriched the book more. For example, his narratives of both traditional and modern stories label all the resistance movements as the product of nationalism and, therefore, ignore the big diversity and differences that exist among the nationalist movements in Asia and Africa. The analysis undervalues the importance of non-violence movements in the struggle for freedom among the British and French colonies particularly in the case of Indian Subcontinent. However, the book by advocating a subaltern perspective of history is a significant contribution to the mainstreaming of non-western narratives in the contemporary discourse of international relations.

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