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## Violent Histories and Political Consciousness: Reflections on Nepal's Maoist Movement from Piskar Village

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## VIOLENT HISTORIES AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: REFLECTIONS ON NEPAL'S MAOIST MOVEMENT FROM PISKAR VILLAGE<sup>1</sup>

This paper considers the links between the Maoist movement and past histories of political violence in rural Nepal. I explore how a 1984 police massacre of villagers in Piskar, Sindhupalchok, fostered local political consciousness, which later became essential to the Maoist movement's ability to motivate participants at the grassroots level. Most observers of the early phases of the Maoist movement in Nepal treated it either as an incomprehensible, anomalous rupture in a generally peaceful political field, or as a case of political party splits gone awry. I argue instead that the Maoist insurrection is deeply embedded in Nepal's violent history of state formation and is a contemporary manifestation of the long-term interplay between politics and consciousness created by that history. In order to understand the movement's tenacity, particularly in an ostensibly post-Communist world order, we must address the question of motivation on the part of those who have formed its rank and file, and examine the historical conditions that presaged their participation. In order to do this, I draw upon the theories of Antonio Gramsci to consider Nepal's current situation a "crisis of hegemony", as well as upon ethnographic and historical material from my own research in the Piskar area.

*In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking . . . or because huge masses . . . have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or crisis of the state as a whole.*

—Antonio Gramsci (as cited in Forgacs 2000: 218)

### INTRODUCTION

Most observers of the early phases of the Maoist movement in Nepal initially treated it either as an incomprehensible, anomalous rupture in a generally peaceful political field, or as a case of political party splits gone awry.<sup>2</sup> Absent from these discussions is any substantive consideration of the roles rural residents have played in the rebellion.<sup>3</sup> I argue instead that the Maoist insurrection is deeply embedded in Nepal's violent history of state formation and is a contemporary manifestation of the long-term interplay between politics and consciousness created by that history. In order to understand the movement's tenacity, particularly in an ostensibly post-Communist world order, we must address the question of motivation on the part of those who have formed its rank and file, and examine the historical conditions that presaged their participation.

Antonio Gramsci's analyses of societies in political crisis provide an insightful set of conceptual tools to guide our enquiries of the Nepali situation. Gramsci was the leader of the Italian Communist Party from 1924–26, when he was arrested and imprisoned until 1937. He was released just in time to die from a disease he had contracted in prison, but during his incarceration he had several influential insights for Marxist theory, which he recorded in notebooks that were eventually published posthumously. He attempted to transcend traditional Marxism's economic determinism, which gave primacy to economic production and treated political and cultural discourse, as well as personal consciousness, as dependent "superstructure" that adjusts to changes in economic production systems. While still recognizing the importance of historical conditions, Gramsci focused on the active role social, cultural, and political discourses play on the ideological level to influence individual consciousness, control social groups, and

thereby consolidate the power of dominant classes. Spending several years in prison for his political beliefs, Gramsci developed the key concept of "hegemony." The term has since been used widely, although imprecisely (Kurtz 1996), to mean the set of ideas and assumptions promoted by a dominant group. Gramsci's definition was more complex: hegemonic discourse was not limited only to the strategies used by those already in power to justify their rule, it could also characterize the ideological strategies dissidents employed to justify an alternative vision of society. Hegemony also implies the successful alliance of diverse social groups and classes to effect change. Broadly defined, Gramsci's approach acknowledges the importance of the historical parameters which limit the development of individual political consciousness, while recognizing that political consciousness is simultaneously mediated through culture and transformed on the level of individual practice and agency.<sup>4</sup>

I consider Nepal's current situation a "crisis of hegemony" because all three of Gramsci's conditions for such a crisis have been met: "a crisis at the top, one of political and party representation; a serious economic situation . . . ; and a crisis 'at the base,' marked by the entry of the masses on to the historical stage and their ability to organize themselves and lead a process of alliances."<sup>5</sup> In this paper I focus on the third point: the formation of political actors at the "base" level. Gramsci's concept of "practical ideology," which describes the way in which hegemonic discourse is understood by common people through the idiom of economy and production, is central to this endeavor.

