

THE ROLE OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION IN THE MAOIST CONFLICT IN NEPAL

This paper argues that to understand the Maoist mobilization in Nepal, it is necessary to probe the manner in which the project of national development has helped engender new forms of collective imagination for the people, including the Maoists. I first review the political history of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and a variety of approaches to analyzing the Maoist People's War. I argue that, in addition to macro-political economic analyses and inquiries into local histories of domination and resistance, we need to explore the forms of collective imagination that impelled certain forms of action - in this case, participation in an armed movement with the aim of overtaking the state power. Based on textual and ethnographic sources, I show that the projects of development in Nepal in the past five decades, including such a major undertaking as the creation of a national education system, provided crucial conceptual and institutional conditions for the current Maoist mobilization.

Keywords: Maoists, development, youth, revolution, Nepal

This paper calls for an ethnographic approach to the analysis of the Maoist People's War in Nepal. In particular, it is an argument that to understand the Maoist mobilization, it is necessary to probe the manner in which the project of national development has helped engender *new forms of collective imagination* for the people of Nepal, including the Maoists. There are already a growing number of studies about the Maoist conflict. Some of these analyze the evolution of the ideology and the strategies of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) as well as the macro-economic and social factors that have contributed to the emergence of violent conflict. Other studies take more ethnographic approaches to the issue. These emphasize the long term continuity of local histories of exploitation and resistance, and provide us with a perspective from which to view the current conflict as another instance in a long series of peasant rebellions. The approach that I propose here, however, is different from both the political and the ethno-historical approaches that I have just described. My aim is not to refute either economic problems or local conflicts as important factors in the current mobilization. I believe they are. What I seek to do, however, is to add another, and I think crucial, dimension concerning the role of imagination in shaping forms of desire and action. In particular, I argue that we fail to understand the historical specificity of the Maoist mobilization, if we do not explore the ways in which modern discursive forms—particularly, discourses of national development and of revolution—have

helped shape the imaginations, and thereby the actions, of the participants of the movement.

POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE MAOIST PEOPLE'S WAR

Since the early years of the People's War, journalists and public intellectuals in Nepal have provided invaluable insights into the nature of the conflict (Cf. Shrestha 2053 v.s.; Gyawali 1997; Mainali 2055 v.s.; Sharma 2057 v.s.; Dixit 2002). Deepak Thapa, a leading journalist, begins one of his articles on the subject with a review of the history of the Nepali communist party and its many fractures (Thapa 2002; Cf. Thapa 2001). Thapa traces the history of the communist movement in Nepal to the founding of the Communist Party of Nepal in Calcutta in 1949. The story moves forward to the time King Mahendra seized state power in 1960 and installed the Panchayat system, the system of 'basic democracy' he claimed was best suited to Nepali soil. Even though the King banned political parties, the 'Russian Communists' decided to participate in his government, while the 'Chinese Communists' kept their distance. Many communist leaders who opposed the King were jailed or went into exile as a result. But in 1974, the more radical members of the communist movement succeeded in establishing a new party, the Communist Party of Nepal (Fourth Congress), which asserted as one of its primary demands that elections be held to



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claimed was best suited to Nepali soil. Even though the King banned political parties, the 'Russian Communists' decided to participate in his government, while the 'Chinese Communists' kept their distance. Many communist leaders who opposed the King were jailed or went into exile as a result. But in 1974, the more radical members of the communist movement succeeded in establishing a new party, the Communist Party of Nepal (Fourth Congress), which asserted as



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one of its primary demands that elections be held to constitute an assembly to prepare a new constitution for the country. In addition, this party worked to become a popular movement, which was to be turned into an armed struggle at the opportune moment. There were further splits within this radical faction in the following years. But after the restoration of the multi-party parliamentary system in 1990, some of the splinter groups joined together and took part in the general election under the name, United People's Front (UPF). The UPF goal was to win in the election so as to hasten the end of the parliamentary system 'from within.' After the election, the UPF emerged as the third largest force in parliament.² Yet a further split divided the UPF in two, with one half taking part in the mid-term election of 1994, and the other boycotting it. The faction that boycotted the election became the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in 1995, and in the same year developed the strategy for a people's war designed to encircle the city from the countryside. This 'People's War' began on February 13, 1996, when the CPN (Maoist) simultaneously attacked police posts, Agricultural Development Banks, and Small Farmers Development Project offices in the Sindhuli, Rolpa, Rukum, and Gorkha Districts (Thapa 2002: 77-82; INSEC 1999: 123-126).³

