

## Chapter 3

### Creating 'Civilized' Communists

#### A Quarter of a Century of Politicization in Rural Nepal

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#### INTRODUCTION

By the time Nepal's Maoist insurgency reached its tenth anniversary in February 2006, it had only recently begun to garner consistent international attention.<sup>1</sup> Many early discussions of the 'People's War' in Nepal treated radical communism as if it were a newly introduced ideology which common citizens were unlikely to understand, much less believe. Yet communism had been one of the country's central political forces since the advent of party politics in the early 1950s. This paradox is in part due to the fact that, as Nepali political scientist Krishna Hachhethu has stated, "research on political parties at the local level is completely lacking in the literature on Nepali politics and parties so far" (2003: 136). In agreement with Hachhethu, I suggest here that we cannot understand contemporary politics in Nepal without taking a closer look at how political discourse, ideology, and practice have been deployed by leftist parties in local Nepali contexts over time. This chapter therefore seeks to provide a piece of historical background to the country's recent upheaval by considering the role of communist parties in the process of politicization that many citizens of rural Nepal have experienced over the last quarter century.

Both of Nepal's mainstream parties—the Nepali Congress (hereafter NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (hereafter CPN)—have been involved in the ongoing project of raising political consciousness among Nepal's citizens since the early 1950s.<sup>2</sup> In this

chapter, I focus specifically on the activities of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) (hereafter CPN-ML) in the eastern districts of Sindhupalchok and Dolakha, where cadres first began actively 'educating' villagers in the late 1970s. On the run from persecution under the pre-1990 partyless Panchayat system, CPN-ML activists chose several villages in the region as their 'underground' hideouts and used the opportunity to spread communist ideology among local people.<sup>3</sup> One such village was Piskar, in Sindhupalchok district, predominantly inhabited by the poor and disenfranchised Thangmi ethnic group.<sup>4</sup> As subsistence farmers who had long been exploited by the wealthy landowners whose land they sharecropped, many Thangmi were sympathetic to the communist project. The area soon developed a reputation as a hotbed for revolutionary ideas, and the village of Piskar gained national notoriety when government forces ambushed a local festival there in January 1984, killing two Thangmi villagers and injuring many more. In the next several months scores of villagers were arrested for their alleged participation in this event, and held in custody for up to three years without trial. After the fact, the so-called Piskar Massacre (*piskar hatyakand*) became a rallying point for a range of communist factions operating in the area, including today's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (hereafter CPN-M).

I have described elsewhere the aftermath of the Piskar Massacre, and how the ensuing events shaped local attitudes towards the Maoists when they appeared on the scene in the mid 1990s (Shneiderman, 2003). Here, I look back in time to examine the activities of CPN-ML activists in the years leading up to the Piskar Massacre. In particular, I consider the relationships between party cadres and residents of the Piskar area in the late 1970s and early 1980s, so as to understand how communist ideas were introduced and received at the local level. An analysis of these relationships suggests that Piskar's history as an early CPN-ML base area had produced a heightened political consciousness, which meant that Maoist ideology, when introduced in the late 1990s, was attractive to many villagers who had long been communist supporters but were disillusioned by the mainstream Communist Party's shift to the centre after the 1990 democracy movement. CPN-ML activists had done the difficult work of politicizing the populace, but then disappeared to pursue their own paths to power at the centre, leaving the villagers of Piskar open to Maoist recruitment.

My discussion of the early years of communist political activity in Piskar brings out the way in which socialism is a civilizing project linked to the production of dominant 'modern' identities. The attitudes of the cadres who interacted with Thangmi villagers in Piskar during the early phase of the communist politicization project there reveal a great deal about the internalized class and caste prejudices that motivated many communist activists, despite their ideological disavowals of such differences. They saw themselves as the architects of a radical social transformation that required all participants to give up 'primitive', localized ethnic identities in favour of a 'modern', homogeneous national identity.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of their attempts to create a modern peasantry through the discourse of class struggle, the CPN has consistently viewed the competing discourse of ethnic empowerment as secondary.<sup>6</sup> This is hardly surprising, given the fact that the CPN has always espoused an orthodox communist line when it comes to the evolutionary model of historical materialism, which suggests that ethnic, national, and other group identities are simply artifacts of class hierarchy, which will disappear naturally as a side effect of class struggle.<sup>7</sup> Mukta Tamang has raised these issues in an analysis of the CPN's policy documents on caste and ethnic issues over time, arguing that, "despite the policy formulation during the formative periods, the issue of caste and ethnicity remained marginal in the party discourse and practice in the whole history of the communist political movement until 1990" (2004a: 2). Yet there remains little documentation of how these tendencies played out on the ground as party cadres from dominant groups came in contact with ethnic minority peasants through the process of politicization. Here I show how such cadres saw themselves as part of a civilizing mission to create modern, national Nepalis, who would rise up in class struggle leaving their outmoded ethnic identities behind.

## **METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES**

One of my primary sources for the present discussion is an extensive interview with Amrit Kumar Bohara and Asta Laxmi Shakya, conducted in Kathmandu in November 2004. Bohara and Shakya, a husband and wife team, were some of the first CPN-ML cadres to reside in Piskar during the early 1980s and were both major

players in the events leading up to the massacre. After the 1990 *jan andolan*, or People's Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, they became important figures in the newly unified CPN (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML) party and remain Central Committee members of this mainstream opposition party. Both served as cabinet ministers during Nepal's multi-party democracy phase from 1991 to 2005.<sup>8</sup> In the 2008 Constituent Assembly election, Shakya ran for a first-past-the-post seat from Kathmandu's 8th district, but lost to Nabindra Raj Joshi of the NC. She was later appointed as Minister for Industry, the post she continues to hold at the time of writing. Bohara served as acting general secretary of the UML for several months after Madhav Kumar Nepal stepped down in the wake of their party's poor electoral showing.

Other textual sources include two articles on the Piskar Massacre published in Nepali by Thangmi ethno-political organizations (NPTS, 1997; TBTSUK, 1999), a book about the event published the following year in Nepali by the CPN-ML (HPP, 1984), and English language human rights reports on the massacre published by Amnesty International (1987) and Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), a Nepali human rights NGO (1995). These materials are complemented by a series of interviews with Thangmi residents of the Piskar area conducted between 1998 and 2000, and additional interviews conducted in Kathmandu between 2000 and 2005.

## BACKGROUND: CPN PARTY HISTORY

The CPN has split and reunified several times. A basic understanding of these dynamics provides essential context for interpreting villagers' experiences. I rely heavily on the seminal work on Nepal's political parties done by Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton (1999) and Hachhethu (2002, 2003) to provide an overview of the history of the party here.

The CPN was officially founded in 1949 by Pushpa Lal Shrestha in Calcutta. Previously a member of NC, Pushpa Lal was influenced by Mao Zedong, and called for mass mobilization of the peasantry and violent struggle against Nepal's partyless Panchayat system. Pushpa Lal and his supporters returned to Nepal in 1951 after the fall of the Rana ruling family, but were quickly banned in 1952 for their violent activities. They operated underground for four years

between 1952 and 1956, during which time they focused primarily on peasant issues, such as redistribution of land, tenancy rights, and the abolition of compulsory unpaid labour (cf. Hachhethu, 2002: 34–5). The CPN was legalized again in the late 1950s, and stood in the 1959 elections, but won only 4 seats out of 48 contested (compared to 78 out of 108 for the NC).

