

## Where Maoists Still Matter

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The boy wore an M-16 bullet on a thin gold chain around his neck and was unusually talkative to strangers. Around his wrist was an ammunition belt that he twirled like a bracelet. He said these were souvenirs from the battlefield at nearby Khara, after a celebrated clash a few months earlier between the People's Liberation Army and the Royal Nepalese Army.

Mani Kendra Gharti was his name. He was 17. And he offered two reasons for having joined the Maoists earlier this year: curiosity and peer pressure. He was a student when his uncle, a party worker recently released from prison, pressed him into service. Mani was better suited to carry a tune than a rifle, and so he signed up for the party's cultural wing, took on a nom de guerre - Comrade Prabhat - and went around singing and dancing revolutionary songs from village to village, usually at schools. This is one way the party spreads its gospel and draws new members. Comrade Prabhat's decision seems to have been prompted mainly by boredom, and by this afternoon he seemed no longer convinced he had made the right move.

"It would have been better to stay in school," he said, playing with his ammunition belt. "Once you join, you can't leave."

My Maoist minder for the day, Ratna Mahara, overheard this and intervened. There was no peer pressure, Ratna said; Comrade Prabhat had been keen to join. Ratna didn't yell, but there was no hiding his displeasure.

Prabhat admitted he had been curious. But he stood his ground. There was also peer pressure, he said.

Silence. Then Ratna took him aside, whispered something that neither I nor my interpreter could hear and sent the boy into the jumble of houses across a thin spit of river. The next time I saw Comrade Prabhat it was pitch dark and he was wearing a forest green uniform, a red tie knotted loosely around his neck. A fluorescent light had been hooked up to a car battery. Prabhat and his comrades - boys in red ties, girls in red sashes, Miss Universe-style - had been persuaded to treat us to a revue, a practice run of what they would perform at an indoctrination session later that week. The dances were a hybrid of Nepali tradition and global-guerrilla pantomime. The songs fused the romanticism of Keats with the sloganeering of the Gang of Four. One song went something like this:

The proletariat's fortress grows stronger.  
Like clouds that part and reveal the red sky, like daylight after darkness,

There is great happiness and greenery in the forest.  
That is how happy my heart is.

Built of small fighters with flip-flops for combat boots, suffused with rage against a long legacy of oppression based on caste and ethnicity, the Maoists' guerrilla war began nearly a decade ago in these villages of Rolpa District, in the midwestern foothills of the Himalayas. Since then, it has spread a peculiar mixture of terror and desire across the countryside, cost more than 12,000 lives and come to be arguably the most resilient and ruinous Communist insurgency in the world today.

[Nepal](#) is a landlocked nation, slightly larger than [Arkansas](#), pressed up against the Himalayas. Its nearly 28 million citizens are among the poorest in the world. Its system of government - after more than a decade of tumultuous semi-democracy - is, in effect, an absolute monarchy, ruled by the world's only Hindu king, Gyanendra Bikram Bir Shah Dev, a chain smoker with perpetually downturned lips. Some of his followers regard him as a direct descendant of the god Vishnu.

Our journey from King Gyanendra's capital in Katmandu to the Maoists' capital in Rolpa took an hour by plane, nine hours by car, and nine days on foot, up and down the hills, through clouds and forest and one red-flag hamlet after another. "Any goal short of capturing the state is revisionism," screamed the red-ink graffiti on the side of one house. At each stop, Maoist cadres greeted us with an upraised fist and a *lal salaam* - "red salute" in Nepali. At most stops there was also a Hindu tradition of hospitality - a dash of vermilion smeared on our foreheads - and once, a rousing send-off by a marching band of barefoot Dalits, or those considered "untouchable" in the Hindu caste system. A tag team of Maoist minders accompanied us through the hills, with a promise to let us see for ourselves the fruits of their revolution. At the end of the road, on a hill above the revolutionary capital Thabang, they said, was a model Maoist school, a tiny but vital building block for the new society they sought to erect. Each of the comrades in turn urged us onward to this Xanadu.