Since I aim to outline the conditions of consciousness that have led to individual participation in the Maoist movement, my account of the crisis of hegemony in Nepal is inherently ethnographic and local. Part of why it took so long for scholars to recognize the gravity of Nepal's political situation was because the "regional ethnography traditions"<sup>6</sup> in Nepal have focused on describing small-scale village-based communities at the expense of examining state structures.<sup>7</sup> Early attempts to address this bias in analyses of the Maoist movement stepped too far to the other side, seeking to explain the revolt primarily in terms of state and party-level dynamics. My intention is to steer a middle course that both focuses on local experience, and situates it in the broader framework

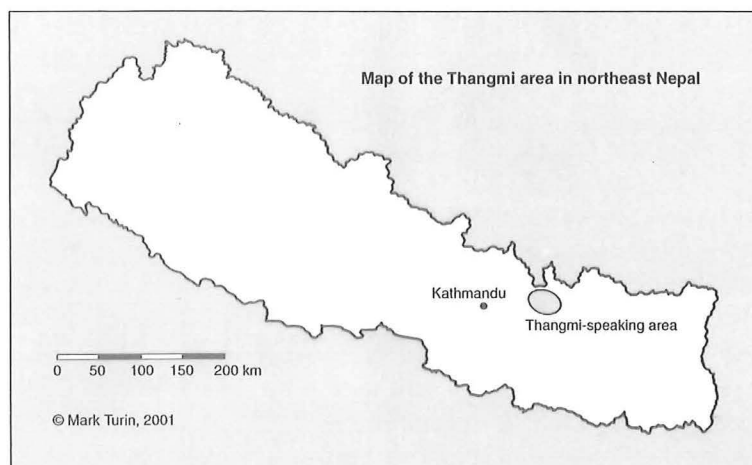
of national processes. Such an analysis must also have an historical aspect which can, in James Scott's words, provide the long-term background of "slow, grinding, quiet struggle over rents, crops, labor and taxes"<sup>8</sup> that underlies any explosive revolutionary movement. Indeed, in the Nepali context, "what is missing from the picture of the periodic explosions is the underlying vision of justice that informs them and their specific goals and targets, which are often quite rational indeed".<sup>9</sup>

My own small contribution to this larger ethnographic project

focuses on political violence and resistance in the ethnically Thangmi village of Piskar, in the Sindhupalchok district of northeastern Nepal.<sup>10</sup> Piskar was the site of a 1984 massacre by police forces after villagers allegedly protested against the state-supported exploitative policies of local landlords. It provides a specific microcosmic example of the development of village level political

consciousness in relation to regional and national events. At the same time, the narrative from Piskar presented here should not be reified as the master narrative for all of Nepal; instead, it should be seen as a first step towards collecting diverse, and even conflicting, narratives from across the country during different historical phases in an effort to piece together the full story.

Detailed information on daily life in Maoist-affected rural Nepal has been hard to obtain, and the account presented here is the result of accidental providence rather than explicit ethnographic intention. From 1998–2000, I was resident in Nepal as a Fulbright scholar, conducting research on the ethnohistory and ritual practice of the Thangmi ethnic group of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts. During the course of my research, the Maoists began to build their 'base areas' in these two districts, and I unwittingly came in contact with both their agents and their ideology. Only after the fact did I realize that I had witnessed a crucial moment in the formation of local political consciousness as I watched my close friends and collaborators first become aware of the Maoist project and then consider its implications.<sup>11</sup> My research on the Maoist movement, then, is a sort of "accidental anthropology."<sup>12</sup> My local relationships were pre-determined by my previous residence in the area, and my perspective on the unfolding



political situation was shaped by my ongoing fieldwork in the Thangmi community. Furthermore, the historical documents on which this paper draws all originate from Thangmi cultural committees. My bias towards Thangmi villagers' experience of the situation naturally colors my analysis here. The next step in understanding Piskar's history will be unearthing the official histories of the same events, and pairing them with the Thangmi accounts to create a more complete picture of the unfolding crisis at both the local and state level.

#### THE ARGUMENT FOR FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

The focus on ethnographic detail is particularly urgent because most analyses of the Maoist movement in Nepal have focused on the other two aspects of a Gramscian crisis: the breakdown of political legitimacy on the part of the ruling parties at the top and the economic problems of poverty and poor development.<sup>13</sup> Although these are both key pieces of the puzzle, they alone cannot explain the political chaos that Nepal has experienced over the last several years. The missing piece lies in the third component of Gramsci's crisis: the process of consciousness formation among individuals. For a number of reasons this crucial element was largely ignored in initial analyses.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Nepalis who participated in the Maoist movement were often represented as victims of a sort of false consciousness, or worse, of no consciousness at all. The assumption of false consciousness was linked to a general sense of disbelief that, for some individuals, participation in the Maoist movement may have been a conscious decision, although the specific forms of disbelief prevalent among the Western scholarly and aid communities, and the Nepali elite commentators were different.

The following three citations from Western observers with extensive experience in Nepal—the first an anthropologist, the second a journalist, and the third a participant in an email discussion group—demonstrate how the assumption of false consciousness slipped into even the most engaged and otherwise effective analyses.