In 1960 King Mahendra terminated Nepal's first experiment with democracy. All political parties were once again banned, and the CPN and NC alike went underground. During the 1960s and 1970s, the CPN underwent multiple splits, based on ideological, pragmatic, and personal differences. One of the most important factions to emerge during this period was the 'Jhapeli' group, which operated in the eastern border district of Jhapa and followed the Indian Naxalite doctrine developed by Charu Mazumdar, which drew heavily on Maoist ideology.<sup>9</sup> Active in the early 1970s, this group took the hard line that 'annihilation of the class enemy' was the only way to effect political transformation. They were for all practical purposes Maoists, since they, "advocated the application of the Chinese way of armed revolution in Nepal to establish New Democracy [*naulo janbad* in Nepali] according to the Chinese model" (Hachhethu, 2002: 36). After killing at least eight landlords, and experiencing several casualties among their own activists, the Jhapeli group eventually shifted away from the Naxalite line and began forging alliances with other less radical communist factions. Despite this ideological shift, the Jhapelis remained well respected within Nepali leftist circles, and they formed the nucleus of the CPN-ML at its establishment in 1978 (Hoftun et al., 1999: 84).

It was during this period of change between the late 1970s and the mid 1980s that CPN-ML cadres first travelled to the Piskar area, as part of the party's programme to identify suitable 'base areas' and develop support there (Hachhethu, 2002: 59). As we shall see, the party's ambivalence at the central level during this period about whether to pursue violence or not had important implications for Piskar villagers' early experience of communism.

As part of their transformation in the late 1980s, the CPN-ML turned away from the demand for a one-party communist state. Along with other communist factions, they accepted the proposition that "conventional multi-party democracy could be a stage on the road to achieving *naulo janbad*" (Hoftun et al., 1999: 238), as an alternative to armed struggle. Under this aegis, the CPN-ML became

one of seven communist factions allied as the United Left Front (ULF), which fought alongside the NC during the 1990 movement for the restoration of democracy. After the success of that movement, in 1991 the CPN-ML merged with the CPN (Marxist) to become the CPN (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML, usually known simply as the UML). This combined party then fully adopted the concept of 'multi-party democracy' (*bahudaliya janbad*) as an end in itself, in place of *naulo janbad*, and became the mainstream opposition party in competition with the NC. The UML came to power at the national level for the first time in the November 1994 elections, forming a minority government for nine months, but were ousted in a vote of no confidence in September 1995. For those nine months, Nepal had the world's only democratically elected communist Hindu monarchy. The party split again in March 1998, largely due to personal differences within the top leadership. The larger faction retained the UML name. The CPN-ML—now a very different entity than the pre-1990 CPN-ML, the popularity of which was inherited and maintained by the UML—was unable to gain the name recognition or popular support necessary to consolidate power. In 2002, these two factions reunited once again as CPN-UML.

In the meantime, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M), which was established as such by 'Prachanda' (Pushpa Kamal Dahal) in 1995, had emerged as a major force to be reckoned with. The CPN-M officially launched their People's War in February 1996, after presenting a 40-point list of demands to the central government and receiving no response. By the end of the civil war in 2006, over 15,000 people had died in the conflict between the insurgents and state security forces, with the Royal Nepal Army deployed to fight the Maoists in 2001 after the police suffered severe losses. Thousands more were injured, displaced, disappeared, and otherwise adversely affected. The CPN-M won *de facto* control of base areas in the far western parts of the country and rural areas of much of the rest of the country, but was never able to hold any district capitals or major cities through military operations. The Maoist agenda and the lack of a coordinated political response to it were important features of Nepal's crisis right up to the Second People's Movement of 2006.

After the UML accepted the notion of multi-party democracy as an end in itself (rather than as a means to an end) in the early 1990s, they had trouble maintaining their radical communist

ideological edge. It became harder to differentiate the UML from the NC by their policies, particularly because the NC had always portrayed itself as a socialist party at the economic level. As Hachhethu puts it, “the NC is a liberal democratic party but with a socialist trademark and the UML is a communist party but with allegiance to multi-party democracy” (2003: 137). The UML had difficulty maintaining its emphasis on activism and positive change for peasants at the grassroots level after 1990. This situation became particularly acute in the face of the Maoists’ erstwhile ‘successes’: if the UML was indeed a genuine peasants’ party, why then were they unable to maintain their mass support? Why did many of those who supported the UML in an earlier era later turn towards the CPN-M instead? Looking at the Piskar story from an ethno-historical perspective helps answer these questions.

### **JOINING THE PARTY: BOHARA AND SHAKYA AS YOUNG IDEALISTS**

It was during the formative years of communist thought in Nepal in the 1960s–70s—as the party leadership was struggling to intertwine Naxalite, Maoist, and democratic ideologies and reconcile this mixture with practical mobilization strategies suited to Nepal’s context—that young activists like Amrit Kumar Bohara and Asta Laxmi Shakya emerged. Bohara was born in Piskar, Sindhupalchok in 1948 into a landholding Chetri family that was part of the Hindu rural elite against which he later fought, and Shakya was born in 1954 in Kathmandu to a middle-class urban Newar Buddhist goldsmithing family. Their respective backgrounds determined the different manners in which they were initiated into the CPN, and these divergent experiences demonstrate clearly that the gap between rural and urban Nepal—which is often cited as one of the underlying causes of the Maoist insurgency—was already substantial in the 1970s.

Bohara was a rural youth angry with the exploitation he saw around him while growing up in the village. He was particularly struck by the plight of Thangmi sharecroppers, who were intentionally kept illiterate by the landlords they worked for so that they could not understand land use and loan documents they signed. As Bohara put it, “We abhorred from deep inside the feudal exploitation

and injustice. But how were we to liberate the people?"<sup>10</sup> His maternal uncle had been an early social worker in the area. Although not affiliated with a political party, this uncle was devoted to educating villagers and raising social awareness, against the wishes of his own family and other village elites. Bohara had long been influenced by his uncle's activities, and when he came into contact with CPN party workers in the town of Dolakha while completing his secondary studies there, he felt that he had finally found the answer to his burning questions about injustice and exploitation. In 1966, at the age of 16, he became a member of the underground Pushpa Lal faction of the CPN. He imagined that he would continue with his college studies and work with the party at the same time. But when he went to meet Pushpa Lal in Banaras some time later and explained this plan, the party leader told him that further studies would only bring him personal security and comfort, not liberation from injustice and exploitation in the manner that full-time Communist Party work could. Pushpa Lal instructed the young man to leave college, and Bohara was convinced: "After he said this I decided then and there that I would quit my studies and give up everything including my home and my family. I took a vow that I would get involved in politics." He was soon assigned to a village-level cell and sent to "organize the people" from his home area. By 1980, he was the top CPN-ML party leader for the entire Bagmati zone.<sup>11</sup>

One of seven daughters and three sons in a well-to-do urban family, Shakya lived a very sheltered life. After taking her School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam in 1972 at the age of 18, she had several months of free time while waiting for the results.<sup>12</sup> By chance, she stumbled upon a library maintained by the Chinese diplomatic mission to Nepal. She enrolled in Chinese language lessons, began to read Chinese literature, and in her words, "learned that China was a good country and that the communist party was good". She had been acutely aware of her own privileged position from a young age, and had desired to help the poor people who worked as servants for her family. But, "it was difficult to form those kinds of ideas having been born in a family like that", so when she came in contact with communist literature, she finally felt that she had found her place. Shakya continued her Chinese lessons after enrolling in college, and soon developed a network of like-minded friends. They became associated with the CPN through the Shyam Prasad faction, but after some months Shakya and her friends became disillusioned because



54 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

“it could not work according to our aspirations, so we rebelled and left the group”. Instead, they formed their own study group of fifty or so young people, and continued reading Chinese texts, especially Mao Zedong’s *Little Red Book*. They learned from reading Mao that villages held the key to transforming the country, and that they would have to go to the villages and raise consciousness there if they wished to be true communists.

