

The formation of political consciousness in rural Nepal

Sara Beth Shneiderman

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Abstract This chapter considers the formation of political consciousness at the village level in Nepal through an ethno-historical examination of the 1984 Piskar Massacre, in which a local festival in Sindhupalchok district became a fatal confrontation between villagers and the police. Using a Gramscian theoretical framework, this case study suggests how we might broadly conceptualize the formation of political consciousness in rural Nepal as a key historical process, in relation to which any genuine understanding of motivations behind participation in the Maoist movement in particular, and the political sphere in general, must be considered.

Keywords Nepal · Maoist · Political consciousness · Crisis of hegemony · Antonio Gramsci · Ethnography of conflict and violence · Nationalism · Ethnicity · Class

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 Forgas 2000: 218)

S. B. Shneiderman (✉)
St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
e-mail: sbs31@cam.ac.uk

Introduction

This article considers the formation of political consciousness at the village level in Nepal through an ethno-historical examination of the 1984 Piskar Massacre (*hatyakand*), in which a local *jatra*, or festival, in Sindhupalchok district became a fatal confrontation between villagers and the police. This case study suggests how we might broadly conceptualize formation of political consciousness as a key historical process, in relation to which any genuine understanding of motivations behind participation in Nepal's Maoist movement in particular, and the political sphere in general, must be considered.

Since I first wrote this article in 2002, the political landscape in Nepal has changed dramatically. The royal coup in February 2005 and the ensuing People's Movement (*jan andolan II*) of April 2006 brought about the end of the decade-long civil conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and Nepali state forces. After the conflict officially ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) in November 2006, the Maoists returned to mainstream politics, surprising many with their strong showing in the April 2008 Constituent Assembly elections. Academic, journalistic and political analyses have shifted away from casting the Maoists as Nepal's most intractable threat, as new identity-based armed groups representing a range of interests in different regions have stolen the limelight.

Still, many fundamental questions concerning the processes through which political consciousness has been forged in local contexts across Nepal remain remarkably relevant, yet poorly addressed. Two earlier versions of the arguments presented in this chapter were conceived as initial steps toward filling this gap.¹ At the time, making the argument that the CPN-M must be taken seriously as a political force capable of mobilizing large numbers of Nepalis through ideological rhetoric—not just coercion and fear—was often at best greeted with skepticism and at worst treated as evidence that the author harbored Maoist sympathies.

Thankfully the analytical climate has changed substantially since then, with the CPN-M now recognized by most observers as “one of the three major parties”,² and as a prime mover in pushing Nepali political discourse far to the left, making possible previously unimaginable goals such as the transformation of Nepal into a federal republic.³ Yet, despite this change in attitude toward the Maoists in particular—which was unavoidable after they came above-ground and became public political figures in Kathmandu in 2006—comprehension of the dynamics of political consciousness at the grassroots level in general remains superficial on the parts of both the Nepali political elite and the international community. Instead, “villagers” or “Nepal's people” are seen as victims of various kinds of false consciousness. The Maoists may no longer be demonized as the only propagators of

¹ The first version was published as Shneiderman (2003). I thank *Himalaya* for permission to republish this updated version of the article here. The second version of the paper was presented at the “Agenda for Transformation” conference in Kathmandu in 2003, and is still awaiting publication in the conference proceedings.

² As described in multiple newspaper articles in early 2008.

³ Nepal was declared a federal republic on May 28, 2008.

false consciousness among Nepali villagers—*madhesi*, *janjati* and other identity-based groups dominated by bourgeois members of their own communities may now equally be judged as such—but the fact remains that many observers imagine rural Nepalis to be somehow beyond the range of political discourse. A detailed look at local histories of politicization in general, and Maoist mobilization in particular, shows that nothing could be further from the truth, and that there is a continued need for in-depth analysis and public discussion of the dynamics that have shaped political consciousness in a range of locales over time.

For these reasons, I have decided to let the theoretical structure of this article remain intact as it was initially written. In some sections I have added additional detail and insights gleaned from individual interviews conducted during more recent periods of research. However, I have not attempted to update the narrative of events in Piskar substantially, since the focus of the article remains the early phases of politicization which fostered the forms of political consciousness that later contributed to Maoist mobilization.

