

# READING NEPALI MAOIST MEMOIRS

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In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the content of a piece of literature that makes it unacceptable to Maoists, it is its objective. We do not demand 100 percent support. An end to the exploitation of Janajātis, rights for all, women's liberation, Dalit liberation: these are good objectives, but mistakes can be made while trying to achieve them. There should not be blind support or blind opposition. But if there is opposition it should be based upon an understanding of the objectives of the People's War.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Hundreds of firsthand accounts of Nepal's internal conflict have appeared, mainly (though not exclusively) in Maoist-aligned journals, magazines and newspapers, since the early years of the People's War.<sup>3</sup> According to Manarishi Dhital, the deputy editor of the Maoist weekly newspaper *Janādeś*, the most widely read part of his newspaper was for

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<sup>1</sup> Lines taken from Mao Zedong's speech to the Yan'an conference of 1942, quoted in Xin Ning (2010: 122).

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with (late) Ghanashyam Dhakal, Kathmandu; 5 March 2011. Unfortunately, he died in a motor accident in Kathmandu in February 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term 'People's War' in this article should not be taken to mean that its author accepts the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M)'s own construction of the military campaign it waged from 1996–2006 (see Hutt 2004: 5n.3). Most of the research upon which this article is based was conducted in Kathmandu in September–October 2010 and February–March 2011 as a part of the British Academy-funded South Asia International Partnership Project on "The Creation of Public Meaning during the Democratic Transition in Nepal," for which Martin Chautari and the School of Oriental and African Studies are the partner institutions. My thanks to the British Academy for making this possible. Thanks also to Pratyoush Onta and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

many years a section dedicated to recollections of the conflict.<sup>4</sup> These autobiographical essays continue to appear, but the years since the end of the conflict in 2006 have also seen the publication of a large number of book-length memoirs written by erstwhile Maoist combatants.<sup>5</sup> Many of the earlier essays reappear as sections or chapters of these books. One reviewer suggests that *dvandva sāhitya* (“conflict literature”) has come to constitute a new genre of Nepali writing, estimating that by late 2010 over 350 books of poetry, fiction, songs, essays and memoirs had been written, either by Maoist or pro-Maoist authors or by others using the conflict as their subject matter (Giri 2067 v.s.; see also Baral 2054–2055 v.s.: 68.) Of the minor avalanche of Maoist-authored literature, approximately 43 books published up to April 2012 can be categorized as memoirs (*saṁsmaraṇ*).<sup>6</sup>

My interest in the “Maoist memoir” as a new genre of Nepali writing was first sparked by the striking commercial success of Tara Rai’s *Chāpāmār Yuvatīko Dāyari* (The Diary of a Guerrilla Girl) in the summer and autumn of 2010. However, Tara Rai’s *Diary* does not sit very comfortably among the other book-length Maoist memoirs. In fact, it has provoked a very hostile response from left leaning intellectuals and particularly Nepali Maoists. When I raised the matter of the *Diary* with the senior Maoist cultural commentator Ninu Chapagain, he was unwilling even to discuss it: I got the impression that as far as he was concerned it could not be considered a ‘Maoist memoir’ at all. This raises three questions. First, what should the defining features of a memoir be, according to Nepali Maoist ideology? Second, to what extent do the memoirs that have appeared meet these ideological criteria? Third, why is Tara Rai’s *Diary* not accepted as a Maoist memoir by Nepali Maoist reviewers?

### **The Maoist Memoir as a Genre**

Much of the Nepali Maoist discourse on the purpose of literature and the criteria by which it should be evaluated draws on Chinese antecedents. At the Yan’an conference in 1942, Mao famously declared that artists and writers had to expose and criticize the enemy, and praise the people, the

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Manarishi Dhital, Kathmandu; 4 March 2011.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Ninu Chapagain for introducing me to this genre of writing, and to Ram Tiwari for helping me to procure these books from various Kathmandu booksellers.

<sup>6</sup> Kailash Rai, Martin Chautari discussion, 3 April 2012. Of these 43 books, about half a dozen were authored by women.

revolutionary army and the communist party leadership. Workers, peasants and soldiers were the proper focus of literary and artistic representation, and people from other social classes and ideological backgrounds were to be excluded from consideration as subjects (Xiaomei Chen 2010: 65, 66). Chinese Maoist discourse also insisted that class identity must be the fount of all emotions; it “posited the supremacy of class love and denounced romance as the myopic preoccupation of the bourgeoisie” (Lee 2010: 153).

In his introduction to a collection of martyrs’ memoirs, Gopindra Paudel states approvingly that they all manifest “boundless faith in the revolution, harsh hatred for the enemy class, and sympathy for the laboring people” and that by their very nature progressive memoirs contain a class and philosophical partiality (*pakṣadharaṭā*) (2067 v.s.: 673). These are the core ideological elements of a typical Nepali Maoist memoir. According to Ashok Subedi,

Like society, literature and art are also class-determined (*vargīya*). What is beloved and joyful news for one class is hated and sorrowful for the other. Between these two classes, between these two sensations of happiness (*āṇandānubhūti*), there can be no other sensation (Subedi 2067 v.s.: 87).<sup>7</sup>

The etymological root of the English word “memoir” lies in the “double act of recalling and recording” (Smith and Watson 2010[2001]: 274) and is probably the best available translation of the Nepali term *saṁsmaraṇ*, which is used to denote the majority of these texts. *Saṁsmaraṇ* is defined in the *Nepālī Bṛhat Śabdakoś* [Comprehensive Nepali Dictionary] as,

1. A matter of past days that comes to memory time and again; a sweet kind of remembrance; sweet recollection; 2. The act of remembering well or repeatedly; the recitation of a name; remembrance; 3. Mention, telling or composition of important matters that are needed to keep fresh old events, things and importance (Pokharel et al. 2040 v.s.: 1281).