There was only one problem. As Shakya explained, perhaps with some exaggeration, “We had not seen a village, so we did not know what a village was like. We did not know what kind of people lived in the village and how one should deal with them.” Urban youths like Shakya had never been to the villages where over 90 per cent of their fellow citizens lived, mostly in abject poverty.<sup>13</sup> The interest that she and her comrades had in visiting villages like Bohara’s was more of an exception than the norm, and following this desire to visit villages and raise consciousness there required Shakya to make a break from her family. In 1980, at the age of 26, she ran away from home in order to evade an arranged marriage. At that point, she finally took the plunge and became a full-fledged CPN-ML member. Since she joined the party in the Bagmati zone, she came under Bohara’s jurisdiction, and soon after she took the party oath he came to meet her to evaluate her skills and determine how to deploy her. He was sceptical of this well-off city girl’s commitment to communist ideology, and as a test of her loyalty, he immediately assigned her to ‘serve the people’ in Piskar. This meant going underground, and for the next three years, Shakya, Bohara, and a third cadre, Madhav Paudel, lived in close quarters in the village environment.

During this period, Shakya and Bohara spent a great deal of time together. They married in 1981; apparently she had passed the test that he had set for her, on both political and personal levels. Shakya described the circumstances of their party-sanctioned marriage in Piskar:

As I worked there I would meet him often. I liked his habits. I liked his perseverance. I saw him getting involved in the party with sincerity and working for the people. I saw that he endured a lot of suffering. When I saw this I felt that the two of us should get together and I should help him. Then we became attracted to each other. In 1981 we took an oath under the party flag. We could do this only after getting permission from the party. The two of us liking each other was not enough. The party had to give permission. So we got permission from the party

and took an oath under the party flag that the two of us would move ahead together and get [more deeply] involved in the party.

Bohara and Shakya's marriage was a quintessential CPN alliance, which was held up as an example for other cadres. As their divergent narratives of communist initiation show, they represented several defining oppositions that the CPN was working to overcome in order to create a broad-based movement that emphasized Nepali national identity as a whole: rural versus urban, agricultural versus artisanal modes of production, poor versus rich, uneducated versus educated, caste Hindu versus non-Hindu, and even male versus female. Their union and ensuing work in Piskar was a powerful symbol of such party goals at the time.<sup>14</sup>

## **PISKAR: A 'BASE AREA' IN THE MAKING**

What did the CPN-ML see in Piskar that convinced them to choose it as one of their first base areas for political activity in the immediate wake of the party's formal establishment in 1978? According to Hachhethu, "While exploring potential base areas, the ML had considered two factors, one was proletariat people like the landless, agricultural labourers and poor peasants, and the other was area—the remoteness of the villages from the headquarters of the districts" (2002: 59). Piskar met both of these criteria. Its population was overwhelmingly comprised of poor farmers who owned little or no land, who served as indentured labourers to a tiny group of landlords who owned the majority of productive land. The village was located in the eastern corner of Sindhupalchok district close to the border with Dolakha, far away from the district headquarters of Chautara.<sup>15</sup> Although it felt quite remote due to the hilly terrain, poverty, and lack of infrastructure, Piskar was also relatively close to Kathmandu (3–4 days' walk, or one day's bus journey once the Arniko highway opened in the mid 1960s), so cadres could travel back and forth between the political nerve centre in the city and this model 'village of the masses' fairly easily.

In addition, the importance of Bohara's personal connection to Piskar should not be underestimated. He was already in charge of the party's Bagmati zone operations before the Piskar agitation began, and he had a strong say in the choice of base areas in his zone. As a

## 56 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

local boy who had risen through the party ranks, he could portray himself as a 'son of the soil' who was genuinely working for the masses in his home village, rather than as an outsider importing alien ideas. Bohara knew that his capacity to portray himself as an 'organic intellectual', in the Gramscian sense, would be an asset in achieving the party's objectives in the area. Moreover, it would satisfy him personally to see an end to exploitation in his home village more than anywhere else.

Piskar's Thangmi villagers had suffered from various forms of exploitation at the hands of predominantly Bahun, Chetri, and Newar landholders. Highly inequitable landholding relations were at the root of other forms of exploitation, such as indentured labour and usurious money-lending practices. Table 3.1, published in 1985 by the CPN-ML, shows the distribution of land in Piskar at the time cadres began working there in the late 1970s.

**Table 3.1**  
**Ownership of Land in Piskar by Class (1970s)**

<i>Class</i>	<i>Families (%)</i>	<i>Ownership of Land (%)</i>
Landlords	1.32	16
Rich Farmers	5.26	31
Middle-Class Farmers	19.74	22
Poor Farmers	61.15	29
Landless Farmers	10.53	2
Total	100	100

*Source:* HPP (1984: 4), translated by Suren Thami.

To summarize the key points, 1.32 per cent of the families were landlords owning 16 per cent of the land, while another 5.26 per cent were rich farmers who owned a further 31 per cent of the land. Adding these two groups together, we can see that 6.58 per cent of the population owned 47 per cent of the land, while 71.68 per cent of the population was classified as poor or landless, and altogether owned only 31 per cent of the land.

The majority of poor and landless farmers had no alternative but to work as sharecroppers for the small number of wealthy landlords. There were two primary systems of land tenure: *adhiya*, by which the sharecroppers were required to give the landowners half of the harvest every year regardless of yield, and *kut*, by which the sharecroppers were required to give the landowners a fixed

amount of grain every year, once again regardless of yield.<sup>16</sup> Both of these systems, especially *kut*, led to a situation where the grain that sharecroppers received in exchange for their labour was usually not enough to feed their families for a full year. This compelled the poor farmers to seek out additional cash income, in order to purchase food supplies. However, cash-earning opportunities were almost non-existent in the agricultural economy of Nepal's hills, and in desperation poor families would ask for loans from the same wealthy families for whom they already worked. Loans would be granted, but at extremely high interest rates of up to 5–6 per cent per month (60–72 per cent p.a.). When the farmers could not repay their loans within the stipulated time, the moneylenders would foreclose on their remaining land, if any. If the borrower had no land, he would be required to work on the lender's land with no compensation as punishment. In addition, lenders would often take advantage of illiterate borrowers by falsifying loan papers to show an inflated amount which the borrower could not read. All of these conditions led to a situation where the poor were continually getting poorer and losing land, while the rich were getting richer and consolidating property holdings.

As might be expected, the figures published by CPN-ML do not show the ethnic or caste identity of Piskar's residents, but rather focus on their class position. At the time, the Nepal census also did not collect information on ethnic and caste identity: this was done for the first time only in the 1991 census. For these reasons, there is no concrete statistical data available to demonstrate that most of the poor farmers targeted for politicization by the CPN-ML in the 1970s–80s belonged to the Thangmi ethnic group. However, this is a reasonable assumption based on anecdotal evidence and recent population figures that demonstrate the high Thangmi population of the area, as well as the Thangmi position at the bottom of the economic heap. In the interview, Amrit Bohara claimed that during his childhood in the 1950s–60s the population of Piskar was at least 60 per cent Thangmi. The 2001 Nepal census showed 834 Thangmi residents in Piskar Village Development Committee (VDC) or 38 per cent of the population (HMG, 2002: 73).<sup>17</sup> In the adjacent VDC of Chokati, Thangmi accounted for 46 per cent of the population (HMG, 2002: 69).<sup>18</sup> Based on my own survey work in these areas, I believe these numbers to be substantially lower than the actual Thangmi population.<sup>19</sup> In any case, Thangmi currently

constitute an important population block in the region, and most likely their numbers were approximately the same or higher during the earlier period under discussion.

A 1999 survey of property ownership in Alampu, another VDC in the region with a majority Thangmi population, sheds some light on how land was probably distributed along ethnic/caste lines in Piskar.<sup>20</sup> The information collected by a Dolakha-based NGO shows that while Thangmi in Alampu constitutes 90 per cent of the population, 75 per cent of Thangmi villagers owned only 0–5 *ropani* of land, and no Thangmi landholder owned over 20 *ropani* (ICDM, 1999).<sup>21</sup> In contrast, 67 per cent of Bahun and Chetri villagers owned over 20 *ropani* of land and none owned less than 5 *ropani* (ICDM, 1999).

