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Men's participation in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal

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1. Introduction

Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) led a ten year long (1996-2005) armed insurgency against the Nepali state. Its objectives were the overthrow of the monarchy, the convening of a constituent assembly, and establishment of a multiparty republic. The Maoists agenda at its core attacked the feudal nature of Nepali society and the structural inequalities inherent in it. At the start, the Maoists were no more than a small fringe party with hardly any weapons, few active members and a support base limited to small pockets in the remote mid-western hill areas. Yet, their ten-year armed insurgency transformed them into a powerful political force capable of standing alongside, and even overshadowing, Nepal's major, established parties. The speed and intensity with which the insurgency gained support in the countryside has inspired a growing literature on rural life and the roots of the rebellion. Generally speaking, five key factors were identified as motivating popular support. *a)* Popular disillusionment with the failure of the Nepali state to deliver expected democratization of social relations and political authority; *b)* Continuing poverty and a widening gap between rural and urban quality of life despite decades of development; *c)* economic crisis and the lack of performance legitimacy of the state; *d)* widespread frustration with corruption at different levels of the state; *e)* state atrocities, torture and counter-insurgency campaigns. These factors provide useful contextual explanations for the widespread support for the Maoist party but they are all gender blind. For example, they fail to tell us about why did some young men decide to leave the village and family to join the armed struggle while others stayed back.

Maoist insurgency attracted a large number of young men and women from rural different caste, ethnicity and class though popular support came from *dalits*, hill ethnic groups and poor peasants from the western hills. One of the most commented features of the Maoist insurgency is the unusual degree of women's participation, and the Maoists own emphasis on women's liberation (Yami 2007). A few scholars have attempted to explore women's involvement in the Maoist insurgency (Manchandha 2004; Leve 2007; Shrestha-Schipper 2009) but the existing scholarship has largely ignored the question on the gendered nature of men's involvement in the insurgency. This ignorance reflects the overall trend in the gender analyses in the global south where discussion of masculinities has lagged behind analysis of women's position (Jones 2006). In their review of South Asian masculinities, Osella and Osella write that while men are present in South Asian ethnography, they are not the explicit object of study, and the gendered nature of their involvement is rarely problematized (Osella and Osella 2006). Men form a significant part of CPN-M and its influential associate organisations like People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Young Communist League (YCL). 75 per cent of PLA are men (UNMIN 2007) and my own estimate from the field research

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suggests that about 80-85 per cent of YCL members are male. Therefore, it does appear that men are everywhere (in the Maoist insurgency) but nowhere (in the existing scholarship). We know very little about men directly involved in violent conflicts like Maoist insurgency. Based on an ethnographic fieldwork among young men involved in 'armed struggle', this paper explores gendered involvement of men in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. It attempts to analyse men's motivation to join the party, and to remain within it and the transformations in their lives. Based on how young men viewed their involvement in the insurgency, it attempts to understand the question of 'becoming and being a man' in the Maoist insurgency. In this paper, I will make an attempt to address the following questions:

- Who are the men who participated in the Maoist insurgency?
- How did these men make decisions about joining the Maoist insurgency? What motivated them to join and become a part of militias and armies?
- Why do some men leave the village to join the armed struggle while others stay at home?
- How do men view their involvement in the Maoist insurgency? How transformative was their participation in the Maoist insurgency?

2. The Maoist Insurgency

By any standard, the emergence and the popularity of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal between 1996 and 2005 is spectacular. It started as a ragged rural insurgency in the hills of western Nepal and eventually spread to almost all of the 75 districts. The insurgents pursued a classical Maoist strategy of "encircling the cities" forcing the police and civil servants to retreat to district headquarters. By mid 2006, over two thirds of the approximately four thousand secretaries of Village Development Committees (VDCs)—the lowest tier of government in rural areas—had been displaced to district headquarters or to Nepali Army strongholds. The government was able to maintain a stronger presence only in the Kathmandu valley and in some parts of the Eastern Terai.

The insurgency thus affected the entire country. While they were not able to withstand large-scale government operations they effectively denied stable government access and presence throughout rural Nepal. Maoist rule was not homogenous: it was more structured and transformative in their heartland hill areas but looser and sometimes contested in areas where their presence was more recent.

The rural population bore the brunt of the conflict. It was caught between Maoist intimidation, forced conscription and extortion on the one hand, and police or Nepali army reprisals on the other. Some 15,000 lives, in large part civilian, were claimed by insurgency and counter-insurgency. Civilian population were targeted by both sides, though observers agree that more lives were lost to state-led than insurgent violence. Up to 5,000 people disappeared during the decade of armed conflict. The conflict was also characterized by recurring patterns of impunity for human rights abuses. Abductions, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, and the use of child soldiers were common on both sides. The conflict affected women's role in society as their men-folk

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either joined the insurgency or fled to avoid forced conscription by either side. Conflict affected children as well: many teachers were displaced and children in rural areas were taken from school in groups to indoctrination programs that sometimes lasted several days.