Thus, in Thapa's article, the Maoist People's War is seen to emerge out of ideological and practical struggles within the Communist Party itself. The ideological struggles identified include debates about whether the revolution should be brought about through a popular movement or through armed struggle, or whether the parliamentary system should be used or boycotted. The practical struggles singled out include contingent events, such as the failure of one faction of the UPF to receive the appropriate election symbol from the election commission, which resulted in their being effectively blocked from participating in the mid-term election of 1994 and ultimately drifting further away from mainstream parliamentary politics.



Among the practical struggles and contingent events critically important to this discussion are the violent tactics used by competing political parties against each other after the restoration of multiparty democracy system (Thapa 2002: 82-85; Cf. Thapa 2001: 8-10). Use of violence among rival parties was often reciprocal, but after one of the parties won control of the government, competition became radically asymmetrical, as the ruling party could and did employ police and other state machinery against its rivals. Indeed, Thapa quotes Amik Sherchan, a leader of the United People's Front as saying "If it hadn't been for Girija Prasad Koirala and Khum Bahadur Khadka, there would perhaps have been no Maoist war" (Thapa 2002: 84). Koirala is a senior leader of the Nepali Congress Party who served four times as Prime Minister of Nepal between 1991 and 2001. Khum Bahadur Khadka, serving as Home Minister in a Congress government in 1995, directed suppressive operations (code-named 'Operation Romeo') against opposition political party activists in the Rolpa District. The Human Rights Year Book 1995 describes the operations in the following manner:

The government initiated . . . suppressive operations to a degree of state terror. Especially, the workers of United People's Front were brutally suppressed. Under the direct leadership of ruling party workers of the locality, police searched, tortured and arrested, without arrest warrants, in eleven villages of the district. Nearly 6,000 locals had left the villagers [sic] due to the police operation. One hundred and thirty people were arrested without serving any warrants. Among the arrested included elderly people above 75 years of age. All the detained were subjected to torture. Seven innocent women were forcibly undressed and tortured pouring water and simultaneously beating in genitals by nettle (INSEC 1996: 12).

In addition to presenting a history of political parties, Thapa and other commentators (e.g. Sharma 2057 v.s.; Gyawali 2002; Mikesell 1993, 2001; Mainali 2055 v.s) also discuss the more general political, economic, and social circumstances in Nepal. They write about the absence of substantive democracy, about the prevalence of poverty and unemployment, about the significance of the urban-rural divide, and about the importance of ethnic and caste discrimination. All are seen as contributing factors to the Maoist mobilization. And they generally end their analyses with an examination of various scenarios for the future, including their own prescriptive statements about how the conflict should be resolved. For example, Thapa suggests sincere political dialogue rather than military force as a solution (Thapa 2002: 94-98).

Although I find much about this manner of presentation and analysis significant and indeed indispensable, I also agree with the demand for a more ethnographic approach, one that explores specific local experiences and mobilizations as integral part of this conflict (cf. Shneiderman, this volume). Such

an approach probes the specific local context: it investigates local memories and motivations that are embedded in the texture of the everyday life. Fundamentally (and following the example of anthropologists concerned with conflict and violence in other parts of the world), such an approach does not regard the current conflict as simply imposed from 'above' or 'outside' on an otherwise 'peaceful' rural life. It attempts to discover how "the form and content of the extraordinary is deeply embedded in the history of the everyday, while it nevertheless also stands outside the everyday" (Pradeep Jagarnathan, as quoted in Menon and Bashin 1998: 60).

To understand the Maoist mobilization, therefore, we must explore the "quiet prehistory" of violent conflicts (Scott 1992: 63) in Nepal. Such an exploration will reveal, I trust, that the current Maoist mobilization is to a large degree, a matter of continuity: that violence, and even violent deaths, have long been a part of rural life. But, it will also reveal dimensions of rupture: that in the collective consciousness of the participants, when a Maoist dies in this conflict, s/he is seen as a martyr for the causes of the nation and the revolution—that is, for imagined communities beyond the horizons of village and the local relations of exploitation. Thus, I would like to shift the emphasis in Jagarnathan's formulation and suggest that we need to explore how the extraordinary, even while it is embedded in the everyday, nevertheless "stands outside the everyday" and remains, indeed, extraordinary.