These numbers show that Piskar was a suitable microcosm in which to put communist ideas and actions to the test: it was what the CPN-ML liked to call a ‘semi-feudal, semi-colonial’ village environment. When Bohara returned to his home village in 1978, he found that there was already a “smoldering class hatred” (HPP, 1984: 7) among the Thangmi farmers, which could be harnessed to serve the broader purposes of the nascent communist movement. Thangmi villagers had long been aware of their exploitation at the hands of landowners, a feeling expressed in a substantial corpus of songs, poetry, and stories in the Thangmi language that articulates these issues and calls for justice. Many older Thangmi told me that they were involved in small-scale acts of resistance against their landlords long before they had ever heard of communism.<sup>22</sup> However, their frustrations had neither been linked to a clear ideological agenda that extended beyond the village, nor expressed in a manner that incurred the wrath of the state and implicated the villagers in a much broader web of political intrigue at the national level.

## ENTER THE COMMUNISTS

The two publications on Piskar’s history put out by Thangmi ethno-political organizations link the emergence of political consciousness in the area to the arrival of CPN-ML cadres in 1978 (NPTS, 1997: 67).<sup>23</sup> Amrit Kumar Bohara is given credit for being the first activist in the area, introducing other influential cadres to the villagers, and beginning the process of consciousness raising that enabled the Thangmi population to rise up in revolt, ultimately resulting in the

Piskar Massacre. Both Thangmi publications suggest that Bohara was and remains a respected figure who was instrumental in organizing the villagers:

The name of Amrit Kumar Bohara is well-known to the Piskar people, a very responsible underground contemporary Communist leader (recently minister of local development), who was also from Piskar VDC in Sindhupalchok district. Amrit Kumar Bohara had brought to this same village of Piskar a very prominent, honest, and active member of the Communist Party, Madhav Paudel (recently district chairman of Lalitpur)... Awareness of [the importance of] education was increasing and the gap between the rich and poor, and the exploiter and exploited, was widening among the farmers. As a result, an anti-aristocratic and anti-exploitation movement arose among the local peasants in 1987 (VS 2034). (NPTS, 1997: 67)

The communist minister Amrit Kumar Bohara, who was born in Piskar, returned to the Bhumi at his birthplace and became active. The local people gave him support from their hearts. The people were becoming aware of natural rights, human rights, justice, equality, sovereignty, and so forth. They were becoming organized. (TBTSUK, 1999: 67)

The former publication also mentions Shakya:

Asta Laxmi Shakya arrived in Piskar and spent almost one and a half years underground hiding in the above-mentioned Piskar area. Her work and motivation left a big impression on the locals and motivated them also. (NPTS, 1997: 69)

Several features of these quotations deserve further comment. First of all, it is intriguing that both of them mention with apparent pride Bohara's stint as a minister within the UML government of 1994–95. This suggests that the people of Piskar saw him as a local boy made good—he is said to have returned to Bhumi, the territorial deity, or literally 'earth'—and that his presence in the national government increased their sense of actual representation in a democratic system. At the same time, these publications elsewhere display an ambivalence about the abilities of the central government to actually follow through on its promises to local people, and increasing disillusionment about the participation of local heroes like Bohara in such questionable ruling structures. Second, although Madhav Paudel, who was not a Piskar local (he was from the city

of Lalitpur, to the south of Kathmandu), in fact did much of the early political work in Bohara's absence; Bohara as the local is ultimately given credit for bringing such an 'honest' and 'active' cadre to the village to work there in his stead. Finally, although these publications recognize local people's agency in agitating against the exploiters, the causal relationship between the appearance of CPN-ML cadres on the scene and the beginnings of these activities is made clear. The project was not just about agitating for their own rights, but about 'supporting' Bohara as well—which I interpret to mean supporting his larger political agenda and aspirations for personal advancement within the party. Villagers' frustrations were genuine and were already being expressed through other means, but a broader political consciousness that deployed communist ideology to counter hegemonic powers at the local and national level was Bohara's creation. The extraordinary efforts he put into politicizing the village appear to have emerged partly out of his genuine concern for the well-being of the villagers and his belief in the power of class struggle to transform their situation, and partly as an attempt to increase his own political stature.<sup>24</sup>

## **DISCOURSES OF DOMESTICATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

What did Bohara and Shakya actually do when they arrived in the village? Their descriptions of the process of gaining people's basic trust and laying the groundwork for direct political action expose a great deal about their own class and caste/ethnic positionalities, and the way that these perspectives affected their interactions with villagers. Such details are conspicuously absent from the official accounts published by both the CPN-ML and Thangmi organizations. In addition to the objectives of raising consciousness and garnering personal support as described earlier, a central aim of these activists' early work in Piskar appears to have been the domestication of what Bohara and Shakya saw as the 'wild' Thangmi population, through simple development initiatives that would improve their basic livelihoods.

Bohara had clear impressions of 'the Thangmi' that dated to his childhood in Piskar. Despite having a strong social conscience, he was still a high-caste Hindu and saw the Thangmi, a non-Hindu,

Tibeto-Burman language-speaking population, as distinctly other. Speaking of his late childhood years spent studying in the village primary school, he reminisced:

Since by now there was a primary school in the village, we would call the Thangmi children to come to school. We had to plead with them to come to school. Otherwise they would not come, saying that they were Thangmi children and they had no use of education as it was meant for the rich; the Thangmi children should be looking after the animals ... They would say that they had to go work in the fields and there was no use learning to read and write. We were finally able to convince them and they began to read a little. That way social awareness was introduced to the villagers. Slowly they started becoming politically conscious too.

Although Bohara's claim that he was already introducing social awareness to villagers as a child is clearly exaggerated, the description of the Thangmi as largely illiterate and uneducated is accurate. There is no question that elite landholders conspired to keep their Thangmi sharecroppers from learning to read so that the latter could not challenge exploitative practices. Given this history, Thangmi families were likely to think that the new opportunity for primary education was yet another strategy for exploitation and stayed away from it, saying "it was meant for the rich".

Yet basic literacy was one of the fundamental prerequisites for building political consciousness, so when Bohara returned to the village as an adult with a political agenda, developing literacy within the Thangmi community was one of his first tasks, along with teaching the fundamentals of hygiene and sanitation:

We began our work with such activities: We conducted adult literacy classes in the mornings and evenings. We taught them that they must keep the paths to their homes clean and keep the area around water taps clean. They used to keep their environment dirty. They would live and eat in such an environment. They did not take baths or wash their clothes. They lived and died like that. We taught them to make their living area clean. That is how we began our work.

However, this was not an easy task:

But they said that they could not understand such things, and could not understand the lectures of big people (*thulo manche*).<sup>25</sup> They said that they could not fight against the big people and that was the way



62 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

they were. They said that it was their fate to be poor and lead difficult lives. They were not supposed to have comfortable lives and all that we were suggesting was not possible. They said what we were talking about was for bigger people and they should not follow what we were telling them. They wouldn't listen to us. When we said something they would say, "yes, yes", but later they would say that they would not get to eat without working, and therefore they would not come for the literacy classes. They felt that we were trying to disrupt their lives and that we scolded them. It was much later that they began to trust us. Only later did they realize that we were trying to do good.

These details complicate the story of immediate understanding and easy trust between Bohara and the Thangmi villagers recounted elsewhere. Many Thangmi individuals first saw the activists as 'big people' from outside, who could not understand their situation and might in fact be trying to take advantage of them like all the other 'big people' they had come in contact with. Bohara may have been a Piskar native and a Communist, but he was not a Thangmi. Until he proved otherwise through his actions, villagers had no grounds on which to believe that he was not out to exploit them just as his forefathers had.

Interviews with Thangmi villagers confirm this view of events. As one man put it:

We had no reason to trust them. When people like him [Bohara] left the village we said farewell happily, when they came back we worried what they would do next. People were suspicious of new ideas and did not understand why they even bothered to talk with us. They didn't understand our way of life and even though later I understood that he was trying to help us, at first I thought he was like all of the others. Eventually I became interested in communist ideas and I learned to read through the classes Bohara started.