To most observers, it is obvious that the Maoists cannot win the war and cannot rule Nepal. But a young and infirm democracy and an increasingly discredited monarchy have together rewarded the Maoists with newfound leverage. The Nepali newspaper columnist C. K. Lal described them as "political entrepreneurs," able to exploit the cracks in the system. I asked him, Isn't a Maoist insurgency a bit retro? He told me to consider medieval Katmandu and the strange and bloody misadventures of its royal court: "We are living in a time warp. An absolute monarchy belongs to the 14th, 15th century. One anachronism invites another anachronism." Nepal has struggled to find a more viable politics than this contest between the 15th century and one of the most absurd ideological innovations of the 20th. But the circumstances of Nepal have conspired against reform - to such a degree that the Maoists may be gaining the upper hand.

Nepal's own Tiananmen Square came in April 1990, when, in response to street protests, Gyanendra's predecessor, King Birendra, opened the doors for parliamentary elections, a new constitution and a free press. With an elected government came roads, private radio stations, aid money and ambitions among ordinary Nepalis to improve their lot. Perhaps most important, the

proliferation of schools in the countryside after 1990 taught a generation of young men and women how to read and write - and become political.

What 1990 failed to deliver was perhaps more significant for the political entrepreneurs of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). The new constitution paid lip service to Nepal's diversity, but Hinduism remained the state religion, and calls for more local autonomy, to reflect the country's true demographic mix, were ignored. The upper-caste Brahmins and Kshatriyas - priests and warriors, respectively, in the Hindu pecking order - continued to run everything. There was no meaningful land reform. The army remained beholden to the king rather than to Parliament. Politicians, local and national, indulged in corrupt dealings. For most enterprising Nepalis, the best prospects required leaving Nepal.

These were the considerable shortcomings that the Maoist political entrepreneurs sought to exploit. By 1994, Nepal's Communists had split. One faction, led by Prachanda - what would become the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) - was kept out of the elections. Many Nepalis regard that as the crucial moment in the political history of Communism in Nepal. Had the C.P.N. (M) been allowed to contest for power, it might never have resorted to war. By the time this was clear, however, it was too late.

No sooner had democracy arrived in 1990 than Ratna (our party minder in the Rolpa hills) learned from his father that war was imminent. His father was a Communist old-timer and is today a member of the Prachanda faction's Central Committee. Weapons had been procured over the border in [India](#). And even as the Communist Party of Nepal engaged the democratic system - once winning the second largest bloc of seats in Parliament - preparations for an armed confrontation were under way. In February 1996, the Maoists launched a series of coordinated attacks, starting in the midwest. In a village called Holeri, on the road from Nepalgunj to Maoist country, a gutted police post still stands as a monument to that first strike.

Ratna remembered exactly where he was when the revolution began. He and his friends ran around their village shouting revolutionary slogans. Then some of his friends went to the next village and broke the kneecaps of some young men they considered thugs. Ratna was 14 at the time.

For the first five years of the war, it was local police officers who fought the guerrillas and their suspected sympathizers. Then, on June 1, 2001, came the nocturnal massacre inside Narayanhiti Palace in Katmandu. King Birendra and his son, the crown prince, Dipendra, were killed. The king's brother, Gyanendra, and his family survived. Three days later, with a nation in mourning and conspiracy theories swirling under the rain clouds, Gyanendra took the throne. At his order, the Royal Nepalese Army was unleashed against the Nepalese people for the first time in history.

In 2002, King Gyanendra dissolved Parliament. This February he imposed emergency rule, jailed some of Nepal's most prominent elected officials and vowed to crush the Maoists. But the Maoists haven't been crushed. Since emergency rule was imposed in February, 1,334 people have been killed, an average of more than five each day, according to a human rights group called Informal Sector Service Center in Katmandu. The Maoists, for their part, carried out assaults across the countryside; at the same time, they started cozying up to the sort of politicians

they had once regarded as "class enemies" and often butchered. They began reaching out to Nepal's most powerful allies too - yesterday's "imperialists," from India, [Britain](#) and the [United States](#). In early September came the Maoists' biggest surprise: a temporary cease-fire. It was a deft move designed to further isolate the king at home and abroad. By some measures, it worked; the king canceled a scheduled appearance at a summit meeting of world leaders in New York.