Theoretical framework

Many 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 at the structural level.⁴ Absent from these analyses was an in-depth consideration of the roles that rural citizens themselves played in fomenting the insurgency.⁵ I argue instead that the Maoist movement 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.

Nepal's ongoing political crisis meets all three of Gramsci's conditions for a "crisis of hegemony": "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" (Buci-Gluckmann 1980: 95). Here 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.

Part of why it took so long for scholars to recognize the gravity of Nepal's political situation was because the "regional ethnography traditions" (cf. Fardon

⁴ By 'early phases' I refer to the period before the November 2001 deployment of the army and imposition of a State of Emergency by the Nepali Government.

⁵ New publications began to fill this gap only after 2003. See especially Gellner (2003), Hutt (2004), Karki and Seddon (2003), Thapa (2003), and Thapa with Sijapati (2003).

1990) in Nepal have focused on describing small-scale village-based communities at the expense of examining state structures (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004). Initial attempts to address this bias in analyses of the Maoist movement perhaps stepped too far to the other side, primarily examining 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 a 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..." (1985: 37) 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" (Scott 1985: 37).

Guha's (1999) seminal work on peasant insurgency in colonial India provides a useful but as yet largely untapped model for analyzing recent history in Nepal. Guha argues against the term "pre-political", as used by European historians such as Eric Hobsbawm to "describe a state of supposedly absolute or near absence of political consciousness or organization" (1999: 5) that characterizes so-called peasant movements. On the contrary, Guha suggests that "there was nothing in the militant movements of its rural masses that was not political" (1999: 6) and that the Indian peasant rebel, "obviously knew what he was doing when he rose in revolt" (1999: 9). As a corrective, Guha introduces the category of "rebel consciousness" as a subject of analysis, suggesting that the true dynamics of insurgency can only be understood from this perspective.

Although we cannot elide the temporal, spatial, and political differences between colonial India and contemporary Nepal, Guha's work still holds many relevant lessons. The Hobsbawmian position that peasant movements are "pre-political"—which Guha critiques—sounds much like the early responses to the Maoist insurgency from both Western and Nepali analysts that characterized the movement as a law and order problem without an ideological agenda, which 'duped' poor villagers into participating. Observers wishing to understand Nepal's conflict might benefit from a Guha-esque shift in attention toward rebel consciousness, situated within a larger Gramscian framework in which the emergence of political consciousness at the base level is understood as one of the three crucial conditions that contributes to an ongoing crisis of hegemony.

Collecting local histories

Since 1998, I have conducted research in areas of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok with a predominantly Thangmi ethnic population.⁶ Early in my research, I began to notice that open-ended questions about how villagers became politically conscious always led back to the same event: the 1984 Piskar *hatyakand*, or massacre. As recounted in

⁶ The Thangmi, known as 'Thami' in Nepali, are an ethnic group of approximately 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.



Fig. 1 Villagers in the Piskar region attend a *jatra*, or cultural festival, like the one at which the Piskar Massacre occurred in 1984. Note the Maoist flags in the foreground (2000, Photo by Sara Shneiderman)

publications of the various Thangmi cultural committees,⁷ and Amnesty International (1987), the basic storyline of the Piskar Massacre runs as follows. On the festival day of Maghe Sankranti of 2040 VS (15 January 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 that 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 ambushed 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 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 approximately 300 others on the charge of being present at the event. Many of those arrested spent upwards of 3 years in jail without trial. Some years later, Piskar residents finally lodged a formal complaint with the central government, then led by Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand. Promises of compensation were made, but nothing was ever paid (Fig. 1).