Tens of thousands of Nepalis fled their homes to avoid persecution, extortion, conscription or conflict-induced economic hardship. There was no formal registration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) so their number is difficult to estimate. Moreover, conflict-related population movements are difficult to disaggregate from the long tradition of labor migration as a coping mechanism in times of crisis, especially across the open border to India. Some estimates put the number of migrants who moved to India during the conflict years at around two million.

3. CPN-M: party structure and organisation

The key to success of CPN-M is the participation of a large number of young men and women in its organisation. Its strategy consisted of massive recruitment of population, mainly rural, in its political and military organisations. In the “liberated” areas the Maoists established their own structures of governance to promote their political and anti-discrimination agenda. These included schools and “people’s courts” in addition to the CPN-M party structures and the Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA).

The organisational structure of the CPN-M has the standing committee at the top, and below it are the politburo, central committee, regional bureaus, district committees, area committees and village committees. Likewise, CPN-M has several associate organisations designed for recruitment of targeted population (students, peasants, labourers/workers, ethnicities, women and youth among others). While it is impossible to get the right statistical figure on the full-time (or whole-time) cadre of the Maoist party, it is believed that there are somewhere between 50,000 to 150,000 of them. An important feature of the party membership is that an individual may be a member of multiple organisations.

While the party was involved in spreading political ideology and formulating policies for ‘people’s war’, the PLA was responsible for attacking enemies and defending the areas under its control. PLA was the most powerful pillar of CPN-M. When the Maoists began their war, they did not have an organised armed wing. With limited weapons at their disposal, they had formed fighting groups, security groups and volunteer groups in some areas. Apart from PLA, there are militias. Militias did not receive the similar training like PLA and are not a mobile force. Militias worked as a supporting unit during some offensive. Militias are under the command of village committee. The exact number of militia was not available. Witness accounts state that unlike PLA who are young men and women, militias consist of men and women from all ages.

Total authority regarding the mobilisation of the people’s army rested with the central military commission. Each army unit was under the dual control of the military commander and political commissar. At the lowest level of the PLA were the squad, comprising nine to eleven members. Above the squad were, in the ascending order, the

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platoons, companies, the battalions, brigades and divisions. People's army was formed in 1998.

Following Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006, the Maoists insurgents entered the peace process and the 19,602 verified PLA are now kept in the UN monitored cantonments in seven PLA divisions awaiting integration. The YCL- an associate organisation of the Maoists- was reactivated after the recent peace agreement between the Nepal's seven-party alliance (SPA) and the Maoists in November 2006. It is believed that there are more than 300,000 cadres in YCL operating around the country. According to YCL chairperson, it is a fusion of the party's military and political character. Each of these Maoist leaders is a hard-core member of the CPN-M and has been appointed to the YCL in order to evade inclusion in the mechanisms for the management of arms and armies by the UN. Most of the YCL members are combatants who the CPN-M did not want confined in the cantonments under the regulation of UNMIN. YCL also includes an unspecified number of youths who are not eligible for registration as per the UNMIN standards, as well as a large number of cadres who were recruited by the Maoists during the cease-fire period, with the assurance that they would be inducted into the Nepal Army. They are unarmed young cadres but they receive extensive training in armed combat. YCL cadres openly carry knives, sticks, iron bars and other improvised weapons and move around in Kathmandu and other towns without fear of restriction. Occasionally, YCL members have been involved in social and community work, including cleaning up neighborhoods, supplying drinking water and "arresting corrupt officials, businessmen and criminals".

3. Why did the men leave the village to join the armed struggle?

Although young men from different caste, ethnicity and class were participated in the Maoist party (CPN-M), it is the *dalits*, excluded ethnic groups and poor peasants from the remote villages in western hills that formed the significant support base for the armed struggle. A large number of recruitment took place from the remote rural hills with very little presence of the state services and a long history of communist party mobilisation. Also, as indicated above, significant recruitment took place from families that had faced state atrocities and torture during the early years of the insurgency. Two key demographic characteristics of men who left their village and family to join the armed struggle were that they were between the age of 14 and late twenties and unmarried without children who still resided with their parents, rather than married adults with family responsibilities.

Men I met during my field research did not leave the village to join the armed struggle for a single reason. Just as the men I spoke came from a diverse background, their circumstances, motivations and decisions differed significantly. A significant number of young men had exercised choice and made decisions to join the armed insurgency but as I shall discuss below their choices (and lack of choices) were mediated by a number of factors. For others, there was virtually no choice but to join the armed struggle.