How have rural people reacted to the campaigns of politicisation originating in the towns? How is it that they have found themselves involved in, and how have they allowed themselves to be dragged into, fatal combat?<sup>15</sup>

One would think this sort of Stalinoid cant had long ago been rendered obsolete, but the grimly familiar 20th century phenomenon of socialist zealots who justify a reformist agenda with a rigid ideology—and enforce it with psychotic brutality—is spreading like a virus through this fragile Himalayan nation, raising a threat to the delicate regional balance of power.<sup>16</sup>

The government's abuse of human rights—disappearances, illegal detention, torture—is abhorrent. But the main relief that I believe the poor people of Nepal are looking for, right now, is an end to the rebellion that, being carried out supposedly in their name, has left them hungry, terrified, and even more oppressed than they were before.<sup>17</sup>

These writers all draw attention to important dimensions of the conflict by emphasizing the grim reality that many non-aligned villagers face.<sup>18</sup> However, their approaches do not adequately address those individuals who have actively chosen to participate, and instead cast all local people as passive participants in the movement, who are "dragged" into it or subsumed in its viral spread. Specific examples such as these indicate the broader tendency on the part of Western scholars, aid workers, and observers to seek out explanations that would forestall the unpleasant realization that 'peaceful' Nepali villagers were also capable of extreme violence and murder.

For the Nepali elite, acknowledging participation in the Maoist movement as a rational decision on the part of many of its members would have required recognition of the insurgents' potential to claim power at the state level. As long as Maoist supporters were portrayed as uneducated villagers who did not understand the Maoists' true intentions, the movement's success could be portrayed as an accident that would come to an end as soon as the villagers in question could be shaken out of their false consciousness. Furthermore, an elitist form of nationalism made it difficult for many city dwellers to believe that such a violent movement could actually be orchestrated by their own countrymen, that Nepalis could commit such acts of violence against Nepalis. Rumors circulating in the Nepali press that numerous Maoist bodies recovered by security forces were very tall and dark—both physical features that would suggest the fighters were not in fact Nepali—point to this particular form of disbelief. Claiming that the Maoists were non-Nepali mercenaries was structurally equivalent to claiming that the Maoists were Nepali victims of false consciousness. Either way, they were not agents acting in the conscious interest of the Nepali nation. Whatever the structure of disbelief, the category of false consciousness provided an easy way out for both Nepali and Western observers to avoid thinking of rural Nepalis as political agents, Maoist or otherwise.

Although it is clear that many, and perhaps most, villagers have been unwillingly caught in the crossfire of the current conflict, as Judith Pettigrew has shown,<sup>19</sup> others have actively participated in the Maoist movement, and it is these activists who are at the crux of this article. The large number of Maoists involved in several attacks just before the 2001 Emergen-



cy was imposed showed without a doubt that thousands of Nepalis were indeed actively participating in the movement. While there are no reliable statistics for that time, more recent estimates of the Maoist People's Liberation Army suggest that in early 2003 there were 11,000 combatant fighters, with a support base of approximately 20,000 local militia members.<sup>20</sup> Army and militia members are only one portion of the total number of individuals who have participated in the movement in some way. Participants have ranged from sympathizers who provide food and lodging, through non-combatant local-level informers, armed militia men or women, to regional commanders. As has often been argued, many may have participated out of fear, but that is not the whole story. The proclamation of a *jan sarkar* (People's Government) at Rakhe Danda, Dolakha district, on July 23, 2001, is a case in point. According to numerous independent estimates, including one by a British reporter, 10,000-15,000 locals attended the meeting at which the *jan sarkar* was announced.<sup>21</sup> For an area not stereotypically thought of as a Maoist base up until that time, where the largest religious festivals rarely attracted even 5,000 people, this number is significant. I assert that 5,000 people do not attend a meeting purely out of fear. In order to understand why the Maoist movement succeeded in gaining so much ground in Nepal, it is necessary to establish who the people attending meetings like the one at Rakhe Danda were, and why they participated.<sup>22</sup>

#### VIOLENT HISTORIES

Understanding the motivation behind mass participation in the Maoist movement requires a detailed investigation of the history of state-propagated violence and oppression in Nepal, as well as the resistance to it. The myth of a peaceful Nepal is precisely that—a myth.