The specific reference to “sweet” (*mīṭho*, *madhur*) in the first of these definitions gives one pause, as much of the content of these memoirs is anything but sweet. However, these writings do seem to have the primary function of “keeping old events fresh” and creating the historic meaning of their authors’ activities and experiences. Indeed, Maoist memoirs are repeatedly referred to as *abhilekh*, “testaments,” and this perception of their purpose is set out in dozens of articles in Maoist-aligned literary

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<sup>7</sup> All translations from Nepali in this article are my own.

journals such as *Nayā Yathārtha*, *Kalam* and *Candrāgiri*. It is perhaps articulated most clearly by ‘Sangitsrota’ in his contribution to the thousand-page collection of critical essays published by the CPN-M’s literary wing<sup>8</sup> in July/August 2010 (Dhakal et al. 2067 v.s.):

Sometimes literature leaves a more powerful effect than the gun and sometimes the gun is capable of communicating a much more beautiful message than literature. The beauty (*saundarya*) that arises from the union of the power of the pen and the art of the gun is truly alive and meaningful...Here the warriors have joined with the people and played the role of leaders *in the creation of history*. The literature they have written may be weak in its structure, and the form and tone of their expression might not quite match those of art. But the history the warriors have created with their blood, tears and sweat, and this very present time, which is standing upon the foundation of that glorious history, is beautiful literature in itself. Taken together, these memoirs are able to establish the value of the great Nepali People’s War. Now, through counter-polar (*pratidhruviya*) art and literature, attempts are taking place on all four sides to corrupt and distort the beauty of the People’s War. At such a time, it is the true revolutionaries who must save the value of revolution – through the important media of art, literature, music and film (Sangitsrota 2067 v.s.: 724–725, emphasis added).

Maoist literary critics also often refer to memoirs as *dastābej*, “manifestos.” As such, they not only establish the meaning of past events but also influence their readers’ relationship with and attitude to the present and future. Gopindra Paudel writes that their impact is not only powerfully emotional: they also convey an “awareness of duty” (*kartavyabodh*) and “revolutionary consciousness” (*krānticet*) to their readers by amplifying and transmitting “advanced opinions” (*unnat vicār*) (Paudel 2067 v.s.: 667, 673).

During discussions of these memoirs in Kathmandu in 2010–2012, I put it to several informants that they could also be construed as warnings (*khabardāri*) from Maoist cadres to their political leaders, who might be seen to be frittering away the achievements of the People’s War during their negotiations with other parties. Most informants agreed with this

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<sup>8</sup> The *Akhil Nepāl Lekhak Saṅgh* [All Nepal Writers’ Association] is a Maoist class organization. It is a part of the *Ekikrit Akhil Nepāl Jana Sāṅskritik Mahāsāṅgh* [Unified All Nepal People’s Cultural Federation] which comprises organizations for writers, artists (*Akhil Nepāl Jana Kalākār Saṅgh*), filmmakers (*Akhil Nepāl Calcitrakarmī Saṅgh*) and the fine arts (*Akhil Nepāl Lalitkalā Saṅgh*). Personal communication with (late) Ghanashyam Dhakal, Kathmandu; 5 March 2011.

reading of them. The late Ghanashyam Dhakal, who was then the chairman of the Akhil Nepāl Lekhak Saṅgh, put it like this:

If they have fought truly for an objective, then they are right to give warnings until that objective has been achieved. Fourteen to fifteen thousand people lost their lives, and that's only from the Maoist, the rebel side. Now [if the leaders] forget that and say 'we are in the mainstream' and start living in comfort, they have a right to say: 'where has it gone, that suffering, that history, that objective?'<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, although Khem Thapaliya concedes that the sacrifice made by “tens of thousands of warriors” in the course of the People’s War has made Maoists extremely sensitive, “no one has forgotten that the dream of the great martyrs is still incomplete, nor should this be forgotten” (Thapaliya 2067 v.s.: 665).

Maoist memoirs are also represented as a new genre of Nepali literature: they are a part of the “new reality” engendered by the People’s War, and it is no longer necessary for Nepali readers who wish to appreciate the aesthetics of revolution, people’s revolt and war to read Chinese or Russian literature (Sangitsrota 2067 v.s.: 718). Ashok Subedi asserts that the People’s War not only defeated feudal villains, it also gave birth to new heroes, and not only in the political, culture and military fields, but also in literature. In fact, he says, the People’s War was the “golden age” of Nepali progressive literature (Subedi 2068 v.s.: 23). Gopindra Paudel argues that although there is a long tradition of writing memoirs in Nepali, the history of the genre before the beginning of the People’s War was merely a “development period” (*vikās kāl*) and its “fertile period” (*urvar kāl*) commenced in 1996 (Paudel 2067 v.s.: 671).