This event shaped the political consciousness of the entire area, and was in part responsible for making Piskar a Maoist stronghold some years later. I do not want to suggest that the 1984 events in Piskar led inevitably to sympathy for the Maoists in this region. On the contrary, I argue that the political consciousness generated in relation to these events could have had many other potential outcomes had it been viewed as a positive national asset rather than as a threat to be subdued by force. By looking back to 1984, and tracing the subsequent development of political consciousness in this area, we can see how Maoist ideological arguments made a

⁷ Niko Pragatisil Thami Samaj [hereafter NPTS] (2054 VS [1997–1998]); Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra [hereafter TBTSUK] (2056 VS [1999–2000]). The Nepali calendar Vikram Sambat is indicated with the abbreviation VS. This calendar is approximately 57 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar, with each year running from approximately April through March of two Gregorian years. 2054 VS is therefore 1997–1998 AD, while 2061 VS is 2004–2005 AD.

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.

Piskar's history provides a microcosmic example of the development of political consciousness at the village level in relation to regional and national events. Yet the experience of Piskar should not be reified as the master narrative for all of Nepal; instead, it should be seen as one example of the diverse, and often conflicting, narratives from across the country, which must all be documented if we wish to piece together the full story. While it is now commonly acknowledged that state efforts to wipe out far-left groups with military offensives such as Operation Romeo in 1995 and Kilo Sierra in 1998 played a large part in fomenting the insurgency, these events should not be given sole credit for the creation of political consciousness. Rather, we need to look beyond their temporal and geographical limits to events like the 1984 massacre in Piskar to understand how the vectors influencing the insurgency have been much longer in the making.

The argument for false consciousness

Focusing on the political experience at the base level 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 lack of development (cf. Hachhethu 2003; Onta 2003; Roka 2001; Thapa with Sijapati 2003; Thapa 2004). Although these are both key pieces of the puzzle, they alone cannot explain the political transformation 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.⁸ 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. This was linked to a general sense of disbelief that, for some individuals, participation in the Maoist movement may have been a conscious decision.

Western observers with extensive experience in Nepal writing about the conflict early on suggested that participants were, "dragged into" (de Sales 2000: 41) the Maoist movement, which was, "spreading like a virus through this fragile Himalayan nation" (Moynihan 2002: A21), leaving, "the poor people of Nepal ... even more oppressed than they were before" (Anonymous, from an online discussion group, September 2002). These writers all draw attention to important dimensions of the

⁸ Gautam et al.'s discussion of women's agency within the Maoist movement is a notable exception (2001). Substantial new work focusing on the question of agency as well as other particulars of local experience began to appear only after 2003, although this late date may be partially due to the slow speed of academic publishing. See especially Ogura (2004) Pettigrew (2003), Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004), Sharma and Prasain (2004), Shneiderman and Turin (2004), Leve (2007).

conflict by emphasizing the grim reality that many non-aligned villagers faced.⁹ However, their approaches do not adequately address those individuals who have actively chosen to participate in the movement, instead casting all local people as passive participants. These examples indicate a tendency on the part of Western observers to seek explanations that would forestall the unpleasant realization that “peaceful” Nepali villagers were also capable of extreme violence.

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 unanticipated momentum could be seen 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 be orchestrated by their own countrymen, that Nepalis could commit such acts of violence against Nepalis. During the early years of the conflict, rumors circulated 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. Claiming that the Maoists were non-Nepali mercenaries was structurally comparable 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, assumptions of false consciousness provided an easy way out for both Nepali and Western observers to avoid conceptualizing rural Nepalis as political agents, Maoist or otherwise.

Although many villagers were unwittingly caught in the crossfire, as Pettigrew (2004) has shown, many also made an active choice to participate in the Maoist movement. The large number of Maoists involved in several attacks just before the 2001 Emergency was imposed showed without a doubt that thousands of Nepalis were indeed actively participating in the movement. While there are no reliable statistics for the earlier years of the movement, 2001 estimates suggested there were 11,000 combatant fighters, with a support base of approximately 20,000 local militia members (Luitel 2001). After the Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed in 2006, over 30,000 PLA members were registered in the cantonments, approximately 19,000 of whom met criteria for verification as genuine combatants.¹⁰ Other participants have included sympathizers who provided food and lodging, non-combatant local-level informers, and armed local militia men or women. As has often been argued, many people 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 23 July 2001, is a case in point. According to numerous independent estimates, 10,000–15,000 locals attended the meeting at which the *jan*

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Those who failed verification were primarily child soldiers under the legal age of 18, and individuals who had joined the PLA after the set deadline.