The social condition of insurgency with a strong ideological base together with various forms of recruitment tactics and campaigns used by the Maoists played a critical role in exposing

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young men to the Maoist ideology. Mass gathering in the villages, door-to-door campaign and campaigns in the schools were the key strategies for political education. For rural youth who felt marginalised and aggrieved, the Maoist ideology was compelling.

Forced recruitment: Forced recruitment by the Maoists was a common practice during the insurgency years, where they specifically targeted young men and women. As the insurgency spread rapidly in the rural villages, services of the state and other political were suspended creating a social condition where people had very little voice but to join the Maoist party. Maoists launched a series of recruitment campaign in the villages and in the schools in different parts of Nepal. *One person, one household* was one such campaign in the remote rural villages of western hills. During these days, the households had very little choice but to arrange to send someone to the party, usually a young man. Households that resisted such recruitment were either forced to leave the village or alternatively if they could afford paid levy to the party. In order to avoid recruitment, households that could afford sent their young men to other parts of Nepal or India. For the poorer households, there was no choice but to arrange their son (and some cases daughters) to the Maoists.

Likewise, there were specific recruitment campaigns in the schools targeting pupils. Once the Maoist built the student and teacher organisation in the schools, it was much easier to expose ideological trainings and cultural activities to the pupils. Eventually, school children would be 'abducted' (or 'taken away for ideological training and/or cultural programmes') for a few days and then recruited into the party from there.

Some forcibly recruited young men and women ran away from the party but were soon followed and re-recruited by the party. Maoist viewed the runaways as 'traitors' as they held important information about the party. Therefore, there was very little opportunity for these men to leave the party.

State violence and torture: Often using the term 'revenge' several young men I met during the field research in Rolpa spoke their involvement in the armed struggle as a backlash against state atrocities and torture from police and army. During the insurgency, Nepali state's counter-insurgency operations, mainly in Rolpa and Rukum districts, led to police and army brutality, torture and killings. Young men spoke of torture, disappearances and killings in their immediate family network by the police and army. The social condition of insurgency meant that the young men were often interrogated by both the armed parties for their suspected involvement in the war, which made it extremely difficult for young men to live usual life in the village. Several men who had nothing to do with the armed struggle but maintained membership of other communist parties were tortured, disappeared and killed by the state security forces. One man summed in the experience men went through, '*I had three options. First, I join the party and go underground. Second, I leave the village and go to terai or India. Third, I go to the state administration and get tortured. I opted for the first, who would not?*' In the context of war young man had limited choices but to join the armed struggle for their own safety and security.

Ideology, modernity and manhood: From young men's perspectives, Maoist ideology i.e. their agenda for social transformation played an important role in their decision-making. Young men, mainly those from *dalits* and excluded ethnic groups, got attracted to the

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Maoist ideology as its rhetoric addresses the structural equality of all regardless of age, caste or ethnicity. From young men's perspective positions within the Maoist party were awarded on merit rather than on the basis of age, gender, caste or ethnicity. This certainly explains why there was a high rate of recruitment in the armed struggle from *dalits* and certain excluded ethnic groups. The ideology and the everyday strategies of the Maoists attracted recruits; the Maoists who visited the villages lived with them, ate with them, sought their assistance and opinions. This had an empowering effect on the local youth who found themselves as active agents within the Maoist worldview.

Moreover, men's involvement in the armed struggle needs to be viewed in relation to other men who did not join the armed struggle. Young men were under tremendous pressure to perform economically and avoid being labelled as 'useless' (*faltu*). For young men in the poorer households in the hills adolescence hardly existed. They moved from an impoverished childhood in which their parents were unable to protect them from the knowledge of adult realities into a young manhood, which immediately demanded that they share their responsibilities with those realities. This meant working in the agricultural field in the village or migrating to work under exploitative working conditions across the border in India. For the poorer households there was very little possibility to migrate to other destinations in the Gulf or other international destinations, which required a larger capital and social networks.

Labour migration to Indian offers an important livelihood strategy but one must work under exploitative conditions and paid minimum. Young men's migration is embedded in the hills where it is viewed as a part of growing up as a man, a rite de passage. For the rural households, remittances, though little in amount, sent from young men form a major source of income. In many ways, given the widespread practices of labour migration and recruitment in British and Indian armies, joining the armed struggle was not a significantly different experience for young men in the hills.

Living in remote rural hills of Nepal, young men saw themselves and were seen as marginal to the good and proper life offered by the city/town living and those with money to relocate and involve in consumption activities associated with migration and relocation to the cities. For the village young men, the Maoist ideology played an important role in reconfiguring the perceptions of a consumerist world that excluded them. The rhetoric of Maoist ideology constructed an alternative version of modernity, one in which a consumerist version of masculinity is rejected on ideological premises. These men rejected that which they were previously excluded from and in doing so made attempt to re-position themselves as centre-stage. For these young men, joining the Maoist insurgency was very much an attempt to redefine dominant ideas of being a man in the hills of Nepal. It was very much a move to escape from being labelled as a '*faltu*' (or a useless person). From the youth from poorer households, joining the armed struggle did not reward them with salary or payment and it was not like a 'job' but it certainly attracted them as it opened a possibility of 'job' once the 'Maoist came to power'.