It is now well known that the violent police rampages during the so-called "Operation Romeo" in the far-Western district of Rolpa in 1995, and "Operation Kilo Sierra" carried out in 18 districts in 1998, generated rural anger and discontent which in turn fuelled the early phases of the Maoist movement. To quote Deepak Thapa:

The pain and suffering that the brutal police action left in

its wake would have provided the long-lasting motive energy for the Maoist insurgency, and it is on the foundations of the angered peasantry targeted by the police that the insurgents have been able to build the larger edifice of the People's War of today.<sup>23</sup>

Working from this premise, I suggest that by examining earlier instances of state repression such as the Piskar Massacre that I describe below, we can begin to identify the social conditions which led to the development of the specific political consciousness, on which the Maoist movement later capitalized. Building upon the documentation that now exists for Rolpa and other Maoist strongholds in western Nepal, a more complete history of violence entails looking to other parts of the country in order to understand the broad parameters of the anger Thapa describes.<sup>24</sup>

#### THE PISKAR CASE

Piskar has a majority Thangmi ethnic population, and a sizeable Brahmin/Chettri community. Through the course of my own research on Thangmi religion, culture, and identity, I became aware of a particular event in the history of Piskar village which shaped the political consciousness of the entire area, and was in part responsible for making Piskar a Maoist stronghold some years later. This event was the 1984 Piskar *hatyakand*, or massacre, in which seven villagers were killed by police forces and many more injured and arrested.

By looking back to 1984, and tracing the subsequent development of political consciousness in this area, we can see how Maoist ideological arguments, particularly in their early incarnations, made a certain amount of pragmatic sense to many of Piskar's inhabitants. Once this history is acknowledged, participation in the Maoist movement for some of those involved may be understood as a logical reaction to earlier experiences of state violence and oppression rather than as an anomalous break precipitated by outside forces beyond their comprehension or control. Understanding this manner of motivation in greater depth requires tracing the historical trajectories of frustration, rage, and resistance as they are refracted through memory to become relevant categories in our analysis of the contemporary situation. As the Piskar example shows, the Maoist movement may have been in part a



Limbu Woman on Charpoy

PHOTO: KENNETH HANSON

calculated response to generations of state violence, a form of resistance actively and willingly participated in by those who had exhausted all other means.

As recounted in publications of the various Thangmi cultural committees<sup>25</sup> and by Amnesty International,<sup>26</sup> the basic storyline of the Piskar Massacre runs as follows. On the festival day of Maghe Sankranti (the first day of the month of Magh) of v.s. 2040 (January 15, 1984), around 2,000 villagers from Piskar and the surrounding area gathered at the Piskar Mahadevsthan, a local temple, for their annual jatra, or cultural festival. The program included songs and skits which criticized local landowners and advocated just treatment of the poor. With the help of the Chief District Officer, the District Superintendent of Police, and the wealthiest regional landowner, Devi Jang Pandey, local police forces surrounded the festival and opened fire. Bir Bahadur Thami and Ile Thami were instantly killed, and were quickly anointed martyrs in Thangmi tellings of the story. Five other wounded villagers died soon thereafter, while fifteen sustained serious injuries. Numerous arrests were made on the day of the jatra, and a wide-ranging police dragnet in the aftermath arrested many others on the charge of being present at the event. Many of those arrested spent upwards of three years in jail without trial. Some years later, Piskar residents finally lodged a formal complaint with the central government, then led by Prime Minister Lok Bahadur Chand.<sup>27</sup> Promises of compensation were made, but nothing was ever paid.

#### SPONTANEITY AND CONSCIOUS LEADERSHIP

Cultural performance and religious ritual have long been understood as primary arenas for political expression in rural Nepal.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, it would be unsurprising if the Piskar jatra had an explicitly political agenda, regardless of who initiated it, or upon which particular ideological lines it was constructed. The Amnesty and INSEC reports on the incident suggest that the politically contentious aspects of the 1984 Piskar festival may have been the result of intervention from outside political agitators.<sup>29</sup> As the Amnesty report explains, "The authorities of the Piskar area are understood to have been concerned for some time about the influence and activities of radical groups who . . . were 'defaming' local landowners."<sup>30</sup> However, Thangmi-authored descriptions present the festival as a genuinely local event evolving out of long-term frustration: "From the year 2037 v.s. [1981] onwards, in [the area] the people's discontent against the exploiters had begun growing quickly. The suffering village community was becoming conscious of their own fundamental rights and welfare."<sup>31</sup> In fact, I would argue that the festival itself, as well as Piskar's ensuing political evolution, was a perfect example of the marriage of mass "spontaneity" and "conscious leader-