The emphasis on literacy had both symbolic and practical elements: teaching Thangmi individuals to read was symbolically powerful since it flew in the face of the landlords' attempts to keep them illiterate, and it was practically important since it enabled villagers to begin reading political publications on their own and to communicate with like-minded villagers elsewhere through letters. Literacy was linked to a discourse of development and modernity: reading itself was not enough, but along with implementing basic hygiene and developing a sense of pride in one's environment, it was one of the keys to becoming a 'politically conscious' and 'modern' Nepali citizen.

Unlike Bohara, Shakya had no preconceived notions of what village life in general or Thangmi life in particular was like. Her first night in a Thangmi house was a shocking experience, but one which further convinced her that she had taken the right path in becoming a party member:

We got there exactly at midnight. It was a Thangmi village. We knocked on a door. We went inside a Thangmi house. I felt very strange as soon as I saw the room. I was born in a city. I lived in a city. I realized that this was also Nepal, this was also our country... It was a dark and small room. There were no mattresses or blankets. When we got there we were hungry, we had not eaten anything. Then a woman comrade wearing dirty clothes got up, shook my hand, and told me to sit down. She said that I must be hungry and asked me what I wanted to eat. There was nothing to eat, only some flour. She poured some water on it and put some salt in it and gave it to us. I came to realize what the love of the people means.

For Shakya, the Thangmi were a wild 'other' in need of domestication before even basic political activities could be carried out. The prospect of imparting communist education seemed impossible until the potential students in question—the Thangmi—began to think of themselves as full-fledged humans entitled to basic dignity and rights:

They never took a bath. They did not know that the pot they cooked food in should be cleaned. After they cooked the food they would keep it just like that and there would be flies all over the pot the whole day. In the evening they would pour water in it, cook and eat. I would stay inside and clean the pots. They would go to the fields to work, and to collect fodder for the animals. When they came home in the evenings they would see everything clean. It's nice to see everything clean. That's how they learned. I combed their hair and they learned that hair should be combed ... There was no soap to wash clothes. I taught them how to wash clothes. I did not teach only about politics because there was a need to change the economic situation, the social situation, their ideas, and their lifestyle ... They ate beef and we taught them that they should not eat it.

Shakya's social work appears to have been well intentioned, arising out of a genuine concern for the welfare of the people she encountered. But there was also an element of ethnic prejudice in it that saw most Thangmi traditions and habits as unclean and unacceptable, rather

64 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

than as fundamental aspects of Thangmi life. This is most evident in Shakya's pride in teaching Thangmi villagers not to eat beef. Killing cows was strictly illegal in pre-2006 Hindu Nepal, and consuming the flesh of cows that have died of natural causes was and remains a marker of low social status. Nonetheless, the practice is still an important marker of Thangmi identity. An act of resistance against the Hindu world that dominates them, Thangmi men and women take pride in eating beef and go to great lengths to maintain this tradition despite strong pressure to end it. What Shakya attempted to teach them, then, was not just how to be communists, but how to subjugate their ethnic identity to an emerging national identity as 'modern' Nepalis who complied with dominant expectations.

## **PICTURE BOOKS, SONGS, AND SPEECHES**

Once the basic hurdles were overcome and trust was gained, Bohara and Shakya both began holding literacy and general education sessions. Since none of the villagers were literate at the beginning, the main teaching tools they used to explain communist concepts were picture books. Shakya explained:

I took a lot of picture books with stories in which people come together and rise against scoundrels, where people get together to solve their problems. We would explain on the basis of these picture books. There were a lot of picture books in Chinese available then. We ourselves would write picture books which had characters who were people's enemies.

The next step was getting the people to express their anger about their own oppression, which was best done through songs and other non-literary forms. But, according to Bohara, even these modes of expression had to be introduced to them:

We taught the women to read, sing songs, recite poems, write, to give speeches, to speak up. We taught them in caves, jungles and other shelters in the night. We did all that. Otherwise how would they have been able to stand up and speak?

Since songs and poems are widespread traditional Thangmi cultural practices, one wonders whether Bohara and company can

actually claim credit for teaching Thangmi women about these forms of expression. Perhaps the activists were indeed the first to suggest to Thangmi individuals that their songs might be good for more than intra-ethnic communication and entertainment, and could in fact be used as a mode of protest against others. The Thangmi publications on Piskar concur that songs were a central aspect of the emerging political movement:

The main source of public awareness was the 'people's song', so they went to caves to listen to songs secretly in the evening. For this purpose they purchased a cassette recorder with money from selling wild honey. Through listening to the songs, the farmers realized that there had been serious class suppression. (NPTS, 1997: 67)<sup>26</sup>

Most likely, the communists can claim credit for suggesting to Thangmi villagers that they begin singing and reciting poems in Nepali, rather than in their ethnic language, so that their complaints could be understood by the landlords against whom they were directed. Once again, the cadres' presence worked to inculcate a sense of agency as national political actors, at the same time discrediting the value of indigenous Thangmi-language activities, which did not qualify as 'standing up and speaking'.

## **SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION**

Both Bohara and Shakya felt that they experienced great personal suffering in the process of bringing political awareness to the Thangmi of Piskar and empowering them to 'speak out'. For Bohara, this took the shape of state persecution against his own family in the village:

Our family has struggled a lot for them [the Thangmi] so that they would not have to be dependent on anyone, so that they would not be exploited by anyone and they could lead their own lives. Our house was locked up for having done that. The government at the time confiscated all our property. They jailed my brother and his wife. They chased us away from our home, they demolished our house and destroyed our garden. That's what they did during the Panchayat era. I could not even see my father when he died. I could not go there.

Shakya described her suffering more as a test of internal strength in adverse conditions, epitomized by the experience of having to

eat rotten meat served to her by Thangmi villagers in order to gain their trust:

I could not eat the meat. I thought that I could not stay there. I thought that I could not work with him [Bohara]. Tears rolled down my face but I somehow ate it. Later I told them that we must live, we do not have money for medicines and if they died early who would bring about a revolution, who would build up an organisation. So we should not eat it, let's continue to live ... I told them this after I ate it. If I had told them earlier, they would have chased me away. They would not have trusted me. Now they could consider me one of them.

All of this suffering was not without its results, and ultimately being 'one of them' paid off. Both Shakya and Bohara acknowledged that their political careers would never have taken off without the support of Piskar's people, and the repute they gained as genuine communist revolutionaries in the aftermath of the Piskar Massacre. As Shakya put it, "Piskar brought me up to here"—'here' being a seat on the UML central committee and a ministerial portfolio in the UML government of 1994–95.

## **THE MASSACRE: ONE SQUAD ACTION AND BEYOND**

How did all of this communist education affect Piskar's Thangmi villagers? As early as 1978, villagers began taking action against landowners and experience retaliation from state security forces. The massacre of 1984 was not the beginning of the movement, but rather the culmination of a long series of encounters between villagers and the police. The actions in which villagers were engaged, such as 'stealing' property and grain from wealthy landlords, refusing to work for them, and tearing up loan documents, conformed to the broader CPN-ML policy of "escalat[ing] its one squad action ... in some of its base areas in Ilam, Sankhuwasabha, Sindhupalchok, Mahotari and Dang districts in 1978–79" (Hachhethu, 2002: 59).

One of the Thangmi activist publications from the 1990s recounts three different events in the late 1970s in which Thangmi activists pillaged landlords' houses and property, and consequently faced police retaliation (NPTS, 1997). Often it seemed that the police had been called in by the landlords, and that it was these local big men who were using their influence to command the state authorities

rather than the other way around. In response to the last incident, 105 Thangmi villagers were listed as 'terrorists' by the government, and warrants were put out for their arrest (NPTS, 1997: 68). In late 1979 a company of 80 policemen came to arrest these individuals, but the villagers resisted them violently. Three Thangmi protesters were badly injured in the incident, and the stakes were further raised.