Likewise, participation in the Maoist insurgency provided young men with an opportunity to escape the hierarchy of age, domination and tradition that were prevalent in the villages. The fact that Maoist party advocated for inter-caste love marriages appealed to many young

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men who had very little say in the choice of their life partner. It is interesting to observe that most men were unmarried when they joined the armed struggle but later got married with the choice of their partner.

4. Life as a Maoist

What was life like for young men who left their home and village to join the armed struggle? Young men underwent a significant transformation in their worldview and life once they 'became a Maoist'. From the perspective of those involved, life as a Maoist was transformative, exciting and difficult when compared to the life of other men who did not join the armed struggle. Being a Maoist required men to take risks, take part in fighting and involved physical injuries. However, not all men experience life as a Maoist in the same way. It depended on their social background, decision-making and the nature of their involvement (*see below*).

Transformation experienced by men

More transformative

Poor, dalits and excluded ethnic groups

Personal decision

Part-timers

Who left home and lived communally

Who received ideological and political trainings

Less transformative

High caste and middle class

Forced recruitment

Full-timers (or whole timers)

Who stayed with their family

Who did not receive ideological and political training

By joining the Maoist young people forged new relationships to the existing power relations in the villages. They acquired a previously denied public voice, albeit at the end of a gun. Living together with other fellow comrades, young men saw armed struggle as a possibility of transforming social relations that discriminated them. Although men found themselves free from the hierarchies in their villages, they suddenly found themselves caught in the hierarchy within the party. While equality was said to exist within the PLA, some dissent members talked about discrimination and exploitation of PLA fighter by the commanders.

Men often spoke about increased political awareness as a result of involvement. However, increased political freedom did not mean that Maoist men were allowed to speak freely. Joining the armed struggle certainly gave more agency to young men to engage in courtship and love. However, courtships, love and marriage were regulated and approved by it.

Being a Maoist gave a sense of empowerment to young men who lived in the everyday and structural hierarchies of caste, ethnicity, class and age in their villages. However, it put some of the dominant ideas of being a man into question. For the first time in life, many men found themselves cooking meal, washing dishes and looking after their newly born babies in

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the cantonments and communal living space. Maoist men depart significantly from other men in Nepal in the sense that Maoists men were unable to look after their family members. Interestingly, responsibility to family is replaced by responsibility towards fellow comrades, society and nation. Domestic sphere where men lived and exercised their authority over women was not available in the party.

Men I spoke to constructed an alternative modernity based on the Maoist ideology; they rejected the dominant modernity, consumerism and city life that seemed almost impossible to them. These men gave up ideas of being a dominant man when they joined the party. Most importantly, these men avoided familial obligations and responsibilities that were considered a major responsibility of young men in cultural context of Nepal. Men went through an intense process of transformation from a householder to a man who works for the nation and society. These men departed significantly from the dominant ideas of manhood that require young men to be a householder and contribute to the family.

One of the significant aspect of joining the insurgency that men (and women) left home; as a full-timer young men (and women) left home and stayed with communally 'friends' in the party. While it was culturally expected for men, it was less acceptable for women to leave their village. In this sense, the practice of joining the armed struggle was comparatively more acceptable for men than for women.

5. Conclusion

This paper made an attempt to understand the decision-making and life among the young men who left their home and village to join the armed struggle. What emerges from the interviews with those men who joined the armed struggle is that motivations to join the armed conflict are complex and involve 'ideas' of being a man. They cannot be explained solely on the basis of five key reasons outlined at the beginning of this paper. The ideology and political education of the Maoist insurgency provided young men from rural remote villages with an opportunity to re-define their position vis-à-vis other men involved in consumption and modernity. Within the social condition of insurgency, it was possible for young men to construct an ideal type of man who was not confined to the 'limited' space of 'family' and personal wellbeing but of the 'community' and 'nation' at large. While Maoist ideology appears to have played an important role in young men's decision to join the party, coercion employed by the Maoists and possibilities of selective benefits did play important role in young men's participation in the insurgency.

Interviews show that young men went through a major transformation in their identities as men once they left home and joined the armed insurgency. Nonetheless, young men's lives in the insurgency are not necessarily liberating. Within the party organisation, men's lives are significantly different, which often restricts their freedom, sexuality and threatens the very identity of men. While the men I interviewed appeared to have re-defined their identity in relation to other men, it is not immediately clear whether these effects will be sustained in the non-insurgency social condition.

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