So the purpose of the Maoist memoir can be seen as threefold. It is an *abhilekh*, a true record of the heroism and sacrifice of those who fought and laid down their lives for the people during Nepal’s conflict, which stands in opposition to the reactionary elements who wish to misrepresent and distort the reality of the “Great People’s War.” It is a *dastābej*, a document that sets out the beliefs, values and standards of the true revolutionary, that will inspire future generations as they strive to transform their culture and society. Finally, it is a *khabardāri*, a record of suffering and sacrifice that warns political leaders not to betray the principles and objectives of the revolution.

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<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with (late) Ghanashyam Dhakal; 5 March 2011.

### Five Conflict Memoirs

Shobha Kattel ‘Pratibha’'s 144–page memoir, *Samarkā Smritiharū* [Memories of War] was first published by *Samar-Pratik* monthly in April 2011 in an edition of 2000 copies and reprinted (1500 copies) one month later. Born in 1978, Kattel worked first for the Maoist-aligned students’ and women’s organizations in her home district of Chitwan and became a Maoist “wholetimer” (*pūrnakālīn*) in 1997. She was arrested in May 2002 and held in Kasara and Bharatpur for 13 months, during which time her husband, Comrade Samar, was killed. She was released during the 2003 ceasefire and was actively involved in military operations as a battalion commissar from 2005 until the end of the conflict, after which she became one of her party’s 73 representatives in the interim government. *Samarkā Smritiharū* consists of 16 chapters. Fourteen chapters recount Kattel’s experiences in chronological order (six of these cover the period of her imprisonment), while one chapter is a tribute to the Maoist heroes of the conflict and another describes the difficulties faced by women in Nepali society.

Ganga Shrestha’s memoir, *Gaḍhīdarbārdekhi Simhadarbārsamma* [From Fort Palace to the Singha Durbar] was first published by the Kochila State Committee of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) in an edition of 3000 copies in June–July 2010 (Shrestha 2067 v.s.) and reprinted (2000 copies) one month later.<sup>10</sup> Shrestha (b. 1970) from Sindhuli district, has a reputation as an author of poetry, fiction and essays and later became a member of the UCPN-M Central Committee. He participated in the earliest military actions of the ‘People’s War’ but was then arrested and imprisoned for over five years until his release during the ceasefire of 2001. After his release he again participated in PLA assaults on police and army posts in east Nepal, and in 2007 he too joined the new interim government. His book consists of eighteen separate essays arranged in chronological order. The first six were written during his detention, the rest after his release. They relate the capture of the Sindhuli police post on the very first day of the ‘People’s War’ on 13 February 1996; the author’s arrest on 6 May 1996; his experiences while in detention for five years; his involvement in Maoist assaults on police and army posts after his release in 2001; and his entry into the interim government. Several essays are lengthy emotional tributes

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<sup>10</sup> One chapter of this book, “Hirāsathitrakā Yātanāyukta Sañtis Din,” was published in *Kalam* twelve years before the book appeared (Shrestha 2054–2055 v.s.).

to Maoist “martyrs” and the disappeared, particularly the famous Maoist poet Krishna Sen ‘Icchuk,’ with whom Shrestha shared a jail for several months in 1999–2000.<sup>11</sup>

*Āndhisaṅga Kheldā* [Playing with the Storm] is the work of Surul Pun Magar (b. 2035 v.s. [1978/1979]) from Maikot village of Rukum district, who writes under his *nom de guerre*, ‘Ajayashakti.’ Its first edition was published by the Fifth Battalion of the Jana Mukti Senā (People’s Liberation Army [PLA]) in collaboration with the Brothers News Agency in 2009–2010 (2066 v.s.) with a print run of 1000 copies. The book recounts the author’s childhood and early politicization; his military training and his involvement in assaults on various army bases and police posts, including the major actions at Dunai and Salleri; his struggle to survive with the help of villagers after being injured at Salleri and abandoned by his comrades; his arrest at Simra on 1 February 2002 and subsequent experiences in detention over a 14 month period. This is followed by his release on 31 March 2003 and his return to active service in the PLA; and the book ends with a brief account of his life in a United Nations-monitored cantonment after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

*Daśbarṣe Janayuddha Smṛtikā Ḍobharū* [Ten-Year People’s War Marks of Memory] was written by Gangabahadur Lama (b. 1963, Kabhrepalanchok district) and published by Jagaran Book House in January/February 2009. The book consists of a single narrative telling of the author’s involvement in the People’s War and the Tamang National Liberation Front from their early beginnings. He joins the CPN (Unity Centre) in 1990, takes part in Valley-based Maoist actions at the beginning of the People’s War, is transferred to Dhading district to organize Maoist activities among the local Tamang population, returns to Kathmandu during the 2003 ceasefire, and is subsequently posted to Gandaki district, where he leads a propaganda and social work campaign. Shortly after the Maoist assault on Beni, he is seriously injured in a Royal Nepal Army action in Lamjung district and lies in a field for five days before being rescued and carried bodily across the hills to Bharatpur in Chitwan district. There he receives medical treatment but eventually has to have a leg amputated in August 2004. Having narrowly escaped army arrest, he goes into hiding for an extended period and loses touch with the

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<sup>11</sup> My thanks to Abhi Subedi for drawing my attention to this memoir and for helping me to obtain a copy of it.