One of the most obvious reasons to acknowledge the fact of rupture is because, from the point of view of the Maoists, their movement is revolutionary movement. Their vision and intent is to bring about fundamental change, a radical break in the continuity of history: they want to destroy the old system, and institute a new one. Another reason to acknowledge that the current mobilization is extraordinary involves its excessive violence, an excessiveness that, I would suggest, is partly connected to the mobilization's revolutionary vision. Finally, we must acknowledge that the current mobilization is extraordinary because it grows out of a rupture that preceded it by several decades. This is the rupture of modernity, which was brought into rural Nepal in large part through various development interventions beginning in the 1950s. I want to explore this last point in the next section.

PROJECT OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE 'YOUTH'

I lived in Salyan District in the mid-western hills of Nepal between 1997 and 1999. Although I have returned there a couple of times for brief visits, most of what I write here are based on my observation up to 1999. The conflict has expanded especially since 26 November 2001, when the Maoists attacked the Royal Nepalese Army and the government was forced to declare a state of emergency.⁴ The conflict has spread throughout the country, and foreign governments



including the United States are now more actively involved. Hence, it is important to emphasize that what I write below refers mainly to an earlier phase of the conflict. In this earlier phase, most of the people I knew well in Salyan were highly ambivalent about the NCP (Maoist)'s People's War. They did not support the Maoists, but they did not support the government either. Instead, they felt "caught in between," as Judy Pettigrew has described (Pettigrew, this volume). Yet, at least in the area in Salyan where I lived, people were still able most of the time to keep both the Maoist and government forces at arm's length and maintain the position of neutrality. Yet, with the escalation of the conflict, there are many signs that the space of neutrality is being eroded, as ever more people are "caught in between" and tortured or killed by either Maoist and government forces (Cf. Pettigrew, this volume). A large number of people have had to leave their villages to take refuge elsewhere in Nepal or abroad. Journalists and human rights activists are continuing their efforts of documenting the crimes perpetrated by both sides.⁵ Here, however, in discussing the relationship between development interventions and the contemporary crisis, I will focus on the earlier phase of the conflict, and on those villagers who supported the Maoist movement.

At least since the early 1990s, analysts have linked Maoist mobilization to the problems of development, or more specifically, to the problems caused by 'failed development.' These analysts suggest that Nepal's failure to develop as a nation-state is the main cause for the rise of the Maoist movement. They argue that the officials who are responsible for running the Nepali state have failed to provide the means for individuals and the nation as a whole to move in an improving direction. Maoism, they believe, is a symptom of inadequate management and coordination, of a lack of the 'good governance' that would have enabled Nepal and its people to mature.

An example of this position is an oft-repeated claim that the lack of employment opportunities for a "growing body of semi-educated youth" (Nickson 1992: 383) in rural areas was a main cause for the rise of Maoist movement.⁶ Schooling, so the argument goes, has raised the expectations of youth by making them aware of the possibilities of a better life. Yet, the state has failed to provide these youth with jobs that would have enabled them to achieve that better life.

Commenting on such an argument, a Maoist in Salyan said: "If unemployment was the reason, it would have made us not Maobadis (Maoists), but Jagiri-badis (Employment-ists)." I interpret her meaning to be that the movement was not simply a mechanical response to an economic problem, or an expression of frustration in the face of individual deprivation. The act of joining the movement was not simply a reaction to personal grievances in the past or present, but rather a commitment, pledge, and dedication to bring about a particular form of a collective future.

A closer look at the problem of education might clarify matters. Stephen Mikesell's 1993 article on the possibility of a Maoist 'people's war' in Nepal contained a concise, and I think very accurate, statement of the problems of the national education system in Nepal. He wrote:

Nepali education simultaneously prepares the students for bureaucratic and managerial jobs and disqualifies most of them from these jobs. ... It is ... an imposition onto the village communities of an alien system of knowledge, priorities, values and methods evolved from Western colleges of education. Classroom discipline, examinations and certification authoritatively determine what is "true knowledge," and devalue the knowledge, practices and languages of the villagers. ... An immense class of people is presently being schooled in Nepal to despise their own rural background (Mikesell 1993: 32).