The villagers of Piskar were not alone in incurring the state's wrath in reaction to their nascent protest movement. The CPN-ML had been instigating similar kinds of actions in other rural base areas throughout the country, and often the results were violent. Ultimately, this compelled the party leadership to rethink their tactics, and a policy change was made at the central level. As Hachhethu explains:

... the ML was unable to resist when the government used suppressive measures in areas where the party's one-squad action had disrupted the law and order situation. The Khalsa belt of Dhankuta was an extreme case in which the government used the army with a major operation for 11 days in November 1979 in which 15 persons were shot dead, 200 women raped, 55 arrested and the rest of the villagers left their homes. Consequently, the ML's central leaders were compelled to review their dogmatic strategy. (Hachhethu, 2002: 60)<sup>27</sup>

But despite this change at the central level, the local unit in Piskar led by Bohara, Shakya, and Paudel did not follow suit. They continued with their 'one squad action' throughout the early 1980s, although they knew they were under increased government surveillance, and although they were receiving warnings from within the party to desist.

So when the annual Thangmi festival of Maghe Sankranti came around in January 1984 it was no surprise to anyone that it contained a political element, or that it was brutally suppressed by the police. As Bohara explained:

Seven days before the 15 January incident, Madhav Paudel and I had gone to Piskar. We had organized a meeting on behalf of the party... We made arrangements for a cultural programme on 15 January and talked about a progressive type of programme that would make the people conscious, in which they would sing songs against feudalism and stage plays.

Bohara and Paudel were making strategic use of the traditional festival day of Maghe Sankranti—on which the Thangmi community of the region always gathered at the Piskar Mahadevsthan—to communicate communist concepts to a large group of villagers beyond the already politicized core individuals with whom they had been working for several years. About 2,000 people turned up at the festival and, according to one of the Thangmi publications, it was a joyous cultural event—albeit with a not-so-subtle political element—that went sour:

On the above-mentioned day at the *jatra* [festival], around 2,000 villagers and devotees from all around the vicinity as well as other places were present. The enthusiastic villagers had also prepared a stage for presenting an entertainment programme ... The audience was deeply engaged in the appealing programme of dances, skits, plays, songs, and so forth. The freezing cold of Magh [January–February] didn't bother them at all. Those who were hungry were busy enjoying soybeans and yams distributed by the organizers. Piskar's environment was entranced by the rhythm of the *madal* [drum] and the melodious sound of the bamboo flute. By around three in the morning the programme had finished peacefully, but the festival continued.

Forgetting their daily lives, the villagers had been enjoying the festival, each in their own way. The time was about four in the morning. No one had any clue that the conspirators in their well-planned style had been encircling the site of the programme from all directions with lethal arms, and they were moving forward. According to the pre-meditated plan, the bloodsuckers were marching alertly on the paths from Chitrepati and Changtha [nearby villages]. The group of police who had come along with the DSP [Deputy Superintendent of Police] had arrested Madhav Paudel and Tara Pant [another cadre], but Madhav was successful in escaping from the police grip. Immediately after he skipped out like that, the police called the attack on the *jatra*. Overturning all of the lamps, destroying the stage, and randomly lathi [baton] charging, the situation became more and more frightening.

Bir Bahadur Thami and Ile Thami stepped forward to take control of the frightened and terrorized trembling masses. The bloody attack went on and on for about half an hour non-stop. (TBTSUK, 1999: 63–4)

Both Bir Bahadur Thami and Ile Thami were killed as the police opened fire on the villagers, and these two men were subsequently declared martyrs by the CPN-ML. Fifteen others were injured, five of whom succumbed to their wounds and died in the following weeks.

Several hundred villagers were also arrested and held for up to three years without charges.

These events constituted a massive rupture in daily life for Piskar's villagers. Families were torn apart, as all those who had been present at the festival (and many who weren't) were branded as 'extremists' or 'terrorists' and went into hiding to avoid arrest. Strangely, Amrit Bohara was not there on the day of the massacre.<sup>28</sup> He had returned to Kathmandu just a few days before, and heard about the events there. Bohara rushed back to the village to hold 'condolence meetings' for the new Thangmi martyrs. Even so, many of the villagers became suspicious that the party leaders had been tipped off about the impending police action, and had saved their own skins by leaving, while putting Thangmi lives on the line in the name of communist revolution. In our interview, Bohara admitted that he was aware of the possibility of retaliatory action from the police, but suggested that his actions had minimized the potential damage:

Once the government starts getting suspicious it begins acting. Political activities increased and people started getting organized. The government mobilized soldiers. They were planning to have a big battle. Their base was Piskar. They said that the communists were coming ... since the forces in the district were not adequate they brought more from the capital and suppressed us. We knew a little of what was going to happen. Friends had warned us to be careful. That's why only two people died. Otherwise hundreds would have died. They had encircled us.

Although he identifies himself with those present at the festival—"they had encircled *us*"—his absence on the day of the event planted the first seeds of doubt in many villagers' minds that Bohara's political activism was intended solely to benefit them and improve their livelihoods. For some local Thangmi who had become CPN-ML activists, the massacre only hardened their resolve to fight against exploitation and the violent state through communism. Others, however, began to worry that the revolution was not so much about them as about politicians fighting for power at the centre. As one young man from Piskar whose father was arrested put it, "It was Bohara's fault that innocent people suffered, and we cannot forgive him for that."

Human rights reports about the event tried to give the villagers the benefit of the doubt by portraying them as victims of outside agitators who used local people for their own political ends. As the



Amnesty International report on the incident 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” (1987: 15). As I have argued elsewhere (Shneiderman, 2003), I do not believe that this is an entirely accurate portrayal of the situation: the specific political terms through which the villagers’ frustrations were expressed had indeed been introduced over the preceding five years by activists like Bohara, but the villagers’ grievances against the landlords were genuine and homegrown, and might well have come to be articulated through other means had communism not appeared on the scene. Yet given the circumstances surrounding the event, Bohara and his comrades do seem to bear substantial responsibility for the loss of life and ensuing social fragmentation that occurred in the village, while they were lauded as ‘heroes’ by the party for their work in mobilizing Piskar’s masses.

### **AFTER THE FACT: STATE POWER FOR THE PARTY, DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE VILLAGE**

The massacre and its after-effects put a temporary end to explicit political activism and one squad action in the Piskar area. Most of the village leaders were in jail, and the rest were afraid for their lives. Bohara and Paudel stopped spending much time in the village and began to focus increasingly on building the party at the central level, especially as the movement for the restoration of democracy began to heat up in Kathmandu in the late 1980s. Although many Piskar villagers remained CPN-ML members, they became increasingly sceptical of the limited role the leadership envisioned for them within the party as village-level cadres rather than key party members at the national level. Furthermore, it seemed that the very party leaders who had taught the villagers about the value of violent class struggle were beginning to lose their ideological edge, as the CPN-ML joined the United People’s Front and adopted ‘multi-party democracy’ (*bahudaliya janbad*) as their goal, in place of the Maoist concept of ‘new democracy’ (*naulo janbad*). As one Thangmi villager who had been an active CPN-ML cadre until the early 1980s put it:

That was the moment when we knew they were not thinking of us anymore. We had come to believe in the value of new democracy through violent class struggle, and suddenly those who had got us involved in the first place deserted us. It looked like they were only interested in gaining power in Kathmandu and had forgotten our suffering. That's when I left the party.