Meanwhile, Katmandu witnessed a kind of Prague Spring after the suspension of emergency rule and the passing of the summer monsoons. In late August and September, street protests echoed with cries for the ouster of Gyanendra, making it increasingly apparent that, if nothing else, the king's February clampdown gave a fillip to the Maoists' principal war aim: it began to turn the nation against monarchy.

Three weeks after the Maoists' cease-fire pledge, King Gyanendra announced that local elections would be held early in 2006 and parliamentary polls a year after that. Most of the country's largest political parties - having lost patience with, and even respect for, the monarchy - agreed to boycott, and a seven-party alliance called for new talks with the Maoists.

Initially, the Maoists' best opportunity for driving a wedge between Nepalese and the monarchy was to pay respect to those castes that a Hindu monarchy was bound to trample on. "We Dalits, we weren't even considered human beings," said an old man named Irkha Bahadur Pariyar, a tailor by birth, in Thabang, the Maoists' run-down capital. "Dogs were considered more human."

Dalits couldn't fetch water at the upstream village tap, the old man said. They had to go to the one downstream, so as not to pollute the water for those higher up the caste ladder. Pariyar had been a tailor since age 9. His father was a tailor, too. His grandfather the same. Today, two of his three sons are migrant workers in the Persian Gulf. He doesn't know what they do, only that they left because it became impossible to stay, thanks to the constant police harassment of young men and women. A third son works for the party - as a tailor, stitching uniforms.

Was Pariyar pleased with the party's accomplishments in Thabang? "Well, the party could have done more," he said. "They could have done better. But this is the beginning." He looked at his nephew, a member of the party's Dalit committee, and smiled. His wiry fingers returned to a pair of blue pleated trousers under his sewing machine. He complained of a backache and refused to say any more.

The stated Maoist plan for Nepal was always a mix of leveling social relations, addressing serious grievances, imposing far-left Puritanism and promoting economic growth, if there was to be any, through either revolutionary enthusiasm or, if necessary, revolutionary violence. The party's first list of demands, presented in February 1996, was typical: a call for a new constitution and an army accountable to the government rather than the palace; calls to ban "vulgar" Hindi films from India; an end to the recruitment for foreign armies of Gurkha soldiers, most of whom hailed from the midwestern hill districts. The government ignored these demands entirely.

In their own territory, the Maoists have instituted a raft of new laws. Untouchability is proscribed, in theory and practice. Alcohol and child marriage are banned. New polygamous marriages are not tolerated, although, depending on the local leadership, existing ones are left alone. Migrating to India in search of work is frowned upon. Legal disputes are adjudicated by a roving people's court that Nepali human rights advocates consider a travesty of justice. Policing is done by a people's militia, members of which also appeared to run Thabang's main tea shop.

Red flags mark the gates of this guerrilla capital. Olive-colored Chairman Mao caps are sold at the People's Liberation Army cooperative, along with ammunition belts and hemp soap. Morning drills for new recruits begin with the rooster's first crow. The nearest police station or military post or post office - or indeed any sign of the authority of the Royal Kingdom of Nepal, within whose boundaries this hamlet officially sits - is a three-day hike through the hills. Chickens cross the road, back and forth. The smoke of cooking fires hangs low in the air, making everything sooty, making it hard to breathe. There is not a single child without a runny nose, and it's not even winter. Medicines are extremely difficult to ferry into these parts, thanks to military and guerrilla checkpoints along the way. The nearest doctor is a couple of days' walk.

Up and down the jagged Rolpa hills, small girls in plastic flip-flops haul bushels of fodder and firewood on their backs. A man lugs a manual sewing machine on his shoulders across a fast-moving river, swollen from rain. As always in the weeks before the monsoon, the hills are terraced with seedlings of rice; if the sky is generous, it will be sufficient to yield enough food for maybe half the year. If they are lucky, people will eat two meals, identical, day after day: rice, lentils and maybe a side of marijuana-leaf chutney. Among the few name-brand goods you can buy at the village shops are instant noodle packets with improbably giddy names like Yum Yum and Shakalaka Boom. There is no electricity here. In one village, Ghartigaun, on the road to Thabang, there was once a telephone tower, the villagers said, but the Maoists destroyed it years ago. Outside their so-called base areas like this one in the midwestern hills, the Maoists don't hold territory for long. But for all practical purposes rural Nepal, apart from the district capitals, is theirs to rule.