I fully agree with Mikesell's observation that national education has been alien and alienating. But, I would also argue that we need to explore how this alienating education may have nonetheless helped foster distinctive visions, aspirations, dispositions, and capacities in village youth. One of the explicit intentions of the Nepali education system was to foster in youth an attachment to the Nepali nation. The history textbooks spoke of the brave Nepalis who unified the nation and heroically defended it against the British (Onta 1996). In fact, the textbooks were framed as exhortations of youth to become the kinds of people who were able to lead the nation in its path towards progress (Ahearn 2001). In other words, a major purpose of education was to enlist the youth into the state-sponsored project of collectively imagining a developing nation. I argue that Maoist discourse built on the themes developed by the nationalist education system but rearranged



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Bonded laborers from western Nepal marching to demand their freedom.



the themes in order to produce an alternative vision. Although the national development discourse and the Maoist discourse are indeed different, since the latter built on the former, the latter makes sense to many of the rural youth because of their prior education in the former. Let me elaborate on this further by way of discussing my observations from Salyan.

Among the people who joined the Maoist movement in Salyan, many did indeed have around ten years of formal education. According to the stories that I heard, however, schooling was not something that was ‘imposed’ by the state. Local resources were mobilized and, during the 1960’s and ’70’s, local people, many of whom were Magars or Matwali Chetris⁷, took the initiative in establishing schools in their own villages. In the beginning only boys went to school. But many local leaders insisted that girls should be sent to school too. One story has it that, in the 1970’s, a Pradhan Panch (‘village chairman’) sent his daughter to school, but soon realized that she felt quite uncomfortable being the only girl there. So, he imposed a fine on each household which did not send its daughters to school. In some villages, girls who finished tenth grade and passed the SLC⁸ exams were immediately given teaching positions in local schools so as to prove to the village people, by way of concrete example, that there were benefits to sending daughters to school.

For many of these women, going to school was more than a means of achieving some purely personal or private goal. This was so because these women, as I have said, were examples. They were examples to other girls, and they were examples to the entire village and beyond. And, being an example meant, first of all, being for others, being beyond the self. I underline this point, first of all, to argue against the kinds of analyses that reduce the problem of motive to a matter of personal interest. However, I should also note that, for the past several decades in Nepal, the project of national development aggressively promoted a view that it was necessary to have a formal education in order to become a kind of person who could help others (Gautam 2051 v.s.), and that, as an educated person, the primary way to help others was through helping to develop the nation (Skinner and Holland 1996).

As I have mentioned above, the Maoists criticize state-sponsored nationalism. Yet, they share a basic assumption with the official nationalism in that they too posit a ‘Nepali nation’ as a taken-for-granted object of attachment and the ground for all political action. A Maoist ‘revolutionary song’ entitled “The Revolutionaries,” begins with the following words: “Revolutionaries, liberate Nepal! / Come, the people are calling / Come out at once, come out / Come out, carrying guns” (Gautam 2055 v.s.: 3; my translation). As we can see, the object to be liberated by the Maoist revolutionaries is ‘Nepal’. Another song, entitled “Wake up and rise, Oh Youth,” begins as follows:

Wake up and rise, oh youth, carrying torches
Growing brave like Himal, turning into a wall of rock
Today on our upper arms depends the fortune of the nation
Today in our heartbeats is the love for the nation
If we are timid now the nation will sink
If we are conscious now the nation will be built
Wake up and rise, oh youth, carrying sickles
Becoming stars equipped with hammers

(Gautam 2055 v.s.: 13; my translation)

This revolutionary song exhorts the youth, just as the school textbooks do, to become conscious and active builders of the nation, although unlike the textbooks, the song calls for armed struggle as a means of nation-building.

The statement issued by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) on the day it launched the People’s War, indeed, began with a criticism of the Nepali state for failing to develop the nation: “The current rulers of Nepal, speaking tirelessly about development and nation-building for 50 years ... [in fact] have led Nepal to become one of the world’s poorest nations, second only to Ethiopia” (Quoted in Nepal Rastriya Budwijivi Sangathan 2054 v.s.: 45; my translation). The Maoists declare that it is now time to overthrow the “comprador and bureaucratic capitalist classes” (ibid.) which have ruled Nepal and led it into its current economic, political and cultural crisis. Thus, the Maoists’ declaration of war attempts to de-legitimize the current regime by pointing out its failure to develop Nepal, and attempts to present its members as the legitimate rulers, the true representatives of the people and the real agents of development.