ship," in Gramscian terms.<sup>32</sup>

I should emphasize here that members of the Thangmi ethnic group often portray themselves as victims of oppression at the hands of Hindu landowners, and that a large corpus of indigenous Thangmi songs, poetry, and stories articulates these issues and call for justice. To give some empirical weight to the generally perceived Thangmi sense of injustice, it is worth citing the available 1999 statistics on property ownership in a neighboring VDC with a comparable Thangmi population (unfortunately statistics from Piskar are not available). While Thangmi constitute 90% of the population, 75% of Thangmi villagers owned only 0–5 ropani of land, and no Thangmi landholder owned over 20 ropani.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, 67% of Brahmin/Chettri villagers owned over 20 ropani of land and none owned less than 5 ropani.<sup>34</sup> The Thangmi sense of inequality is exacerbated by the fact that Brahmin/Chettri families settled in the area within remembered history, and that in many cases these newcomers procured land previously owned by Thangmi through corrupt money-lending practices.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that the Piskar festival may have included songs critical of large regional landowners. Just as many commentators now argue that the Maoist movement is a result of local misunderstandings of imported political ideology that have no bearing on their 'real' situation, one could argue that the Piskar jatra itself was a product of imported political ideology. It may have been the relatively mainstream Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) rather than the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) that was propagating the radical new ideas then, but in just the same way villagers were simply suckered into participating in a staged event that hurt rather than helped their own cause. I do not believe that this is a correct reading of the situation. Instead, I see the structural shape of local involvement in the Piskar jatra as foreshadowing the later form of participation in the Maoist movement. In other words, at the time of the Piskar Massacre, local tensions were already running high: the long-standing sense of exploitation was beginning to be articulated, and when Communist party members agitating for democracy arrived in the village, their demands for universal franchise and the right to protest matched well with long term local concerns.

This is not to discount the important role played by Piskar residents that Gramsci might term "organic intellectuals." "Organic intellectuals are agents who tend to represent and direct the interest of subaltern populations who are being exploited and to provide them with a counter-hegemony to resist their exploitation."<sup>35</sup> Here we see a small group of "organic intellectuals"—in this case local elites who had access to education in urban centers that Thangmi did not—return-

ing to the area equipped with newly-learned Communist ideology. In this way, we can see that those portrayed as outside agitators in some reports were in fact local 'organic intellectuals' who originated from the area. Their ideas, particularly of land reform and political power for the disenfranchised, struck a chord with Thangmi villagers' existing grievances. One of the Thangmi writings on the Piskar events tells of long evenings in covert caves and candlelit rooms where returned local high-caste individuals such as Amrit Bohara and Madhav Paudel explained the intricacies of Communist ideology to Thangmi farmers, who in turn excitedly explained how such ideas applied to their own situation.<sup>36</sup> Thus they began to dream of a shared revolution.

### COMPETING NATIONAL HEGEMONIES

The same match between ideology and local agendas occurred again, fifteen years later, when the Maoists first arrived. Given the growing frustration with the lack of delivery of the promised democracy and the sense of exclusion from its benefits felt by many Piskar villagers, Maoist demands made even more sense than those which had been voiced by the earlier Communist democracy activists. As one villager from the region summarized the situation:

In Nepal, democracy has only come to people in the towns and district headquarters and then only to those with loud voices. In the villages and remote areas, people have no idea what democracy is or how it should feel. How can they know? Even though it eventually reached the villages, the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy was something that started in Kathmandu and spread outwards. But the Maoist movement is exactly the opposite: it started in the villages.<sup>37</sup>

This statement highlights the conflicting notions of national hegemony perceived to be held by the state and the Maoists respectively. The ostensibly democratic state was viewed by villagers in Piskar as alienated from the aspirations and needs of rural individuals, while conversely the Maoists were felt to be attentive to those same concerns. The sentiments expressed here imply that whichever force—state or Maoist—focused more earnestly on rural needs would gain the local support essential to any attempt to establish hegemonic power at the center.

Continuing on this theme, in a version of the Piskar story published by a politically centrist Thangmi cultural committee, the two Thangmi 'martyrs' from the village are initially represented as sacrificing their lives in the interest of national democracy. By the end of the polemic, however, a clear sense of frustration emerges with the central government's refusal to acknowledge their contribution to the democratic struggle. At

the outset, the martyr Bir Bahadur is described as a "poor village boy, fiercely defending himself against the enemy, [who] proudly sacrificed his life for his country as a true nationalist".<sup>38</sup> The closing sentence of the article, however, poses the question, "Isn't it an insult that the country has hesitated to put the names of these heroes who sacrificed their lives for democracy on the list of national martyrs?"<sup>39</sup> While democracy was the ideology of choice for as long as it appeared to promise positive change in villagers' lives, when the democratic system failed the very villagers who had fought for it, the space was open for another alternative—Maoism.