Party, before returning to Kathmandu shortly before the People's Movement (*Jana Āndolan II*) of March–April 2006.

Tara Rai's *Chāpāmār Yuvatīko Dāyari* [Diary of a Guerrilla Girl] was published by the leading mainstream publisher Ratna Pustak Bhandar in May/June 2010. In terms of its sales and media profile, this has been a much bigger success than any other conflict memoir: by October 2010, 7000 copies had been sold, and the book entered its ninth edition in April 2011. The book tells of how Tara Rai runs away from home and joins a Maoist cultural troupe in mid-January 2005, of her arrest by a Royal Nepal Army patrol on 2 May 2005, of her year-long detention at three different jails (Ilam, Jhapa and Morang), and of how she resumes her former party activity after her release but soon becomes disillusioned with the party leadership and returns to her family.

I selected these five memoirs partly to try to reflect the diversity of authorship that exists in this genre. The first was written by a young Brahman woman activist; the second by a male Newar of senior rank; the third by a male PLA foot soldier of Magar ethnicity; the fourth by a middle-ranking male Tamang; and the fifth by a young Rai woman member of a cultural troupe. My choice was also influenced to some extent by my own assessment of how interesting their content is and how well their stories are told. As such, it would not be unfair to question the extent to which my selection was influenced by my own preconceptions of literary quality and therefore the extent to which these texts are representative of the genre as a whole. I hope other researchers will conduct a wider survey of this genre, and challenge my findings if they find them inaccurate.

It is worth noting that the level of the party's endorsement of these books varies greatly. While Kattel's and Shrestha's books are prefaced by laudatory statements from two and three members of the party's senior leadership respectively and Ajayashakti's is introduced by PLA commanders and the editor of *Janadiśā*, Lama's carries only one endorsement, from Maila Lama (then the General Secretary of the Unified All Nepal People's Cultural Federation), and Rai's is not endorsed by any Maoist politician.

In all of the ink spilled in analyses of the motivation of the thousands of mostly young people who walked out of their homes to fight the Nepali state's security forces during the 1990s, very little use has been made of these first-person accounts by authors writing in English, despite the fact that they have been appearing in print in large numbers for at least ten

years.<sup>12</sup> In what follows I will compare the five memoirists' writings on seven common themes. First, I will examine their accounts of becoming involved in Maoist politics. Second, I will analyse the articulations of commitment to the revolutionary cause that may be found in each of the five texts and appear to be a standard feature of the genre. Third, I will briefly compare the descriptions of military action offered by the three authors who were actively involved at this level. Fourth, I will examine the way in which the memoirs portray the relationship between their authors and "the people" (*janatā*) in whose name they claim to be waging war. Fifth, I will compare individual authors' accounts of their treatment in detention, and sixth their characterisations of the enemy (*duśman*). Finally, I will examine the differing relationships between the individual and the party that emerge from these texts. All of this is worth doing not only for the intrinsic interest of this material, but also because it demonstrates that there remains some scope for individuation and polyvocality despite the ideological requirements of the genre.

### *Becoming a Maoist*

Ganga Shrestha tells us nothing about how he became a Maoist. It is almost as if he has always been a Maoist and this is his whole persona. However, the other memoirs considered here provide us with more detail.

Shobha Kattel lost her mother at an early age and grew up at her maternal uncle's home at Belsi in Chitwan. Her decision to participate in the armed struggle appears to have been informed by experiences of politics at both home and school. Her uncle's household, located near the East-West Highway, was a centre of communist activism and Kattel recalls that when the children saw vehicles with four stars during the 1991 election campaign they threw stones at them, but when they saw vehicles with a hammer and sickle they chanted communist slogans (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 21). The communist students' union appears to have been a major force at her school:

The school where I studied, *Pañcakanyā Mādhyāmik Vidhyālaya*, had been regarded as a centre of politics ever since the Panchayat period. After *bahudal* [the multi-party system] came the color of this increased. We had begun to just take our examinations without studying. In 2046 v.s. [1989/1990] we expelled the headmaster Dilliraj Sharma because he was corrupt. The Congressis were angry about this action...and they sent *gunḍās* from Rampur campus to beat up the Akhil students. They

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<sup>12</sup> Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2010) is the only analysis of this material published in English to date.

abducted Binod Regmi, Bhaikaji Ghimire and Shaligram Parajuli, wounded them with spears, khukuris and swords and left them in Tikauli jungle. Events like these made my sympathy for the communists and my hatred for the Congress deepen (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 21–22).

By the time she was 17 she had decided that the CPN-Masāl was the party for her, and had joined the party’s women’s organization at district level. The People’s War commenced soon after this. Kattel had dreamed about it, and she greeted its commencement with enthusiasm:

Should I become a wholotimer and spend a political life, or should I step back, put on feudal handcuffs, and live a life like the ordinary women of society? I was standing at the crossroads of this question. I gave my answer by becoming a wholotimer. I triumphed in my self-struggle and walked on the path of revolution. After that, Pampha Didi, Ramesh Regmi and I set out, looking up at the Chure hills and carrying the greatest enthusiasm of our lives (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 28).