Another story from Salyan will help make my case about the relationship between development and Maoist discourses. The Maoists’ concrete programs for social change included a campaign to ban alcohol, or ‘raksi bandh’. In the area of Salyan where I lived, the raksi bandh campaign encouraged by the Maoists began around 1998. Both Maoists and non-Maoist women – including those women who were otherwise strongly opposed to the Maoists’ violent tactics – participated actively in this campaign. Raksi-bandh committees consisting exclusively of women were formed in many villages and neighborhoods to impose fines on those making and/or consuming alcohol. In some neighborhoods, simply asking where one could obtain alcohol was a crime punishable by a fine of 50 rupees. When men in a village commented that the women were involved in raksi-bandh committees simply because they were told to do so by members of the UPF, all the women present objected. They countered that they wanted to ban alcohol, not because any Party told them to do so, but for their own sakes. It was, they said, ‘the women’ who wanted to ban alcohol. They were the ones who bore the economic consequences of the over-consumption of alcohol and suffer

the harassment and violence from drunken men. It was 'the women' who wanted the reform so as to improve the villages that have been plagued by alcohol.

Interestingly, at the same time as the Maoist-encouraged *raksi-bandh* campaigns were being carried out in the villages, there also was an anti-alcohol campaign funded by the Asia Foundation going on around Salyan's bazaar area. The Asia Foundation is a California based non-profit organization which described its objectives in a pamphlet distributed in Kathmandu in the late 1990s, as the 'promotion of democracy and a market-oriented economy'. According to the Asia Foundation's program officer, their anti-alcohol campaign emerged out of their women's empowerment program. The Asia Foundation had provided funding for organizing 'women's groups' around the bazaar and encouraged them to make a list of the problems in their communities that they wanted to solve. The problem of drinking emerged at the top of the list. Accordingly, the Asia Foundation provided further funding for women to organize a rally in the bazaar against drinking. As far as I could tell, nothing changed after the rally until, a few months later, Maoists appeared at a bazaar shop one night with petrol bombs. They told the shop owner to stop selling alcohol, and destroyed all of the liquor he had in stock. Sales of alcohol in the bazaar stopped (at least in public) the very next day. This episode was interpreted by many living in the area as an example of the Maoists' determination and ability to produce real changes in society, in contrast to that of other political parties or development-aid organizations. It was also clear to all that the effectiveness of the Maoists derived in large part from their use of force.

There were many other causes that the Maoists advocated and initiated, during the early years of the Maoist war (ca. 1996-99) that many non-Maoists approved of. There was in general less government corruption and usury where the Maoists were strong. Dalits⁹ had less fear of being beaten-up by members of higher castes. Public servants were compelled to go to their offices and actually do their work. There was more discipline in Maoist-dominated schools. Discipline was evident both in the way students studied in their classrooms

and also in the manner in which they learned such extra-curricular skills as dancing. Even if they were not Maoists, a blacksmith abused by his patron or a student's parent upset about a teacher who did not show up in school could say: "What would the Maoists do if they heard about this?" In many areas, the Maoists appeared to be involved in 'making things right' – making things work the way they were supposed to work within a modern, developmentalist Nepali nation-state. The threat of violence produced their remarkable effectiveness.



PHOTO: BACKWARD SOCIETY EDUCATION (BASE), 2000
Freed bonded laborers camping near an administrative building in Bardiya.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE 'NECESSITY OF VIOLENCE'

This leads us to the problem of violence. After the initiation of the People's War, many commentators expressed shock at the fact that Nepal – the 'zone of peace', the birth place of Lord Buddha, populated by a friendly and peace-loving people – could so quickly plunge into a state of civil war (Cf. Panday 1999: 10-12). The Maoists however offered a different interpretation of the nature and history of the Nepalis.

Their document entitled "Strategy and Tactics of Armed Struggle in Nepal," adopted by the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPN (Maoist) in 1995, contained the following assertions:

1. The reactionary propaganda that the Nepalese people are peace-loving and that they don't like violence is absolutely false. It is an incontrovertible fact that the Nepalese people have been waging violent struggle for their rights since the historical times.
2. Till today whatever general reforms have been achieved by the Nepalese people, behind them there was the force of violent and illegal struggle of the people.