On the way to Maoist country, I stopped to see the district education office in Nepalgunj. In the last 18 months, it had been bombed "only eight times," the education officer, Vishnu Prasad Thaiba, gamely said. Of 220 instruction days in the official school calendar, classes had actually been in session for 150 days. Two teachers had disappeared. (Last year, according to the United Nations, Nepal had the largest number of new disappearance cases in the world.)

A little farther up into the hills, the principal of a primary school said that all his teachers recently had been whisked off to a weeklong Maoist training program. In the neighboring district of Dang, a teacher's corpse was found beheaded this summer; the Maoists evidently suspected him of spying.

Routinely, the Maoists' student wing - Ratna was among its leaders - sent Thaiba a list of demands: hire more teachers, install toilets and gyms, ban the singing of the national anthem. Thaiba refused to be engaged in a conversation about the merits of their education agenda. "I take information only," Thaiba said dryly. "I don't have any opinions, any ideas."

Why? I asked.

"I will be lost," he said. "I will be disappeared. My family will not see my corpse."

The portraits of 13 successive kings of Nepal hung on his wall. Thaiba was a cheerful man, with the short-sleeved gray safari suit of a lifelong civil servant and, considering his surroundings, a wry sense of humor. Earlier that week, bombs had been hurled at three public schools - there were only explosions and no damage, he said - and he nimbly led us downstairs and onto the parking lot to point out the private school across the road. It had been bombed a few weeks earlier.

Why this intense revolutionary focus on schools? For the Maoists, schools represent a vital source of both revenue and recruits. Teachers, often the most influential elites in rural communities, can either be roped in as allies or eliminated as enemies. (Tulsi Kumari Dangi, a Nepali language teacher we met along the road, said it was routine practice for all teachers to give 5 percent of their salaries every month, plus the entirety of their annual bonus.) Public schools are also the last vestige of His Majesty's government across the Nepali countryside. And, of course, schools in an almost media-free rural society are the best place to assert control over the public mind.

The Maoists have shut down many schools, particularly the fee-paying private schools that have mushroomed in recent years. They have ferried away students and teachers for indoctrination and forced labor. They have brought their Communist song-and-dance shows to schoolyards. They have made children dig trenches around schools in preparation for what they regard to be an imminent, final military onslaught. A Unicef survey of one war-torn district found that the number of children who showed up for year-end exams had dropped by nearly half. To Unicef officials, this signaled that children were either not coming to school at all, or that their instruction days had shrunk so much that they no longer bothered to sit for the year-end exams. The gains made in the last decade to get children into schools, they concluded, were at risk of being lost. I learned in Thabang that no one in the last two years had passed the national 10th-grade matriculation exam, a benchmark recognized as the completion of formal schooling.

Maoists will tell you that the "feudal" education system of the "old regime" is not worth saving anyway. They are preparing for a new day. Sanskrit will be outlawed. Royal history will be replaced with people's history. Teachers will impart practical training and revolutionary values: patriotism, selflessness and the principles of "scientific Communism." A Katmandu-based television journalist, Kishore Nepal, was shown a copy of the model curriculum on one of his trips into Maoist country. The fourth-grade syllabus contained an introduction to dialectical materialism, poetry about Maoist martyrs and an introduction to homemade guns. Fifth graders would learn about the Spartacus revolt and receive a primer on "explosives, grenades and booby traps."

On our second morning in Thabang, we trudged an hour uphill for a look at the model school that our Maoist minders had promised to show us. Its doors were bolted. Benches and cots were piled hurly-burly inside classrooms. The outhouse had never been used. The teachers, I was told, were elsewhere, receiving training; where, they couldn't say. The books were being printed;

where, they couldn't say either. Conveniently enough, the students had already gone home for summer holiday. As an afterthought, the chief of Rolpa District produced two orphans, ages 7 and 12, who nervously nodded when asked if they were studying at the Maoist school. They did not recall when they had last been in class.

