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**Comments on papers from the panel "Nepal's Maoist Movement
Session II: Ethnographic and Comparative Considerations"
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RESPONSE TO THE PAPERS

While most scholarly and media analyses of the Maoist movement in Nepal seek to explain its emergence by focusing on the political and economic conditions that created support for this movement, the papers on this panel offer a different perspective on this movement. Shneiderman and Pettigrew illuminate the experiences of individuals who either take part in the movement or are affected by the conflict, while Bownas examines the internal dynamics of the Naxalite movement in India and encourages comparisons between this movement and the Maoist movement in Nepal.

Shneiderman makes the important point that many analyses of the Maoist movement have failed to recognize rural Nepalis as political actors. As a means of acknowledging the political agency of these individuals, she seeks to understand the "motivations" of those joining the Maoists. Focusing on the appeal of the Maoists' practical ideology for rural supporters of the movement suggests that the reasons why local people support the movement may differ from the reasons that party leaders support the movement, and from how they explain popular support for their movement. While this is an important intervention in the studies of the Maoists, I would caution against limiting investigations of mobilization of this movement to a search for "motivations" of the supporters. The term "motivation" may overemphasize the idea that joining a movement is strictly a matter of rational calculation on behalf of the participants.

In explaining villagers' motivations for supporting the Maoist movement, Shneiderman points to local experiences and memories of state repression and violence. While memories of such events can be deployed at times of political mobilization, we can not interpret such experiences as directly leading to any particular form of political action. It is important to recognize that it was not inevitable that the local experience and memories of the Piskar massacre

would lead to support for the Maoist movement in particular. Elsewhere in Nepal, individuals who have experienced similar incidents of state repression cite these events as the reason for their support for other political movements, as I have described in my study of the Mongol National Organization, a radical ethnic political party (Hangen 2000). To understand these links between experience, memory, and political action, we need to examine who is interpreting these events at particular moments and how they are recounting these memories.

Judith Pettigrew considers those individuals who are caught in the middle of the conflict between the Maoists and the Nepal army. Her paper is a moving portrayal of the routinization of terror and fear, and the coping strategies that people employ to deal with these circumstances. While her paper makes an important contribution by documenting violence and terror, Pettigrew does not limit her analysis to reflecting on the horror of these experiences. Rather she also seeks to analyze the meanings that are expressed in acts of violence, as well as in symbolic forms of violence. We should also try to understand how these forms of violence and terror used by the Maoists relate to those used by the state in the history of Nepal. As Shneiderman notes, violence is not a new form of political action in Nepal, and there is no radical break between state violence and Maoist violence.

While reading about the experiences of these individuals, I wanted to know more about their social location and political affiliations. It is important to represent these individuals not just as victims, but also as actors who have particular interests, identities and alignments—even if their agency is more constrained than that of the army and the Maoists. To be caught in the middle is not necessarily to be apolitical. Many of those in this position in other parts of Nepal are in fact supporters of or close rela-

tives of supporters of other political parties.

Richard Bownas's paper provides an historical examination of Naxalism in India, highlighting points of comparison that could be made between this movement and the Maoist movement in Nepal. The importance of Naxalism for understanding politics in Nepal is not limited to its use as a comparative case of radical leftist organizing. Naxalism has had a direct influence on political movements in Nepal in the past, particularly in eastern Nepal, and as Bownas notes, there are direct connections between Naxalism and Nepal's Maoists, both practical and ideological. Here his focus is not to explore these links but rather to use the history of Naxalism to shed light on the trajectory that the Maoist movement in Nepal might take.

Bownas suggests that studies of Maoism in Nepal should explore the relationship between the movement and the local population. He argues that Naxalism succeeded in areas where the leaders of the movement became well integrated with local people and where there was a "pre-existing infrastructure of resistance." He suggests that the particular forms of protest used by Naxalites were borrowed from earlier forms of local protest and thus resonated with the local people. Shneiderman's paper begins this project by examining how villagers in Piskar interpreted the Maoist's goals in terms of historical conflicts in the area.

Another provocative point for potential comparison between these movements comes from Bownas's discussion of the shape of the Naxalite movement in the 1980s and 1990s, when the movement became more enmeshed with local concerns than with capturing the state. He notes that in areas where the Naxalites have managed to maintain a power base, they operate by collecting funds from villagers and in turn provide security, education, work on development projects, and profits earned from local resources. To what extent might

Maoists in Nepal be able to maintain a durable power base in the western districts where they are acting as the state, regardless of whether the Maoists are successful in achieving their main goal of creating a republic in Nepal?

Bownas also points out that the Naxalite movement drew upon ethnic struggles and ecological struggles, and proposes that researchers investigate the extent to which the movement in Nepal articulates with the struggles of other social movements. Many observers of the Maoist movement in Nepal have noted that ethnic rights issues became a major part of its platform and that the movement has been successful at mobilizing marginalized ethnic groups. More thorough reports on this facet of the movement are emerging, and this is an important area for further exploration. It is crucial to recognize the Maoists as one set of actors in a crowded political field and to examine the relationships between this movement and other movements in Nepal, including ethnic politics, the women's movement and communist party organizing.

As a whole, these papers point to the urgency for more work on historical and contemporary social movements in Nepal. The lack of attention in the ethnographic record to the centrality of political action in rural Nepal places anthropologists at a disadvantage in understanding the meanings of Maoism. As Shneiderman notes, representations of Nepal as a peaceful, non-political place have led many to perceive the Maoist movement as a rupture in the country's history. To understand the origins of the Maoist movement, the particular form of organizing and the modes of protest that the Maoists employ, we must gain a deeper understanding of the political culture out of which it has emerged.

Sharma, Sudheer (2002) *The Ethnic Dimension of the Maoist Insurgency*. Kathmandu: NEFEN.