The document goes on to argue that "Today, the greatest responsibility has fallen upon the revolutionaries to initiate armed struggle against feudalism & imperialism and complete the New Democratic revolution by representing that great historical legacy [of the violent struggles by the Nepali people]" (CPN [Maoist]: 1995). Hence, the Maoists challenged the image of peace-loving Nepalis with a narrative of a violent history which asserted the Nepali capacity for, and necessity to, engage in violent struggle for social transformation.



Here, it is important to observe that this document does not repudiate the official Nepali history in its entirety. While it refutes peace and harmony as the central characteristics of Nepali society, it affirms and utilizes another motif in the official history, namely that of 'Nepali braveness' (Cf. Onta 1996). Hence, it claims that the Nepali people are fervent nationalists who "feel proud to lay down their lives while fighting rather than submit to the pressures of the foreigners" and "are the great warriors in the world" (CPN [Maoist]: 1995). Therefore, the Maoist discourse, rather than simply replacing the official discourse, builds on and rearranges the themes developed by the latter, including those of nationalism and progress. The key ideological task in this rearrangement is to construct a narrative that conveys the absolute necessity of revolutionary violence to achieving the progress that the Nepali State promised but never delivered.

In Salyan District, Maoists not only used violence, but often after committing a violent act advertised it in newspapers and newsletters as well as during cultural programs, where they skillfully re-enacted the torture and murder of a 'class enemy'. For instance, after one such murder of a 'class enemy' in early 1997, the Maoists summoned the local people to a cultural program in which they re-enacted how they dragged him outside of his house and cut-off his limbs, little by little. They repeated this program in several different villages. The purpose of these 'propaganda activities', I believe, was to convince the villagers of the necessity and efficacy of revolutionary violence. What the Maoists aimed to convey was it was only Maoist violence that could eliminate the local 'exploiter' whose power derived in part from his close connection with state power. Through such skillful re-enactments, the Maoists undoubtedly aimed to communicate that they were capable of extreme and hence awe-inspiring violence – calculated use of brutality that they hoped made them appear more formidable and effective than their enemy (the Nepali-state) or other self-proclaimed agents of social change (such as NGOs).¹⁰

The following episode concerning the Dasain¹¹ festival contains an example of the kind of narrative construction which attempted to produce a vision of a radical antagonism between the Nepali state and the Nepali people that necessitated revolutionary violence. During the Dasain season, I was listening to Radio Nepal with a couple of Maoist party workers. A Radio Nepal announcer was explaining the traditions involved in Dasain, repeatedly stating that Dasain as a whole was a celebration of the victory of 'Truth' over darkness and evil. We were listening quietly. At the very end of the program, in his last sentence, the announcer explained that Dasain was traditionally celebrated to commemorate Goddess Durga's triumph over Demons. The Maoist workers took a deep breath and said, "Truth over Evil." To the Maoist listeners, thus, what the Radio Nepal announcer repeatedly referred to as a celebration of the triumph of truth over evil was

really a celebration of the subjugation of the non-Hindus by the Hindu Nepali state. They viewed the Demons referred to in the epic story as the real people of Nepal, and the Goddess as an incarnation of the monstrous rulers of Nepal. The Maoist version of Dasain was constructed as a secret (and hence true) history hidden behind the official pronouncements by the Nepali state. The secret history revealed the deceptive and monstrous nature of the Nepali state, and prodded the Nepali people to wake up and fight against its monstrousness.

The secret history of Dasain just described is in fact a version of counter-narratives told by ethnic-activists in many corners of Nepal (Cf. Hangen 2001). On many occasions, I listened to articulate Magars in Salyan engage in lengthy debates about whether Nepali society was essentially a 'caste-society' or 'class-society'. Magars committed to ethnic activism would emphasize caste as the dominant structuring principle of Nepali society. Others, including Magar Maoists, would argue that class was the ultimate determinant, while caste ideology served the interests of the dominant class which consisted mainly of high-caste Hindus. Again the crux of the Maoists' ideological work was to construct a narrative that subsumed ethnic counter-narratives as well as other oppositional narratives – including those of women, dalits, the poor, the landless, and small farmers – and to present revolutionary war as the only true remedy for all forms of oppression (Cf. Pahari 2003).