In the early 1970's, when I was a child in Calcutta, Maoism was sweeping through our part of India - and through parts of my family. The uncles I knew from that time lived with peasants in the countryside, and when, occasionally, they turned up to visit us in the city, smoking cheap cigarettes and carrying hand-woven shoulder bags, they taught me not nursery rhymes but marching songs for the revolution. Once, while sitting with my mother in a sari shop in Calcutta, I broke out into one such song. My mother thinks the lyrics had something to do with a red sun rising. Whatever it was, it was not safe for a 3-year-old to be singing in a sari shop in Calcutta. Terrified, she scooped me off the counter, ran from the shop and jumped onto the nearest rickshaw. My singing uncles went underground and some were soon dead. In 1975, as emergency rule was declared in India, my family left the country.

In the 30 years since, vast changes have swept through South Asian life and politics, but the Maoists, with their songs, their hubris and their grungy hand-woven shoulder bags, have held on, even flourished. Amid the economic boom in India, Maoist guerrillas thrive across a vast crescent of forest and countryside stretching from Andhra Pradesh in the center of the subcontinent northeast to Bihar and Bengal. Their advance is slow, but they have endured, and they will kill those who seem to oppose them - usually local policemen. Meanwhile, in the years since the Berlin Wall fell and Communism was declared dead, Nepal's Maoist insurgency has blossomed.

I met Comrade Huri on one of my last days in Maoist country, on the morning that she and her fellow soldiers of the People's Liberation Army had stationed themselves in a village called Tila, for the landmark inauguration of the first completed stretch of the road the party was building through Rolpa. Her real name was Tika Gharti Magar, and she was 24.

She said she was a teenager when the police came around her village, not far from here, and singled out Communists and their sympathizers for harassment. The first time they arrested her, she was accused of writing Maoist slogans on the village wall and threatened with life imprisonment. Once, when she and some local kids defeated some officers in an impromptu volleyball contest, the police cursed and searched their schoolbags. If the police hadn't harassed her people like that, she told me, perhaps her life would have taken a different turn. "The only alternative was to join the Maoists," she said.

In eighth grade, Tika Gharti Magar dropped out of school. By the time police officers came to arrest her a second time, she had left home. She joined the party's student wing, then the women's wing; then, at age 18, she became a full-fledged fighter. "As it is, there is so much suppression, and on top of that, I am a woman," she said, dressed in fatigues and a pair of cheery lilac-colored plastic sandals. "I thought I must go for real war for women's liberation, for class struggle. I am young. I understand my country's problems. I needed some military experience."

What's it like being a woman in the P.L.A.? First, she said, "our party has a policy of total equality." Then she said that sometimes, young male recruits had a bit of trouble following orders from a woman. She also told me how radically her own life had changed since she stepped into uniform. Before, in her village, if she wanted to go out somewhere, she would have to be escorted by a friend or one of her brothers. Today, she is a platoon commander, with 25 soldiers under her authority. At dawn this morning, she was on a ridge, keeping watch over these hills, in case of an enemy attack.

I asked her about her ambitions for the future. She looked bewildered, as if despite her training and her confidence she hadn't bothered to think about who she would be after the revolution. "Whatever the party decides" was her final answer.

Not everyone would make her choice, even if the alternative consisted of flight, immiseration and fear. Lal Chandra Jaisi's story was typical. A formerly well-to-do farmer and a supporter of the Nepali Congress Party, Jaisi said he had for years been friends with the local Maoists in his village, Dhayankot. They stayed in one of his homes. His daughters-in-law cooked for them. They debated politics with his family, and Jaisi was on their side on many issues. The idea of equality, he said, still appeals to him.

"It's the violence I don't like, all this destruction of infrastructure, the coercion, the attacks against political workers - all this I don't like," he told me in a refugee camp made of poles and blue tarps.

He experienced coercion up close one night when his Maoist friends suddenly asked that he turn over his three sons to the party. His sons fled to India. The Maoists retaliated, beating him up and seizing his house, his shop, his apple trees and his beehives. That's when he fled, too, with his wife, three daughters-in-law and two grandchildren. He had no intention of staying in this swampy camp. But he has no other place to go.

The Maoists have climbed down from their original demand of a "people's democracy." They have invited political parties to resume working in their base areas and, as one of the party's Central Committee members put it, they have promised not to look at the politicians against whom they once waged war "with yesterday's eyes." Informal talks between the parties and Maoist emissaries have already begun.