A quotation from another, more radical Thangmi publication from 1997 drives this point home: "Was the intention of these patriots [the Piskar martyrs] to establish a multi-party system instead of the Panchayat? Why then are the same old leeches sucking the poor dry? This is absolutely wrong, so to fulfil the lack of representation in the common interest, in the coming days we will definitely see the blood of the people of Piskar people flow again."<sup>40</sup> The emphasis here is on an alternative nationalism, one that recognizes the value of indigenous participation and local sacrifice. By proposing a counter-hegemonic national vision where indigenous needs and local sacrifices are honored, the Maoists cleverly deployed the symbol of the Nepali nation to take advantage of existing local sentiments.

### THE RHETORIC OF MAOIST VIOLENCE

This question of Maoist violence remains. Even if we accept that villagers were repeatedly disappointed by the political process and were seeking another alternative, how do we account for their choice of the violent Maoist approach rather than that of the mainstream Communist parties? Answering this question requires an acknowledgement that violence is not a new phenomenon within Nepali politics; there is no radical break between the state-sponsored violence experienced by villagers as part of the Piskar Massacre, and the more recent forms of Maoist violence. Instead we have a slowly unfolding crisis of hegemony, the seeds of which were planted long ago. By refocusing on the history of violence which the villagers of Piskar experienced, it is easier to understand why an ideology that encourages and even legitimizes violence against people Thangmi publications term "feudalists" and "exploiters" might become popular. It is telling that the first act of violence in the area ascribed to the Maoists was the murder of Devi Jang Pandey, the same wealthy landowner who was complicit in organising the police response to the Piskar jatra. Even villagers generally skeptical of the Maoist movement failed to find fault with this action, and Maoist violence was thus affirmed.



From the perspective of many Piskar residents, their major sacrifice in the national interest had already been made in 1984 when their fellow villagers were killed, and the rhetoric of martyrdom that developed out of those events made it much easier to make similar sacrifices again. The notion of martyrdom is central to the Maoist platform, as shown by their demand #17: "People who died during the time of the movement should be declared as martyrs, and their families and those who have been wounded and disabled should be given proper compensation."<sup>41</sup> The Maoist emphasis on martyrdom creates a source of symbolic capital which legitimizes and even encourages violent actions on the part of its participants, just as martyrdom does for suicide-bombers elsewhere in the world. From this perspective, such actions can be understood as the result of choices made by individuals acting consciously within a logical framework to overthrow one hegemonic order and test another.

In the end, regardless of whether the politicization of the Piskar jatra was the result of a growing indigenous political consciousness or of outside agitation, the state response—seven dead, fifteen wounded, and hundreds of locals arrested and tortured or disappeared—affected everyone in the region and undoubtedly accelerated the development of a critical political consciousness. Indeed, hundreds of villagers who had not even been present at the jatra itself but were suspected of having leftist political sentiments were arrested, and some spent up to three years in jail. These mass arrests greatly affected local economies and family structures. As Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks' themselves demonstrate, there is no better place than prison to develop a nuanced understanding of hegemony. According to many villagers, those who had spent time in jail returned with a much sharper sense of the class struggle in which they were engaged and began spreading Communist rhetoric in the area, effectively forming a new generation of 'organic intellectuals.'

#### CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF PRACTICAL IDEOLOGY

By early 2001, Piskar was a regional Maoist base, or *adhar ilaka*, and it had even become a show village where Maoist propagandists took foreign reporters.<sup>42</sup> The village's history had produced a heightened political consciousness, which meant that when the Maoists did arrive on the scene, their ideology was seen to be essentially congruent with the existing agendas of many villagers.

Gramsci's notion of "practical ideology" is central to my argument here. As Christina Buci-Glucksmann explains, "Practical ideologies and modes of living and feeling have their roots in the economic base: the relation between civilta [civil society] and production is a pivotal point in Gramsci's whole problematic of capitalism, and of socialism too" (Buci-Glucksmann 1980: 89). In the schema I propose for understanding the success of Maoism in Nepal, "practical ideology" refers to the concrete economic reforms, relevant to the daily lives of villagers, which undergird the Maoist agenda. Practical ideology is the necessary complement to "theoretical ideology," a category which contains both abstract notions of class struggle and revolution articulated in elite language, and the international trajectory of Maoism as a historical force. The

important point is that "practical ideology" is just as ideological, or hegemonic, as "theoretical ideology," and therefore can play an equal, if not superior, role in fostering local political consciousness. Both are necessary for the long-term success of any hegemonic movement; their relationship might be seen as analogous to the relationship that Gramsci posits between "spontaneity" and "conscious leadership."