Ajayashakti titles the first section of his memoir “Kunāko Mānche” (“a man from a corner”) and links his own decision to join the movement to his home district’s long history of exploitation and resistance. He describes his home village, Maikot, and the neighboring village of Hukam as very backward and exploited: “in the eyes of the rulers the people here remained ‘sheep,’ whether it was Panchayat, multi-party (*bahudal*) or the so-called democracy (*loktantra*) that has come today” (Ajayashakti 2066 v.s.: 3). He describes the activities of a local tyrant named Uddhayaman, and particularly an incident which occurs when Uddhayaman comes to his village with two dozen police in 2044 v.s. (1987/1988) during a dispute over the location of the district boundary between Baglung and Rukum. Everyone is subjected to violence, even one person with a hearing and speech impairment (*lāṭo*), and the police make off with a large number of chickens and a quantity of drink. After this the village children regularly play a game in which one is made Uddhayaman and the others chase him away (2066 v.s.: 4). After the 1991 general elections, there ensues fierce “class struggle” in the two villages, between activists loyal to Jana Morcā, which has strong local support, and the Nepali Congress, which has formed the national government.<sup>13</sup> Uddhayaman establishes a police post in his house in Hukam, and Jana Morcā youths always flee to Maikot after clashes there (2066 v.s.: 5). Ajayashakti is told by a Jana Morcā leader that a war will soon begin against the local tyrants and that the

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<sup>13</sup> Tatsuro Fujikura points out that inter-party violence is not uncommon in Nepal, but observes that it becomes “radically asymmetric” when one party wins control (Fujikura 2003: 23).

villagers' job will be to feed the guerrillas and help them to pass on information. Ajayashakti wants to become a guerrilla himself but is told that he is too young (2066 v.s.: 6). Soon, however, he becomes a member of a Grām Surakṣā Dal (Village Security Group), and patrols the local area with a group of twenty youths carrying *lāṭhis*. Shortly after the beginning of the People's War, a police post is established in Maikot and Nepali Congress activists indulge in severe oppression (2066 v.s.: 7). When Maoist guerrillas kill three policemen at Koralibang, Ajayashakti rejoices: "We danced with happiness. We sang. We said, 'Our guerrillas have answered bullets with bullets'" (2066 v.s.: 8).

Ajayashakti appears to be a classic example of a young man from a part of Nepal where there has for many years been strong support for political parties on the far left, and which came to be seen as the birthplace of the Maoist movement (see de Sales 2010 and Gersony 2003). Although he is a Magar, his grievances are not expressed in terms of ethnicity, but of class, which bears out de Sales' view that ethnic sentiment was "surprisingly absent" in the early political mobilization of the population in this part of Nepal (de Sales 2009: 366). He is angered by the excesses of the landed classes and their Congress party supporters and develops a strong sense of injustice, based upon what he perceives as the economic marginalization and political oppression of his home district. He is easily persuaded that the sufferings of his fellow villagers can only be remedied through recourse to violent means.

Like Ajayashakti, Gangabahadur Lama is a member of a Janajati community, the Tamang. At a young age he leaves his home village in Kabhre and comes to live with an aunt who is employed in a Rana household in Kathmandu, apparently in order that he should benefit from the education that he receives there. In due course he falls out with the head of this household, who remarks that he is "like a communist." Gangabahadur's political rebelliousness is inspired by his observation of how the Ranas treat their servants (Lama 2065 v.s.:18–19).

Gangabahadur is drawn into active politics by the 1979 student movement that led to the national referendum of 1980. Dinesh Sharma, who was a student at Pulchowk Engineering College at the time (he later became a Maoist party leader until surrendering in 2000) is an important early influence. He and Gangabahadur both work at a restaurant at Kamal Pokhari, and Dinesh regularly passes him books on communism:

Although they gave me books I hadn't got their flavor (*ras*). To tell the truth, I bought books from them but I threw them into a corner without reading them. I could not understand the material they were giving me...

Yes, it was from my connections with friends that I dived into politics, rather more than because I was proficient in a political or ideological way (2065 v.s.: 14).

However, Gangabhadur is very affected by the sympathetic interest Dinesh Sharma and his communist friends take in his personal problems and the help they give him. He is working in a hotel in New Road at the time of the 1990 Jan Andolan. In its aftermath he is persuaded that the mainstream parties have sold out to the monarchy and he takes out formal membership of the CPN (Ektā Kendra):

My ideological and political quality increased from the later instruction. When we got party membership we were greatly enthused and thrilled. As we took on the commitment to fight all our lives for class liberation we felt a responsibility had been added. Matters of discipline made us serious too. We began to feel that we were separate from other people (2065 v.s.: 16).<sup>14</sup>

When the People's War begins on 13 February 1996, Gangabhadur is a member of a team with the task of posting bills and distributing pamphlets calling for People's War in the Kathmandu valley. In the event, all of the other members of the team for his section of Kathmandu are too afraid to take part and he goes out alone in the small hours (2065 v.s.: 17). After this he takes part in a number of other Maoist actions inside Kathmandu. At the start of the *Nepāl banda* of 1996 he throws a petrol bomb at a Sajha bus in Bauddha and is greatly excited to overhear people discussing the incident later in the day, as if "Maoists were another kind of people made of a new type of metal" (2065 v.s.: 23).<sup>15</sup> In April 1997, he leads an action (*kārbāhi*) against a corrupt official at Chabahil. The official is dragged out into the street and his face is smeared with soot (*kālo moso*), after which the Maoists throw petrol bombs and set light to the office. Later he is involved in a successful action to plant and detonate a bomb in the car of the "corrupt minister" Chiranjivi Wagle.