The guerrillas' commander in chief, Prachanda, does not come out of hiding to talk to journalists. But in an e-mail interview, he insisted that while the ultimate aim of his movement remained the ushering in of Communism, adjustments would be made to suit the times. "Right now we are fighting against the remnant of medieval feudalism represented by an autocratic monarchy," an e-mail message read. "So, our immediate aim is to liberate the masses from the yoke of feudal autocracy."

Born Pushpa Kamal Dahal and trained in agricultural science, Prachanda had once been employed on a U.S.A.I.D.-financed rural-development project in these midwestern hills. Today his insurgency, combined with the growing protests against the king, has placed Prachanda and



his movement in a particularly advantaged position. He is not inclined to be cast into the dustbin of failed revolutions. He is willing, he says, to work within the confines of what the Maoists call "bourgeois democracy."

"We are quite serious to develop our ideology so as to face the challenges posed by the situation of 21st century," Prachanda wrote.

Prachanda's friend from college days, Prasanta - a Central Committee member I met on my way to Thabang - told me there was no need for anyone to fear their party. "We have said what we mean by people's democracy," he said. "It is a multiparty people's democracy." Nepali politicians ought to trust the revolutionaries, he added; they ought to know by now they have no choice. "We have emerged as a big force," he said flatly.

It was hard to imagine how and why the Maoists would give up the control they had won, especially the total hold over these hills they call their base areas, and more important, how they will persuade the thoroughly indoctrinated rank-and-file fighters to abandon war before a total takeover of the state. The hubris of a young cadre, Comrade Azad, was typical: Nepal, he told me, would be "the base area" for worldwide Maoist revolution.

Moreover, whether the Maoists will actually share power in a democratic system, or take up the gun again if they lose at the polls, remains a critical subject of dispute. "I don't know if they know what they will settle for," said one senior diplomat involved in talks with all sides in the conflict. "In private, they can be quite candid. They understand their own limits. They understand the need for a political way out."

They also need to show they can build as well as destroy. The Nepalese state has decayed so far that it, too, needs to prove that it is good for something other than retaining military power. And so the Maoists and the state are engaged in a contest to see who can build a better road. The Royal Nepalese Army has also been building one just northwest of Maoist country. A German aid group was working on a road in Rolpa District until harassment from local Maoist leaders prompted it to pull out. The party's own Martyrs' Road is slated to connect Nuwagaon, the southernmost village under Maoist control, 56 miles up to Thabang. The Maoists have used some of their precious explosives to blast through the toughest stretches of mountain, but the rest is done by conscripted labor crews. They are cutting a road through the Himalayas with their bare hands.

One morning, not far from Nuwagaon, I watched a man with a hammerhead drill disembowel the side of a mountain. The underside of the rock shone with specks of silver and mauve. On another stretch of road, close to Tila, I watched small boys and hunch-backed old women erecting a reinforcement wall under the gravel trail, one stone at a time.

The construction crew was not unlike a chain gang. Each family in Maoist territory was required to send one person for a 15-day shift. They were responsible for their own food and lodging, which meant hauling their own rice on their backs and sleeping under a tree. Several road workers said this was already their second shift of the year. For this crew, who had walked two

days from their home village, the Martyrs' Road would bring no direct benefit: they used another gravel road, only two hours' walk from their village.

Aiber Pun, 54, a farmer like the rest of his crewmates, said he had sent his 17-year-old daughter on the last work call. He didn't have the heart to send her a second time, he said.

Are you happy about the road project? I asked.

He cracked a slight smile and fetched another rock. "What can I say? They said to come and do a development project. So we come."

On inauguration morning, Comrade Huri and her fellow P.L.A. soldiers were posted around the hills surrounding Tila. New gates had been erected, streamers hung and the portraits of the party gods (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao) had been placed on the table set aside for V.I.P.'s. There was some anxiety about the prospect of an air attack, but a thick cloud cover, Comrade Huri told me, meant the chance was slim.

Soon, the first official bus, groaning with comrades, came barreling up the road, followed by a long train of children, hollering in delirious joy. They had never before seen such a vehicle.

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