Spontaneity is the unpremeditated political action of the masses, while "conscious leadership" refers to the premeditated strategies of educated leaders. For Gramsci, "the union of 'spontaneity' and 'conscious leadership,' or 'discipline,' is the real political action of subaltern classes, since it is mass politics and not simply an adventure of groups who address themselves to the mass."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, recognizing the distinctive qualities that come together in the union of "practical ideology" and "theoretical ideology" helps to bridge the gap often perceived between Maoist intellectual leadership and grassroots practice. In other words, although the villagers of Piskar may have remained unaware of the political complexities of the movement's national goals, let alone its international and historical context, they were attracted by Maoist rhetoric and action surrounding concrete issues such as land reform, bringing exploitative landowners to justice, driving out the police, and claiming political power for the disenfranchised. Thangmi inhabitants of Piskar and the surrounding areas repeatedly stated that Maoism is about "bringing justice to the exploiters." The argument that most 'Maoist' fighters didn't understand Maoist theoretical ideology and therefore joined simply out of fear or desire for future grandeur—'false consciousness'—begins to falter if we acknowledge the very profound level at which people like those whom experienced the Piskar dramas can understand Maoist practical ideology. In 1984 such villagers understood democ-



PHOTO: SARA SHNEIDERMAN



racy in the very same way, so that some years later they knew precisely when the system had failed to fulfil its ideological promises. For many who were disillusioned by factionalized political movements and empty party promises, the perceived objectives of the Maoist movement made much sense. There was little to gain by sitting it out, and even less to lose by joining.

Refocusing on the importance of practical ideology in the Nepali context provokes a necessarily brief discussion of the relationship between Nepali Maoism and other forms of Maoism worldwide. Part of the argument that ascribes false consciousness to those Nepalis participating in the Maoist movement focuses on their general lack of understanding of international Maoist history and its shocking results, particularly in China. The argument goes that if Nepalis sympathetic to the Maoist cause had any historical knowledge of the outcomes of those earlier incarnations of Maoism, they would be sensible enough to realize that the Maoist project was deeply flawed. Furthermore, it is only on account of their ignorance and failure to grasp the impossibility of a hegemonic success through Maoism that they continue to support the movement. I argue instead that many of those participating in the Maoist movement are working with full consciousness of its practical ideology which articulates local needs and taps into pre-existing frustrations.

In the long run, however, practical ideology alone cannot provide an adequate framework for building a truly egalitarian and functional civil society in Nepal. It is only a matter of time until the same type of disaffection that Piskar's villagers felt with democracy becomes prevalent with Maoism.<sup>44</sup> In James Scott's words, "The revolution, when and if it does come, may eliminate many of the worst evils of the ancient regime, but it is rarely if ever the end of peasant resistance. For the radical elites who capture the state are likely to have different goals in mind than their erstwhile peasant supporters."<sup>45</sup> As consciousness continues to evolve, the people of Piskar will find new means of resistance to both Maoist and state hegemony. Nepal's crisis will continue to unfold, and only by engaging in the specificity of local historical and political discourses about it will we come to understand the crisis in its entirety.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article draws upon research conducted in Nepal while on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1999-2000. I would like to thank Kathryn March, David Holmberg, Jakob Rigi, Shambhu Oja, Matt Rothwell, and especially Judith Pettigrew and Mark Turin for their contributions to this paper. Thanks are also due to John Metz, Barbara Brower, and the other participants of the pre-conference 'War on Terrorism, War as Terrorism' held at the 31st Madison South Asian Conference in October 2002. Finally, I thank the people of Piskar and the larger Thangmi community in Sindhupalchok and Dolakha.

<sup>2</sup> By 'early phases' I refer to the period before the November 2001 imposition of a State of Emergency by the Nepali government. Research for this paper was conducted before that date. Conditions in Nepal have evolved extensively since that time, so I use the past tense to describe the ethnographic situation as I encountered it between November 1998 and September 2001. In that sense, this article is a period piece, and I have not attempted to update it to reflect the emerging situation of mid 2004. The assertions I make in this paper are therefore as accurate as possible for the stated period. However, I make no claim that attitudes among the academic community, in Piskar, or elsewhere in Nepal remain the same at the time of publication.

<sup>3</sup> To date there is only a smattering of published academic articles related to the subject (Nickson 1992; de Sales 2000; Gautam et al. 2001). Several new volumes that appeared in 2003 begin to fill this gap (see Gellner 2003; Hutt 2004; Karki and Seddon 2003; Thapa 2003b, 2003c).