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<sup>14</sup> In his review of Lama's book in *Janādeś* on 3 March 2009, Raju Kshetri summarized its early chapters and concluded, "thus began his journey from his ordinary condition to become a person of a different world."

<sup>15</sup> This sense of 'being separate from other people' and made of 'a new type of metal' is reiterated by Ajayashakti (2066 v.s.: 112–113). Lecomte-Tilouine writes of a Maoist combatant's body being "transformed into a terrible, explosive weapon, one forged in anger and set in iron" (2009b: 249) and notes that the image of "iron bodies" is frequently employed in Maoist poetry (2009b: 264).

Gangabhadur Lama's conversion to revolutionary communism reflects a pattern of politicization that inspired large numbers of young urban males to join the Maoist cause. He was educated, un- or under-employed, frustrated and bored. Activists of his own or similar age befriended him and explained the political causes for his dissatisfaction with life. Involvement in the struggle not only represented an opportunity to improve the lot of people like himself, it also brought with it the excitement of being involved in acts of daring and the close comradeship of others.<sup>16</sup>

Tara Rai is a member of a third *janajāti* community, the Rai. Her family background is unsettled: in her *Diary* she records that her father deserted the family when she was one year old and that she and her mother were obliged to live at her maternal uncle's home (ie. her mother's *māiti*) until her father returned for them six years later (Rai 2067 v.s.: 43). She also tells the story of how she and a girlfriend take themselves off to Dhankuta—without their families' permission, and using the money she has been given to pay her school fees—when they are in Year 6, in an unsuccessful attempt to track down and meet their hero, the famous singer Shambhu Rai (2067 v.s.: 47–49). After they return she is in disgrace and she simply quits school. For some months she spends her days grazing the family's goats on the hillsides around their village, but then leaves to live in a Maoist camp with other children from her school. She has long aspired to becoming a singer and is therefore made a member of a Maoist cultural troupe.<sup>17</sup> The reasons she gives for joining the People's War include insights gained from books and films:

I had only understood that communism was good. How to become a communist? I did not know. The CPN-UML I had liked since I was small. I had also been affected by the story of Ratnakumar Bantawa. After I had seen the film *Deumāiko Kinārmā*<sup>18</sup> I knew that it was hard to become a communist but I had already become inspired to become a communist.

<sup>16</sup> Alpa Shah writes of membership of Maoist movements in India being part of a “search for certainty.” People join the movement in the hope that revolutionary engagement will come with more guarantees of social relations that are “less opaque, more predictable and hence more trustworthy” (Shah 2009: 281).

<sup>17</sup> On Maoist cultural performances, see Stirr (forthcoming), Mottin (2010) and Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a: 393).

<sup>18</sup> Based on a 1989/1990 novel by Sanjay Thapa, published by Nava Chetana Prakashan, Dhading. Visit: [www.madanpuraskar.org/viewbook\\_info.php?id=12048](http://www.madanpuraskar.org/viewbook_info.php?id=12048) for more information on this book.

When I was studying in Class 4 I had read Sanjay Thapa's novel *Naoilāune Phūl*.<sup>19</sup> The main character of the novel, Rajesh, had already made me think that I should become a communist like him. I didn't like it when he suffered but his successful actions inspired me. In the end, when Rajesh was killed by the police, I cried a lot. It entered my mind at that time that the police were bad. I reckoned Rajesh was a communist and that when you become a communist the police kill you, and this frightened me in a way. I always imagined and dreamed of becoming like Rajesh. I wanted to go to Sinam village in Taplejung, where Rajesh was. Gradually I grew to like the UML very much. My mother told me that Madan Bhandari and Jeevraj Ashrit had been murdered.<sup>20</sup> I kept this news to myself. I didn't understand what communism was, but I became a communist all the same (Rai 2067 v.s.: 128).

Tara Rai also had direct experience of being harassed by people more powerful than herself. For instance, on the day of Bhai Tika in 2004 her uncle's house receives a visit from a pair of men who are drunk on festival beer. She has long recognized them as "feudals and exploiters" and she tries to persuade her mother not to give them drink, and to persuade them that they have had enough. This leads one of the men to accuse her of being a Maoist and to threaten to bring the army in to "sort her out" (2067 v.s.: 129). The men snatch the combat cap that Tara is wearing on her head (this cap belongs to her cousin) and after they have taunted her for a while they tear it to pieces and throw it away:

That incident made me even more rebellious. If people from the village who were merely able to fill their stomachs without too much trouble could dominate us like this, I came to understand how much more the rajas and maharajas must be oppressing us. I realised the extent to which the *basikhāne* class had turned the *garikhāne* class into slaves.<sup>21</sup> It made me think how much worse it must be for those who had nothing to eat and no place to live...Others in the village who were like those two should be stood up in a people's court, it seemed to me. As time passed swiftly, I

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<sup>19</sup> A 1990 novel by Sanjay Thapa, published by Pathyasamagri Prakashan, Kathmandu. Visit: [www.madanpuraskar.org/view\\_book\\_info.php?id=12650](http://www.madanpuraskar.org/view_book_info.php?id=12650) for more information on this book.