Fig. 2 A public water tap inscribed with Maoist graffiti (2000, Photo by Sara Shneiderman)

sarkar was announced (Anonymous 2001; Popham 2001). For an area not stereotypically thought of as a Maoist base up until that time, where the largest religious festivals rarely attract over a few thousand people, this number is significant. Ten thousand 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 (Fig. 2).¹¹

Piskar as a “base area” in the making¹²

Cultural performance and religious ritual have long been understood as primary arenas for political expression in rural Nepal, and constitute a key site for observing and analyzing the production of political consciousness (cf. Holmberg 2000; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996). It is therefore not surprising that the Piskar *jatra* had an explicitly political agenda, regardless of whom it was initiated by, or upon which particular ideological lines it was performed. The Amnesty (1987) and INSEC (1995) 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. 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” (1987: 15). However, Thangmi-authored descriptions present the festival as a local event evolving out of long-term frustration: “From the year 2037 VS [1981] onwards, in [the area] the people’s discontent against the exploiters had begun growing quickly. The suffering village

¹¹ See Shneiderman and Turin (2004) for a detailed description of the establishment of the Dolakha *jan sarkar*.

¹² Parts of the following two sections are also published in my article “Creating ‘civilised’ communists: a quarter century of politicisation in rural Nepal” in the forthcoming volume *Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia*, edited by David Gellner.

community was becoming conscious of their own fundamental rights and welfare” (TBTSUK 2056 VS [1999–2000]: 65).¹³ In fact, the festival itself, as well as Piskar’s ensuing political evolution, was an example of the marriage of “conscious leadership” and mass “spontaneity” in Gramscian terms (Cammett 1967: 199).

The “radical group” active in Piskar at the time of the massacre was the then CPN (Marxist–Leninist) [hereafter CPN (ML)]. After a series of splits and reunifications, the party eventually became the center-left CPN (UML), which provided the primary opposition to Nepal’s dominant center-right Nepali Congress party throughout the 1991–2005 democratic period.¹⁴ But in the 1970s and 1980s, the CPN (ML) operated entirely underground, and its cadres were treated as terrorists by the panchayat state much like their Maoist successors were decades later.¹⁵ CPN (ML) cadres first traveled to the Piskar area in the late 1970s, as part of the party’s program to identify suitable “base areas” and develop support there.

According to political scientist Krishna 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. They served as indentured laborers 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.¹⁶ 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 1 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” relatively easily.

Piskar’s Thangmi villagers had suffered from various forms of exploitation at the hands of predominantly Bahun, Chhetri and Newar landholders. Highly inequitable landholding relations were at the root of other forms of exploitation, such as indentured labor and usurious money-lending practices, with interest rates at up to 60% cumulative per annum. At the time cadres began working in Piskar in the late 1970s, 6.58% of the population owned 47% of the land, while 71.68% of the population were classified as poor or landless, and altogether owned only 31% of the land (HPP 2041 VS [1984–1985]).

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Nepali are mine, with guidance from Shambhu Oja, and I bear responsibility for any errors.

¹⁴ The CPN (UML) led their own government for 9 months in 1994–1995.

¹⁵ See “Introduction” to this volume for more details on the history of communism in Nepal.

¹⁶ Areas near district border lines have always been popular choices for political activity in Nepal. Until 2003, Nepal’s security forces were commanded from district headquarters with jurisdiction over only one district. If the situation got tense and party cadres expected punitive action from the state, they could simply cross the district border to buy time. This loophole was closed when the security forces first introduced the Unified Command, under which certain companies of police, military police, and army were commanded from the centre and could cross district lines.