Bohara and Shakya were highly aware of such accusations, and made a point of defending themselves by asserting their continued concern for the villagers of Piskar. Bohara in particular although defended his actions as a cabinet minister in the 1990s, but acknowledged the limits of his capacity to effect change in Piskar from his position of central power:

The condition of the people is still the same. We have not been able to bring about change in their suffering. There is a lot of discontent. We have tried to work for them so that their economic condition improves a little, and they get their political rights. The party respects them and has given them status... I have become a member of parliament and have become a minister two times. When I am leading such a comfortable life, I remember the people of Piskar and understand their suffering. Sometimes people accuse me of being a retrograde and say that I have earned a lot of money. They ask me what I have earned. They say that I have forgotten the people. I still feel for them and I have not forgotten them... It is because of the people there that we are here today. They brought us here. I would not be alive if they had not hidden me and saved me when the Panchayat system tried to shoot me. I would not have been alive if they had not hidden food in their clothes and given it to us. So how can I forget them when I am living a comfortable life now?... It is not easy to go there now but I have not forgotten. I tried to help them when I could and when I was in the government. I tried to have some construction work done in the village there so that the people would benefit economically. I tried to do this through different government agencies. But the class difference there will not end just like that. That could take a very long time. There is a need for a very big social transformation.

One wonders who could effect the kind of 'social transformation' Bohara speaks of, and how.

By joining the fight for multi-party democracy and then participating in governance within the new system after 1990, the UML demonstrated that they were no longer a revolutionary party, but

rather a mainstream democratic party that was struggling to maintain its populist image. As Hachhethu explains, throughout the 1990s both major parties began to lose credibility due to internal power struggles, corruption scandals, and an over-emphasis on power at the centre to the detriment of grassroots concerns:

Parties are increasingly becoming an instrument for self-aggrandizement of the power elites and vested interest groups. This has a negative impact on the parties' advocacy of the collective interests of society. Nepali political parties have failed miserably in their basic duty of linking citizens' preferences with public policy... Beset by these problems, the NC and the UML seem headed towards a reverse course as protectors of the status quo rather than as instruments of change. Their existence among the people and in the society at the grassroots level is mainly confined to physical presence not functional activity. So the mainstream parties themselves are creating a vacuum, ideologically and politically, in society. (Hachhethu, 2003: 173)

Many of Piskar's villagers shared the sense that the UML was becoming part of the status quo rather than continuing to work for social transformation, and the party therefore began to lose its appeal to many of the villagers it had worked so hard to politicize.

The concept of 'democracy' in particular seemed to have delivered little to those who had worked so hard for it. In the 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 follows: "A poor village boy, fiercely defending himself against the enemy, he proudly sacrificed his life for his country as a true nationalist" (TBTSUK, 1999: 65). 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?" (TBTSUK, 1999: 68). UML leaders like Bohara had taken on ministerial positions and become part of the state apparatus, yet they had failed to secure adequate compensation for Piskar's villagers. While democracy was the ideology of choice as long as it appeared to promise positive change in villagers' lives,

when the democratic system was perceived to fail the very villagers who had fought for it, the space was open for other alternatives. A quotation from the other, 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 flow again. (NPTS, 1997: 68)

Indeed, the UML's shift to the centre had created a serious ideological and political vacuum, which the CPN-M—the Maoists—stepped in to fill in 1996.

## THE EMERGENCE OF NEW REVOLUTIONARIES

By early 2001, Piskar was a regional Maoist base, or *adbar ilaka*, and it had even become a show village where Maoist propagandists took foreign reporters (Liu and Roberts, 2001). The village's history had produced a heightened political consciousness which meant that when the Maoists finally arrived on the scene, their ideology was seen to be essentially congruent with the existing agendas of many villagers. In short, CPN-ML activists had done the difficult work of politicizing the populace, and then disappeared to pursue their own paths to power at the centre, leaving the villagers of Piskar a perfect target for Maoist recruitment. When the Maoists held their first meetings in Piskar in 1998, their agenda sounded very much like the CPN-ML platform 20 years earlier. Despite everything the village had been through in the 1970s and 1980s, very little had changed in terms of economic or social structure, and it is hardly surprising that the same type of people who had reacted positively to the CPN-ML rhetoric in an earlier era, and then felt let down by the party's shift to the centre, would once again be attracted by this new version of hard-line communist ideology. Some prominent villagers who had supported the CPN-ML in the early days remained party members, especially those who had been involved at higher levels in the district-level party committee. But others were disillusioned, particularly the younger generation who had witnessed their parents' arrests after the massacre

74 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

in 1984, and who had no personal allegiance to the earlier generation of CPN-ML activists. Some of these individuals began to support the Maoists, either by directly joining their People's Liberation Army, or by acting as village-level militia and informers.

The suggestion that the Maoists were responsible for politicizing the people of Piskar and mobilizing them for revolutionary action was anathema to Bohara and Shakya. It was difficult for them to acknowledge that in fact a substantial number of villagers who had originally comprised their base might have now defected to the new revolutionaries:

Bohara: The Maoists are calling the Piskar area and the Thangmi settlement in Dolakha their base area. There is no truth in this. They may be staying there by force but it was not they who made the people there socially and politically conscious.

Shakya: Today the Maoists say that the Thangmi in the settlements of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok have become socially and politically conscious because of them. That is a lie. It was our party that started organizing the Thangmi politically in very difficult circumstances in Sindhupalchok and Dolakha districts. Our party started working from the beginning, from ground zero, from nothing. Our party is working there even now. Some might have become involved with Maoists, I don't know. They might have got involved for various reasons. I do not want to comment on their independence. But until today, it remains we who worked from the beginning to build the organization there.

There is no question that it was the CPN-ML activists who first built a communist consciousness in the area, which the CPN-M took advantage of later. The Maoists are nonetheless unashamed of using the Piskar Massacre as a propaganda tool. 'Piskar' is a rallying cry in their mass meetings throughout the region. They claim that the massacre was 'their' event and that they will avenge the Thangmi martyrs' death through their revolutionary actions.<sup>29</sup> Although the first part of this statement is historically unfounded, the second part of the statement has proven to be a winning gambit with the disillusioned Thangmi community of the area. It is telling that the sons of both Bir Bahadur Thangmi and Ile Thangmi, the two martyrs of the Piskar Massacre, became involved with the Maoists, one as a high-level area commander. Apparently the Maoists were able to rekindle interest by promising a revolutionary social transformation that villagers no longer trusted the mainstream wing of the CPN to deliver.

At the time of writing in 2005, the UML leadership was disturbed by this situation, and was doing everything they could to win back their past supporters. At a May 2005 convention held by the Nepal Thami Samaj in Kathmandu, a national Thangmi ethno-political organization, one of the invited speakers was none other than Madhav Paudel, now Lalitpur district chairman. He pulled out a dog-eared copy of the 1984 Himali Prakashan Parivar book about the Piskar Massacre published by the UML (HPP, 1984, as cited earlier) and presented it to the convention's organizers, all of whom were relatively young Thangmi who would have been children at the time of the massacre. "This is your history," he said, "[A]ll of Nepal knows that the Thangmi are brave martyrs fighting for their country." Although Paudel did not explicitly mention the UML, his speech was clearly intended to attract young Thangmi to the party. It had mixed effects: the 26-year-old general secretary of the Thangmi organization later told me that he was very uncomfortable with the way both the Thangmi ethnic name and the village of Piskar were deployed for political purposes. "All of the parties have promised us things," he said, "especially the UML. We still want to think that they have something to offer us, but how can we trust them anymore? Many young Thangmi lie about their ethnic affiliation because they do not want to be seen as communists or Maoists, especially in the current situation [i.e. post 1 February 2005]."