Maoist narratives constructed the current Nepali State as a monstrous instrument of oppression in the hands of a small minority of feudal and bureaucratic-capitalist classes. Given such a monstrous state, Maoists argued, only violence of spectacular proportion was sufficient to defeat it and to set things right. And violence, they thought, was necessary 'now'. While visiting Salyan during the 1999 parliamentary election campaign, the leader of Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist), Bam Dev Gautam, said that his party was in almost total agreement with the CPN (Maoist) except that his members thought the situation not yet right for an armed struggle. Local Maoists who heard these words commented that, for people like Bam Dev, the 'right time' would never come, and the future would be indefinitely postponed. The Maoists, in contrast, were committed to making necessary changes immediately (or at least within 5 years, as they used to say around 1998). Becoming a Maoist, for them, entailed abandoning the endless chain of calculation and analysis that they saw as postponing radical transformation. Their call was for a leap into destructive/creative action.

The local Maoists' view I just described strikingly mirrors what Prachanda, the General Secretary (at the time)¹² of the CPN (Maoist), told the interviewer, Li Onesto, in the spring of 1999: "The real process of development is breaking with continuation and making a rupture. Everything in nature, in hu-



man history and society ... is the process of breaking through with continuation. ... We condemn all the revisionist cliques as vulgar evolutionarism. We are revolutionary, and revolution means breaking with continuation and the question of making leaps" (Li Onesto 2000). Both the local Maoists and Prachanda, then, embraced rupture.

There could be several ways of interpreting the concurrence between Prachanda and the Maoists in Salyan villages concerning the necessity of rupture. The concurrence could derive from the effectiveness of Maoist Party indoctrination, reaching from its top to its 'bottom' in the villages. It could also be interpreted as a case of opportunism, with villagers strategically 'adopting' the Maoist position because it served their own pragmatic (and not necessarily revolutionary) interests. I would like to propose an alternative interpretation, one more in accordance with what the local Maoist cadre I quoted earlier meant when she said Maobadis (Maoists) were not Jagiribadis (Employment-ists). The interpretation I would propose is that Prachanda and the local Maoists concurred because they were participants in the same collective imagination. Becoming a Maoist, at least for the local Maoist cadre I quoted and others like her, was not simply a means to pursue personal interests. It entailed, rather, a commitment to, and participation in, a particular – revolutionary – way of envisioning the world, a vision that propelled one toward a particular form of action. Key features of that vision, as we have seen, included the absolute imperatives of progress and improvement, necessity of a radical rupture with the past in order to bring about authentic progress, a group of educated 'youth' as those privileged to bring about that change, and the Nepali nation as both the object and ground for real development.¹³

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that, in addition to macro-political economic analyses and inquiries into local histories of domination and resistance, we need to explore the forms of collective imagination that impelled certain forms of action – in this case, participation in an armed movement with the aim of overtaking the state power. In historical terms, I showed that the project of development in Nepal, including such a major undertaking as the creation of a national education system, provided crucial conceptual and institutional conditions

for the current Maoist mobilization.

I am not trying to claim that the 'lack' of development was a cause of the Maoist war. Nor am I trying to establish that 'incomplete' or 'uncoordinated' development was responsible. Rather I am urging that we attend to the radical transformation of the conceptual and institutional field that development interventions created, a transformation that has reshaped the field of political possibilities. The collective imagination of the People's War has emerged and gained its force within this field of reshaped possibilities. The Maoists have promoted a vision in which the armed revolution appears as an inevitable step forward, given the monstrous Nepali state that was impeding true (and inevitable) progress.

Understanding why their vision might appeal to some,



PHOTO: TATSURO FUJIKURA, 2000

Bonded laborers during Kathmandu victory rally after the declaration of emancipation by government.

or even to many Nepalis does not, of course, mean that we have to agree with it. The task for those of us who do not agree with CPN (Maoist)'s violent politics include, I would argue, explorations of other forms of collective imagination about social transformation that are non-violent but equally compelling and effective. I have in mind, for example, local organizations and networks that have mobilized for the liberation of bonded agricultural laborers, the 'Kamaiyas', in western Nepal. Their mobilization, independent of any political parties, forced the Nepali government to declare the 'emancipation' of tens of thousands of bonded laborers and thereby introduced major changes in class relations in the western plains. The movement is continuing, as a large number of 'liberated' laborers are still demanding government to