The role of organic intellectuals

Another important factor that led to the choice of Piskar as a base area was that the CPN (ML) counted among the ranks of its leadership an “organic intellectual” from Piskar itself: Amrit Kumar Bohara.¹⁷ Gramsci’s definition of the term describes Bohara well, “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” (Kurtz 1996: 108). Bohara was just this. Born in Piskar in 1950 into a land-holding Chhetri family which was part of the caste Hindu rural elite, Bohara became an angry youth determined to challenge 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?”¹⁸ 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 party member. 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 Bagmati zone.¹⁹

Bohara returned to his home village in 1978, accompanied by his soon-to-be-wife Asta Laxmi Shakya, who was also a CPN (ML) activist, and a third cadre from Lalitpur, Madhav Paudel. They found that there was already a “smoldering class hatred” (HPP 2041 VS [1984–1985]: 7) among Piskar’s Thangmi farmers, which could be harnessed to serve the broader purposes of the nascent communist movement. My research confirms that Thangmi villagers had long been aware of their exploitation at the hands of landowners, and that there is a substantial corpus of songs, poetry, and stories in the Thangmi language that articulate these issues and calls for justice. Many older Thangmi also told me that they were involved in small-scale acts of resistance against their landlords long before they had ever heard of communism.²⁰ However, their frustrations had never before been linked to a clear ideological agenda that extended beyond the village, nor expressed in a manner that

¹⁷ Bohara was most recently Acting General Secretary of the CPN (UML) for a short period after the party’s poor showing in the April 2008 Constituent Assembly elections.

¹⁸ All direct quotations from Bohara are cited from an interview conducted on 10 November, 2004 in Kathmandu. It was transcribed by Bir Bahadur Thami and translated into English by Manesh Shrestha.

¹⁹ Nepal is divided into 14 administrative zones and 75 districts. Bagmati is a particularly influential zone as it includes the urban area of Kathmandu.

²⁰ The other common reaction to the high level of oppression that Thangmi villagers experienced was to leave the area entirely and emigrate India, primarily to the northeastern areas of Darjeeling, Assam and Sikkim. Many Thangmi who settled in India did so because they could no longer stand the exploitation they experienced in their home villages.

incurred the wrath of the state and implicated the villagers in a much broader web of political intrigue.

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 the CPN (ML) cadres in the year 2034 VS, or 1978. For example:

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 2056 VS [1999–2000]: 67).

Both of these sources mention with apparent pride Bohara's stint as a minister within the CPN (UML) government of 1994–1995. The people of Piskar apparently saw him as a local boy made good—he is said to have returned to Bhumi, the local territorial deity—whose visibility at the national level increased their sense of representation in a democratic system. Elsewhere, these publications display an ambivalence about the abilities of the central government to follow through on its promises to local people, and increasing disillusionment about the participation of local heroes like Bohara in such questionable ruling structures. Although these publications recognize local people's agency in agitating against exploitation, 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 effort he put into politicizing the village appears 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.

Bohara et al. first focused on teaching basic literacy in the village, which they saw as one of the fundamental prerequisites for building political consciousness, along with teaching basic hygiene and sanitation. However, these were not easy tasks:

... they said that they could not understand such things, and could not understand the lectures of big people (*thulo manche*).²¹ They said that it was their fate to be poor and lead difficult lives... 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 only much later that they began to trust us.

²¹ The connotation of *thulo manche*, which literally means “big people”, is of high-caste, high-status outsiders.

These details complicate the story of immediate understanding and easy trust between Bohara and the Thangmi villagers recounted elsewhere. Many Thangmi villagers first saw the activists as “big people” from outside, who could not understand their situation and might be trying to take advantage of them like the other “big people” with whom they were familiar. Bohara may have been a Piskar native and a communist, but he was not a Thangmi.²² Until he proved otherwise through his actions, villagers had no grounds on which to believe that he was not out to exploit them 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... 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.

For this particular individual, Bohara's literacy classes were the beginning of a life-long commitment to the CPN (ML). The Thangmi man quoted above went on to become a ranking member of the party's district committee, and was imprisoned for 3 years after the Piskar massacre, during which time he refined his understanding of communist ideology. He is now sought out by young party members from all caste and ethnic backgrounds as a mentor: one of several indigenous organic intellectuals who emerged in Bohara's wake.

The Massacre: one squad action and beyond

As early as 1978, Piskar's villagers had begun taking action against landowners and facing retaliation by state security forces. The Massacre of 1984 was not the beginning of a 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 the 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 1978–1979” (Hachhethu 2002: 59).