However, other young people who did not take part in activities of the Nepal Thami Samaj were instead proud of their membership in the Thami Mukti Morcha, a Maoist-affiliated alternative ethnic organization. Although the CPN-M does not differ from earlier CPN groups at an ideological level (all of them claim to give precedence to class over ethnic struggle), Maoist cadres have been significantly more successful at engaging in and expediently manipulating ethnic discourse. The Maoists hardly had a choice: by the time they emerged as a full-fledged political force in the mid 1990s, Nepal's ethnic rights movement, or *janjati andolan*, had developed as a significant alternative social movement that could no longer be ignored.<sup>30</sup> By establishing nominally independent organizations that represent each ethnic group within the party, encouraging cultural performances of 'indigenous' song and dance at political meetings, and carefully appointing individuals from locally prevalent ethnic minority groups to the leadership of their 'people's government' councils (*jan sarkar*) in each area, the Maoists have made a show of being sensitive to grievances voiced in an ethnic, rather than class, idiom.<sup>31</sup> These gestures

76 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

still only go so far; many Thangmi and members of other minority groups who were first attracted to the Maoist movement by precisely such measures soon found that they were often cosmetic. The glass ceiling remains when it comes to the higher levels of CPN-M party leadership, which is dominated by Bahuns.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the Maoist platform for political change is ultimately a radical nationalist one predicated on the erasure of both class and ethnicity.

For UML leaders like Paudel, Bohara, and Shakya, who have joined the mainstream, Piskar remains a symbol of what they once were. According to Bohara, “Piskar is a village that gives birth to martyrs. It gives inspiration for political work.” Indeed, the early work of politicization and consciousness raising that these activists carried out in Piskar appears to have inspired a whole new generation of revolutionaries. But they will have to work even harder than their predecessors to avoid falling out of favour with a highly politicized populace more aware than ever of their ethnic and economic rights.

## NOTES

1. The research presented here was conducted in 1999–2000 with funding from a Fulbright Fellowship, and in 2001–05 under a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Additional funds were provided by the Department of Anthropology and the Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell University. I thank Bir Bahadur Thami, Man Bahadur Thami, and Mark Turin, as well as the members of the Nepal Thami Samaj, for their invaluable support and contributions to my research. Finally I thank Dambar Chemjong, David Gellner, Krishna Hachhethu, David Holmberg, Kathryn March, Frank Pieke, and Mukta Tamang for influential conversations and comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

This chapter was originally written in 2005. I have not been able to update it fully to incorporate an analysis of more recent events, such as the CPN-M’s April 2008 electoral victory. Since the focus of my discussion here is largely historical, for the most part I have left the text in its original form. At key moments, I have added footnotes to indicate areas where recent events warrant future research.

2. The CPN has undergone several splits and reunifications over time. These will be detailed in the following; here I refer to the ‘parent’ party as a whole.
3. All political parties were illegal until 1990.
4. Thangmi is the indigenous ethnonym used by members of the group to refer to themselves. Thami is the Nepali derivative which is used in official documents and most literature on the group. I use ‘Thangmi’ when referring to the group in my own work, but Thami when citing ethnic organizations who use the term in their title, or other writings on the group which use this term.

5. See Tamang (2002) and Pigg (1992, 1996) for detailed analyses of how such national ideals were constructed during the Panchayat period. Although both of these authors emphasize the role of development discourse and practice in creating the generic 'modern Nepali', there is no question that political parties such as the CPN conceptualized the ideal national Nepali in a similar fashion during this period, and the relationship between development and political discourses in Nepal is worthy of further examination. See also Liechty (2003) for a general discussion of the consumption of 'modernity' in urban Nepal.
6. Several authors have addressed the relationship between class and ethnicity in shaping the history of party politics in Nepal. See especially Lawoti (2003) and Tamang (2004 a, b). After the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the CPN-M began emphasizing the concept of ethnic federalism with a proposal for nine states, but in the wake of their 2008 election win, this agenda has again taken second place to that of economic reform. It remains to be seen whether or not the CPN-M-led government can adequately satisfy ethnic demands.
7. See Connor (1984) for an overview of these issues in Marxist-Leninist ideology.
8. Both Bohara and Shakya were placed under house arrest on 1 February 2005, when King Gyanendra assumed full power in a military coup. Shakya was released after one month, but Bohara was held for almost three months. Shakya was re-arrested in January 2006.
9. See Richard Bownas (2003) for details of Naxalism and its relationship with Nepali Maoism.
10. All direct quotations of Bohara and Shakya come from an interview conducted in Nepali on 10 November 2004 in Kathmandu. It was transcribed by Bir Bahadur Thami and translated into English by Manesh Shrestha.
11. Nepal is divided into 14 administrative zones and 75 districts. Bagmati is a particularly influential zone as it includes the urban area of Kathmandu.
12. The very fact that she was sent to school through SLC level as a girl from such a large family demonstrates the wealth and relative open-mindedness of her family; during that era very few girls studied at the secondary level, and large families with limited resources would be likely to send only their sons to school.
13. These attitudes match well with Pigg's (1992) description of the ways in which development discourse, laid atop ingrained forms of caste and class stratification in Nepal, has constructed 'the village' as a metaphorical place identified with all things 'backward' in opposition to the 'developed' urban centre.
14. There are several other well-known examples of Bahun and Chetri men marrying Newar women within Nepal's communist circles. These include the late Man Mohan Adhikari and Sadhana Pradhana, as well as Baburam Bhattarai and Hisila Yami.
15. Areas near district border lines have always been popular choices for political activity in Nepal and continued to be so for the Maoists. Until recently, Nepal's security forces were commanded from district headquarters by officers who only had jurisdiction over only one district. Therefore if the situation got tense and party cadres expected punitive action from the state, they could simply cross the district border to buy time while information and orders got communicated from one district-level command to another. This loophole was closed in 2003, when the security forces introduced the new Unified Command concept, under which certain companies of police, military police, and army were commanded from the centre and could cross district lines.



**78** SARA SHNEIDERMAN

16. See Regmi (1976) for additional details on these and other land tenure systems in Nepal.
17. Village Development Committees (VDCs) are currently the smallest administrative unit in modern Nepal. They were established only after 1990, replacing the earlier panchayats.
18. Although the massacre itself occurred in Piskar, CPN-ML cadres were active in other Thangmi villages throughout the area, particularly in Chokati, Dhuskun, and Tauthali.
19. See also Turin (2000) for an explanation of Thangmi census figures.
20. Unfortunately comparable statistics from Piskar itself are not available.
21. A ropani is a standard Nepali measurement equivalent to 5,476 square feet or 508 square metres.
22. The other common reaction to the high level of oppression that Thangmi villagers experienced was to leave the area entirely and emigrate to Bhutan or India, primarily to the north-eastern areas of Darjeeling, Assam, and Sikkim. My research with the Thangmi community in India confirmed that many of the earliest Thangmi settlers who left Nepal did so because they could no longer stand the exploitation they experienced in their home villages. My doctoral dissertation addresses these dynamics in further detail (2009).
23. Nepal Pragitisil Thami Samaj (NPTS) was linked with far left elements of the CPN, while Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra (TBTSUK) was a centrist organization with ties to the NC. Both have now been integrated into the national Nepal Thami Samaj, which represents the interests of the group within the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).
24. Whether or not Bohara himself made this distinction is unclear, but we will see that the villagers of Piskar came to make it on his behalf.
25. The connotation of thulo manche, which literally means 'big people', is of high-caste, high-status outsiders.
26. De Sales (2003) has described the importance of leftist 'revolutionary songs' in generating political consciousness in western Nepal. Indeed, music has been a favoured medium for political mobilization across the country.
27. Martin Gaenszle is conducting an ongoing research on this event, known as the 'Chintang incident'.
28. Asta Laxmi Shakya, by then Bohara's wife, had left Piskar permanently a few months earlier in late 1983 after she gave birth to their daughter.
29. Personal communications from Gabriele Tautscher and Deepak Thapa, both of whom observed such meetings.
30. See Fisher (1993, 2001), Guneratne (2002), and Gellner et al. (1997) for overviews of the ethnic rights movement and its relationship to broader political developments in Nepal during the 1990s.
31. See Ogura (2008) on the topic of ethnic representation within Maoist 'people's government' at the local level.
32. Members of the Magar ethnic group are an exception to this rule, having played a prominent role in the 'people's war' which began in parts of western Nepal with a majority Magar population.

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80 SARA SHNEIDERMAN

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