provide them with land to live on and cultivate. As with the Maoists, we cannot understand this mobilization without reference to transformations brought forward in rural western Nepal through development interventions (See Fujikura 2001a, 2001b). However, unlike the Maoists, those who mobilized for Kamaiya liberation did not aim to take over state power and used methods that were decidedly non-violent. Rather than aiming at the violent purification of the nation, the movement demanded, and is still demanding, that the Nepali state make good on its promises of development, of upholding constitution, of basing its legitimacy on being able to ensure the security and welfare of its citizens. At the same time, the movement's demands are based on universal principles – those of human rights – that are not contingent on the policies of any particular state. Correspondingly, the network that supports the movement crosses state boundaries. In con-



trast to the Maoists' violent politics, we could characterize the Kamaiya movement as a "politics of patience." Arjun Appadurai (2002) used this term to designate a form of socio-political engagement that values negotiation and coalition building, one that acknowledges that positive social transformations take long time to materialize. The politics of patience, Appadurai writes, is "constructed against the tyranny of emergency" – the emergency experienced everyday by people suffering from poverty and exploitation (Appadurai 2002:30). Those bonded laborers who struggled for their own liberation and who, since the 'emancipation,' have endured without their own land or housing, have NOT joined the Maoists, but have been patiently working to make their society, the Nepali government, and international community live up to their own promises, promises of civility and of equality. These laborers provide a remarkable example of the politics of patience. And they provide an alternative vision to those, on either side of the current conflict, who see violence as its only solution.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This is a revised version of the paper I presented at the "War on Terrorism, War as Terrorism" Conference at Madison, Wisconsin, on October 10, 2002. Revisions were made in part in response to general discussion and specific comments offered during the conference. Special thanks to Deborah Gewertz, Genevieve Lakier, and John Metz for their helpful suggestions and criticisms through the course of revisions.

² The Nepali Congress won 110 seats, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) won 69, and the United People's Front won 9.

³ In addition, members of the party also attacked a distillery in Gorkha, and hurled a petrol bomb at the Pepsi-Cola factory in Kathmandu (Nepal Rastriya Buddhijibi Sangathan 2054 v.s.: 25-26).

⁴ According to INSEC's count, the number of people killed in connection with the People's War between 13 February 1996 and 25 November 2001 was 1803 (993 killed by the government; 810 killed by the Maoists). In contrast, the death toll between 26 November 2001 and 8 June 2002 was 3167 (2552 killed by the government, 615 killed by the Maoists) bringing the total death toll from the conflict (by 8 June 2002) to 4970 (INSEC 2002). There are many reports that suggest that the Maoists, in the frontline areas, have intensified their coercive tactics forcing labor and forcing recruit-

ment of villagers into their military force. As a consequence, many villagers, especially youth, have fled from their homes into India or elsewhere.

⁵ See, for example, the website maintained by Amnesty International's Nepal Section: <http://www.amnestynepal.org/> See, also, Dixit 2002.

⁶ See Nickson (1992). His argument has been quoted approvingly by Mainali (2055 v.s.) Sharma (2057 v.s.) and Thapa (2002).

⁷ Magars are considered an ethnic group, while Matwali Chetris are considered a caste group. In terms of an encompassing caste hierarchy, they are both located around the middle of the scale, below the 'sacred-thread-wearing' castes of Brahmins, Thakuris and Tagadhari Chetris which have dominated the highest echelons of social and political power.

⁸ This acronym refers to School Leaving Certificate exams, taken after ten years of formal education. The passing of the SLC exams is a minimum qualification for many government jobs.

⁹ 'Dalits' here refer to those occupational caste groups who have traditionally been considered 'untouchables'.

¹⁰ In the villages, rumors about the super-human natures of Maoist fighters abounded. The rumors persisted even after many villagers had come in contact with actual Maoist cadres who looked exactly like ordinary Nepalis. Most often, eye-witness accounts of a given 'action' (an attack on a bank for example) would describe how some of the Maoists were taller and bigger than any Nepali anyone had ever seen.

¹¹ A major festival and national holiday in autumn.

¹² Prachanda was later named the Chairman of NCP (Maoist) at its Second National Conference in February, 2001.

¹³ For a useful discussion of the often mutually contradictory characteristics of the modern notion of emancipation, including the demands for radical dichotomy, holism, transparency, rationality and authenticity, see Laclau (1996).