One of the Thangmi publications recounts three different events in the late 1970s in which Thangmi activists pillaged landlord's houses and property, and consequently experienced police retaliation (NPTS 2054 VS [1997–1998]). 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

²² This was more an issue of cultural, rather than political, difference. Compared to other indigenous groups in Nepal, the Thangmi made a relatively late entrance on the stage of ethnic politics. This may be due in part to their relatively high level of participation in party politics based on the ideology of class—rather than ethnic—struggle.

arrest (NPTS 2054 VS [1997–1998]: 68). In late 1979, a company of 80 police 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 (2002: 60).²³

But despite this change at the central level, the local unit in Piskar did not follow suit. Bohara and his colleagues continued with their "one squad action" throughout the early 1980s, even though they knew they were under increased government surveillance and 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:

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 a traditional festival day to communicate communist concepts to a large group of villagers beyond the already politicized core individuals that they had been working with closely for several years. About 2000 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 day of the *jatra* [festival], around 2000 villagers and devotees from all around the vicinity as well as other places were present...The audience was deeply engaged in the appealing program of dancing, skits, plays, songs, and so forth. The freezing cold of Magh didn't bother them at all. Those who were hungry were busy enjoying soybeans and yams distributed by the organizers. Piskar's environment was enchanted by the rhythm of the *madal* [drum] and the melodious sound of the bamboo flute. By around three in the morning the program had finished peacefully, but the festival continued ...

... No one had any idea that the conspirators had been encircling the site of the program from all directions with lethal arms, and they were moving forward.

²³ Martin Gaenzle is currently conducting ethno-historical research on this incident.

According to the pre-meditated plan, the bloodsuckers were marching briskly 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 charging, the situation became more and more frightening.

Bir Bahadur Thami and Ile Thami stepped forward to take control of the terrorized trembling masses. The bloody attack went on and on for about half an hour. (TBTSUK 2056 VS [1999–2000]: 63–64)

Both Bir Bahadur Thami and Ile Thami were killed as the police opened fire on the villagers, and 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, during which several hundred villagers were also arrested and held for up to 3 years without charges.

These events constituted a massive rupture in daily life for Piskar's villagers. Families were torn apart, as those who had been present at the festival (and many who were not) 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. 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. 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 the politicians fighting for power at the center. 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".

Competing national hegemonies

The massacre and its after-effects put a temporary end to 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 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 skeptical 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 [UPF] and adopted "multi-party democracy" (*bahudaliya janbad*) as their goal, in place of the Maoist-inspired concept of "new democracy" (*naulo janbad*). As one Thangmi villager who had been an active CPN (ML) cadre through 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.

The concept of "democracy" in particular seemed to have delivered little to those who had worked so hard for it. Given the growing frustration with the sense of exclusion from democratic processes felt by many villagers, by the mid-1990s, emerging Maoist demands made even more sense than those which had been voiced by the earlier Communist democracy activists. As one villager 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 (as cited in Shneiderman and Turin 2004: 86)

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 as alienated from the aspirations and needs of rural individuals, while conversely the Maoists were at first perceived to be attentive to those same concerns.

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.²⁴ 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: "Poor village boy, fiercely defending himself against the enemy, he proudly sacrificed his life for his country as a true nationalist" (TBTSUK 2056 VS [1999–2000]: 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 2056 VS [1999–2000]: 68). CPN (UML) leaders like Bohara had taken on ministerial positions and become part of the state apparatus, yet they still failed to secure adequate compensation for Piskar's villagers. While democracy was the ideology of choice for 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,

²⁴ See Lecomte-Tilouine (2006) for a detailed analysis of the role of martyrdom in Maoist rhetoric.

the space was open for other alternatives. 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. (NPTS 2054 VS [1997–1998]: 68).

The emphasis here is on an alternative nationalism, one which recognizes the value of local participation. By proposing a counter-hegemonic national vision where the needs and sacrifices of individuals and communities are honored, the Maoists cleverly deployed the symbol of the nation to take advantage of existing sentiments at the grassroots level. Indeed, the CPN (UML)’s shift to the center had created a serious ideological and political vacuum, which the CPN (M)—the Maoists—stepped in to fill from 1996 onwards (Fig. 3).