<sup>20</sup> Madan Bhandari and Jeevraj Ashrit, popular leaders of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) were killed in May 1993 when the jeep in which they were travelling from Narayangadh to Kathmandu left the road and fell into the Narayani river, in what has come to be known as the 'Dasdhunga Incident.' A government inquiry concluded that this was an accident, but many on the left still believe that it was a planned assassination (see Whelpton 2005: 190).

<sup>21</sup> *Garikhāne* denotes the class of people who have to work ('do') to eat, *basikhāne* the class that can simply 'sit' and eat.

became sympathetic to the war. I examined the real form of the exploiter and the feudal in the face of Ram and the others. I met with friends from the Party. And they explained that war is not something they want but is an obligation (Rai 2067 v.s.: 131).

Tatsuro Fujikura (2003: 21) has argued that Nepal's "project of national development" helped to engender "new forms of collective imagination" for its people and Ina Zharkevich asserts that becoming a Maoist reflected "the aspiration of young people to transcend the limitations of their immediate environments" (2009: 69). An individual's decision to join the movement was often not merely a reaction to past or present grievances, but also "a commitment, pledge and dedication to bring about a particular form of a collective future" (Fujikura 2003: 24). These authors became participants in a new type of modernity, and in a new discourse which repositioned youth (and primarily rural youth) at centre stage. They sought to be empowered as national actors, participating in a national movement that would transform not just their home villages but the whole of Nepal (see Shah and Pettigrew 2009: 240).

### *Commitment to the Cause*

It is a common feature of these memoirs that their authors subscribe fully to their party's analysis of Nepal's ills and express their passionate commitment at regular intervals to the cause of the "Glorious People's War." Their sense of belonging to a world communist movement that transcends the narrow confines of the Nepali conflict is also articulated from time to time. Ganga Shrestha, the most urbane of the authors considered here, exclaims,

*Mālemāvād* [Marxism-Leninism-Maoism] is strange. It teaches us to cheerfully accept death for the sake of freedom and equality. Oho! What a strangely powerful philosophy! (Shrestha 2067 v.s.: 45).

Ajayashakti writes in a similar vein of his time in Kathmandu Central Jail:

Perhaps in this physical world it is the communists who are the happiest. Because they have sacrificed all of their self interest in life for the happiness of the people. Also, in this world it is always the communists who are the most concerned and thoughtful. Because it is the responsibility of the communists to change the world. Communists can turn adverse situations to their own advantage and take delight in them. That is why we prisoners of conscience were very happy. Other prisoners seemed disheartened (Ajayashakti 2066 v.s.: 115).

Going ‘underground’ requires an activist to relinquish ties with his or her home and family for a protracted and indefinite period. Although each of the three male authors briefly mentions an occasional visit home or receiving letters or jail visits from their wives, they express no particular anguish over their loss of the pleasures of domestic life. The two female memoirists considered here are different from their male counterparts in this regard, but also different from one other. While Rai’s account of daily life in jail is interspersed with several outpourings of revolutionary zeal, she confesses that she has not given up her fondness for the old customs, particularly the major festivals. When Dasain comes around while she is still in detention she feels her isolation from her family very sorely:

I had not forgotten the red *tikā* on the forehead or the yellow seedling behind the ear. I felt a bitterness in my heart: what would Dasain be like at home without me? My friends went to the men’s jail to receive *tikā*, but I did not. I didn’t want to receive *tikā* from a guard. I remembered Dasain at home last year, what fun it had been. The picture of playing on the swing with my family played in my eyes for a long while. I couldn’t stop my tears, and I wept face down on my bedcover. Sita cried too. We wept for a long time in each other’s arms. Thus that Dasain passed in tears. After 15 days the even more heartbreaking Tihar arrived. That Tihar was very painful for this girl as I remembered my four year old brother Arpan. I couldn’t wipe out that pain with aggressive (*ujhāru*) words of revolution (Rai 2067 v.s.: 113).

These sentiments contrast with those expressed by Shobha Kattel, who gives birth to a son before her arrest. The child is cared for by her husband’s parents during her detention (during which her husband is killed), and the army officers who interrogate and torture her make frequent attempts to play on her maternal instincts in order to persuade her to surrender to them and inform on her comrades:

...you do not have survive for Samar. A husband gets a wife. A wife gets another husband too. But your son will never get the mother who bore him again. So, survive for your son.’

At the final moment of death I never thought about blood relationships. Did I do right or wrong? But it seems to me that it was this that made me hard (*nirmam*). I replied, ‘I will live on for my son, but as an immortal and great person. My son will see life in my greatness. For a revolutionary, a cowardly life is death. Therefore I agree with the idea of living on for my son, but you and I have different understandings of life and death (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 59).