<sup>4</sup> In taking this approach, I offer a respectful nod towards Ranajit Guha's seminal work on peasant insurgency in colonial India (1999

[1983]). Although Nepal's Maoist movement must be considered on its own terms, we would do well to consider the structural similarities between the colonial Indian peasant insurgencies Guha describes and the current situation in Nepal. Guha's category of 'rebel consciousness' is particularly relevant, and the larger question begging attention is why such potentially useful work emanating from the Subaltern Studies School in general has not yet been adequately incorporated into contemporary work on Nepal. [ed: Though see Richard Bownas' paper in this volume]

<sup>5</sup> Buci-Gluckmann (1980:95)

<sup>6</sup> cf. Fardon (1990)

<sup>7</sup> cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka (2004)

<sup>8</sup> Scott (1985: 37)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The Thangmi, known as 'Thami' in Nepali, are an ethnic group of about 40,000 who speak a Tibeto-Burman language. They are one of the poorest and least represented ethnic groups in Nepal within political, developmental, and scholarly discourses.

<sup>11</sup> See Shneiderman and Turin (2004) for a detailed account of this moment in local history.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Pieke (1995)

<sup>13</sup> cf. Hacchethu (2003); Onta (2003); Roka (2001); Thapa (2003a; 2003c).

<sup>14</sup> Gautam, Banskota and Manchanda's discussion of women's agency within the Maoist movement is a notable exception (2001). Substantial new work focusing on the question of agency is appearing just as this article goes to press. In particular see Pettigrew's analysis of youth participation in the movement (2003b) and Sharma and Prasain's overview of women's participation (2003).

<sup>15</sup> de Sales (2000: 41)

<sup>16</sup> Moynihan (2002: A21)

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, from an online discussion group (September 2002)

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Kathryn March for pointing out that those villagers who remain 'non-aligned' make an equally weighty and agentive choice as those who join the Maoists or other political parties. In order to consider the broader complex of political agency in rural Nepal in a way that moves beyond the contingencies of the Maoist movement, we will need to consider how and why those who make the choice to remain politically unaffiliated manage to maintain that status.

<sup>19</sup> Pettigrew (2003a) [ed: and in this volume]

<sup>20</sup> Luitel (2003)

<sup>21</sup> Popham (2001); Anonymous (2001)

<sup>22</sup> See Shneiderman and Turin (2004) for a detailed description of the establishment of the Dolakha jan sarkar.

<sup>23</sup> Thapa (2001: 9)

<sup>24</sup> There is an extensive existing literature on social inequality in Nepal which provides a greater time-depth and regional breadth to the historical narrative presented here. A thorough discussion of these sources is beyond the scope of the current paper. For an account of the structural hierarchies of the caste system see Höfer (1979); for an overview of the military conquests that led to contemporary settlement patterns see Pradhan (1991) and Stiller; and for analyses of land-based class structures see Caplan (1970) and Regmi (1978a, 1978b).

<sup>25</sup> Niko Pragatisil Thami Samaj [hereafter NPTS] (2054); Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra [hereafter TBTSUK] (2056)

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International (1987)

<sup>27</sup> Chand's reinstatement as Prime Minister by King Gyanendra from October 2002 to May 2003 only adds to the odd sense of déjà vu in Piskar that regardless of how much they agitate, the system never changes.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Holmberg (2000); Pfaff-Czarnecka (1996)

<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International (1987); INSEC (1985)

<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International (1987: 15)

<sup>31</sup> TBTSUK (2056: 65). All translations from Nepali are mine, and I bear responsibility for any errors.

<sup>32</sup> Cammett (1967: 199)

<sup>33</sup> A ropani is a standard Nepali measurement equivalent to 5476 square feet.

<sup>34</sup> ICDM (1999)

<sup>35</sup> Kurtz (1996: 108)

<sup>36</sup> NPTS (1997: 68)

<sup>37</sup> Anonymous villager's account, as cited in Shneiderman and Turin (2004)

<sup>38</sup> TBTSUK (2056: 65)

<sup>39</sup> TBTSUK (2056: 68)

<sup>40</sup> NPTS (2054: 68).

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.insof.org/politics/130299\\_40demands\\_Maoist.htm](http://www.insof.org/politics/130299_40demands_Maoist.htm)

<sup>42</sup> Liu and Roberts (2001)

<sup>43</sup> Gramsci, as cited in Cammett (1967: 199)

<sup>44</sup> As of late 2003, there is anecdotal evidence that this may have already begun to happen, but I do not yet have detailed data to support this proposition.

<sup>45</sup> Scott (1985: 302)