The emergence of new revolutionaries

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 (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 center, leaving the villagers of Piskar a perfect target for Maoist recruitment. When the Maoists held



Fig. 3 A 2001 Newsweek article on Nepal’s growing Maoist insurgency shows a mass meeting taking place in Piskar’s village square

their first meetings in Piskar in 1998, their agenda sounded very much like the CPN (ML) platform had 20 years earlier. Despite everything the village had been through in the 1970s and 1980s, very little had changed on the ground 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 center—would 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 watched their parents get arrested after the massacre in 1984, and who had no personal allegiance to the earlier generation of CPN (ML) activists. Many of those individuals began to support the Maoists, either by directly joining their People's Liberation Army, or acting as local militia and informers. 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 organizing the police response to the Piskar *jatra*.

The suggestion that the Maoists were responsible for politicizing the people of Piskar and mobilizing them for revolutionary action was anathema to CPN (ML) activists like Bohara. It was difficult for him to acknowledge that in fact a substantial number of the villagers who had originally comprised his party's base might have now defected to the new revolutionaries:

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.

There is no question that it was indeed 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.²⁵ Although the first part of this statement is historically unfounded, the second part of the statement has proven to be a winning gambit with disillusioned Thangmi villagers in the area. It is telling that the sons of both Bir Bahadur and Ile, the two martyrs of the Piskar Massacre, are now involved with the Maoists, one as a high-level area commander. The Maoists have been able to rekindle interest in communism by promising a revolutionary social transformation that the mainstream of the CPN could not deliver.

The power of practical ideology

After the initiation of the People's War in 1996, the CPN (M) capitalized upon the CPN (ML)'s earlier efforts to create political consciousness in Piskar and elsewhere

²⁵ Personal communications from Gabriele Tautscher and Deepak Thapa, both of whom observed such meetings.

by basing their campaign on the communist cornerstone of “practical ideology”. As Buci-Glucksmann (1980: 89) explains, “Practical ideologies and modes of living and feeling have their roots in the economic base: the relation between *civiltà* [civil society] and production is a pivotal point in Gramsci’s whole problematic of capitalism and of socialism too”. In the context of Nepal’s Maoist movement, “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.

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” (Gramsci, as cited in Cammett 1967: 199). 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.²⁶ Such a strategic relationship between the leadership and the masses is also explicitly articulated in orthodox Maoism’s principle of the “mass line”, as exemplified in Mao Tse-tung’s 1943 directive to local leaders to:

take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action... (Mao 1965: 119).

With this in mind, we can see that the emphasis on practical ideology may have been a conscious strategy on the part of the Nepali Maoist leadership.

Although those villagers sympathetic to the Maoists may have remained unaware of the political complexities of the movement’s goals at the national level, 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. Their earlier experiences with the CPN (ML) and the fallout from

²⁶ Guha also discusses the congruence and necessary complementarity between practical and theoretical consciousness in any such movement: “Insurgency was indeed the site where the two mutually contradictory tendencies within this still imperfect, almost embryonic, theoretical consciousness—that is a conservative tendency made up of the inherited and uncritically absorbed material of the ruling culture and a radical one oriented towards a practical transformation of the rebel’s conditions of existence—met for a decisive trial of strength” (1999: 10).

the Piskar Massacre meant that Maoist ideology was nothing new; it was simply attached to a new leadership structure who promised to follow through on their ideological promises in a way that the CPN (ML) had failed to do. The argument that most Maoist fighters did not understand 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 who experienced the Piskar traumas could understand Maoist practical ideology. In 1984 such villagers understood democracy 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 corrupt and factionalized political parties who made empty promises, the perceived objectives of the Maoist movement made a great deal of sense. Many villagers stated clearly to me that they considered the Maoist movement a worthwhile experiment in a context where other such experiments had failed. However, they did not hesitate to withdraw their support when the Maoist experiment no longer appeared to be fulfilling its stated goals. One Thangmi ex-Maoist combatant I interviewed made the decision to leave when it became clear to him that the hierarchical social structures the Maoists professed to deplore were in fact replicated within the structure of the party itself.²⁷

Conclusion

In the long run, practical ideology alone is unlikely to provide an adequate framework for building a truly egalitarian and functional “civil society” (in the Gramscian sense) in Nepal. Disaffection akin to what many villagers felt with democracy in the mid-1990s had already appeared to set in for several ex-Maoist fighters with whom I conducted interviews between 2003 and 2005. After the Maoists signed the CPA in November 2006, and combatants were confined to cantonments, we can only surmise that many of the rank and file may have been disillusioned with the apparently concessionary approach of their leaders. The 2006 formation of the Young Communist League—which is supposedly the youth wing of the Maoist party, but often seems to take independent positions noticeably more radical than the official party line—and other apparent strains within the CPN (M) party lend credence to this supposition. 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” (Scott 1985: 302). Ironically, by creating an alternative national discourse of inclusion, the Maoists have emerged from their counter-hegemonic stance to become in many ways more hegemonic than the state—in the positive Gramscian sense of “hegemony” as the ability to engage with existing political consciousness at the base level in a productive manner. But this is not an inevitable

²⁷ We find similar sentiments in the statements of many women who left the movement after joining because they wanted to transform gender relations, only to find the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) equally hierarchical as other extant social structures. Judith Pettigrew and I have discussed this phenomenon at length elsewhere (2004).

result, nor necessarily a lasting one. As consciousness continues to evolve, individuals will find new means of resistance to both Maoist and state hegemony, and the crisis of hegemony is likely to continue.

So how can Nepal move beyond the crisis? I suggest that local political consciousness could have, and still can be, harnessed at the national level by ideological formations other than Maoism. We need to look closely at why the Maoists succeeded in doing this to a greater extent than the other predominant discourses of social change operative in rural Nepal during the same time period: development and ethno-activism. Saubhagya Shah has convincingly argued that the development rhetoric of “participation” creates “a paradoxical subject position of agents without an agency” (Shah 2002: 145), a state of affairs which may well have contributed to the Maoists’ appeal.²⁸ Furthermore, development rhetoric has consistently focused on participation at the ‘community’ level, which although essential, has created a framework that pigeonholes rural actors as local only, rather than casting them as national actors working on a local level. Similarly, the *janjati* agenda which dominated an important corner of 1990s politics had the effect of stereotyping indigenous political consciousness as ethnic only, rather than including ethnic individuals as national actors with particularly ethnic interests. Several articles and reports argue that the Maoists in part co-opted the *janajati* agenda (S. Sharma, 2002, unpublished report; Lawoti 2003), but to the extent that this is true, they did this by subordinating ethnic interests to national ones, and thereby empowering their cadres as national political actors in a way that ethnic politics alone could not. In short, Nepali discourses of inclusion must move beyond the fragmented agencies offered by both development and identity-based formulations of political consciousness to acknowledge local individuals as national actors—who have pressing community, ethnic, gender, class or caste concerns—but are above all included as equal actors at the national level.

Appadurai (2004) has argued that the human “capacity to aspire” at the individual level should be treated as a key resource in nation building attempts, particularly among the poor in the developing world. This “capacity to aspire”—to envision alternative local and national orders and one’s own agentive role in building them—is a central feature of the political consciousness I have sought to describe here. This concept works against Hobsbawm’s depiction of peasant rebels as “pre-political” actors, “unable to express aspiration” (as cited in Guha). Appadurai characterizes the development of the “capacity to aspire” as an absolutely necessary aspect of the democratization process. In Nepal, both the Maoist movement and the 2006 *jan andolan* may be seen as evidence that this capacity is alive and well. Following Appadurai’s lead, I suggest that in order to resolve the ongoing crisis of hegemony in Nepal, any government that comes to power must recognize existing forms of political consciousness at the grassroots level to create a national discourse of political inclusion that harnesses the country’s great capacity to aspire.

²⁸ Lauren Leve (2007; this volume) also argues convincingly that the rhetoric of “empowerment” as propagated by countless development projects may have contributed to the politicization of rural Nepali women.

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