After Kattel is released, she struggles to re-establish her bond with her son, who does not recognize her at first. Her husband’s family refuses to relinquish him to her unless she discontinues her activities in the party,

and she reaches the anguished decision (this section of the memoir is greatly extended) that the political struggle must take precedence in her life.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine suggests that “Nepalese revolutionary warriors appear as renouncers. They detach themselves (*tyāg garna*) from all selfish components of life...” (2009b: 240) and bear *noms de guerre* “which are often neutral or abstract, sometimes keeping even their gender ambiguous” (2009b: 247) and signify “the change their identities undergo joining the party” (2009b: 248). Zharkevich takes issue with this representation, arguing that, quite unlike religious ascetics, the Maoists’ aims are this-worldly and that “the most important thing was the feeling of belonging to a community of comrades united by values, cause of struggle and vision of future” (2009: 76). Subscribing to the Maoist cause involved an individual joining a collectivity that was much greater than any family, and which made demands that were not easily reconciled with the demands of familial bonds. In the early stages of his or her membership of the new collectivity an individual’s Maoism could conceivably be maintained as a *part* of their life, but once that individual had suffered custody or torture it had to become the *whole* of their life (2009: 81). On the one hand, Kattel (who suffers greatly in detention) sacrifices her maternal relationship for the sake of the Party, while on the other hand, Rai (who suffers less than Kattel) longs to go home for Dasain. Although some of this variation may be attributable to different levels of commitment to the political cause, it is also surely the case in a Nepali social context that it is much more difficult for women to loosen domestic bonds than it is for men. So while Tara Rai longs for home, Shobha Kattel knows that she cannot easily return:

After I’d been declared a wholetimer the bridge for returning home had collapsed. Men who quit politics and studies could enter India. But where could women go? It was not easy for them to return to home and society. Society poured scorn on them. At that time there was not a wave of women going abroad. That’s probably why women were considered reliable and permanent workers in the party (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 29).

### *Experiences of Military Action*

Shrestha, Lama and Ajayashakti were each actively involved in a large number of Maoist military actions against the state security forces, and Shobha Kattel in a more limited number of actions. Kattel describes shooting soldiers as they emerge from a truck (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 113), but apart from this none of these authors provides an account of their own

personal actions during these attacks, or claims any individual responsibility for the death of a soldier or policeman. They often describe the preparations for a particular battle, the march towards the ‘target point’ and their leaders’ pre-battle speeches in considerable detail, but when the actual attacks take place their narratives become very spare. Lecomte-Tilouine argues that the Maoists’ “complete negation of the enemy’s humanity is a way of asserting that ‘to clean’ does not translate into ‘to kill.’ As in the sacrificial context, murder is denied” (2009b: 255). Zharkevich records that martial prowess was mentioned ‘surprisingly rarely’ by her informants, and explains that,

militancy is never listed as the quality of an exemplary Maoist because it has an obvious association with homicide. In the Maoist worldview armed struggle is conceived as the only route to carry out social transformation and therefore is conceptualized as moral. Violence is framed in the narrative of salvation of the country (Zharkevich 2009: 93).

In these accounts of military action, if the Maoists have been successful the attack is described as a great victory that has dealt a severe blow to the morale of the enemy (*duśman*), but then the narrative moves on. The number of casualties on each side is reported and if there are Maoist casualties these are mourned at some length [see, for instance, Shrestha (2067 v.s.: 46)]. Accounts of deaths on the Maoist side almost always occasion outpourings of violent hatred towards the enemy in “a narrative in which all emotions transform into fury and desire for revenge” (Stirr forthcoming; see also, Lecomte-Tilouine 2009b).

Tara Rai informed Girish Giri, who provides her book with an Introduction, that she never carried a weapon (Rai 2067 v.s.: 2), but elsewhere she writes, “whether I was carrying a grenade in my waist[band] or doing PT while carrying a rifle, my mother always was there inside me” (2067 v.s.: 15) and also describes herself as “a gun-carrying soldier of the battlefield” (2067 v.s.: 113). Given the brief duration of her active involvement with the Maoist forces, not to mention her tender age and her attachment to a cultural rather than a military unit, it does seem likely to be true that she took no part in military actions. However, in her *Diary* she sometimes resorts to standard formulae, representing herself as a warrior for the people’s rights just like any other Maoist. Ashok Subedi draws attention to these inconsistencies in his scrying review of the book (Subedi 2067 v.s.).

*The Love of the People*

For Nepali Maoists it is axiomatic that “the people” (*janatā*) support their party’s cause. These accounts are full of statements such as “the love of the people was inspiring me to fight with the enemy,” “the people cooperated selflessly for the sake of the revolution” “the people were deeply influenced by and sympathetic to the People’s War” (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 38, 108, 122). As Ganga Shrestha describes preparations being made at a temporary base in Solu district for the unsuccessful Maoist attack on Rumjhatar, he is in no doubt that the local Sherpa inhabitants are overjoyed to have a large Maoist force lodging in their houses, remarking that they have “huge houses as big as palaces and beautiful *gumbās* that could hold 400–500 people” (Shrestha 2067 v.s.: 64) and that the people “never darkened their faces even when we lazed about filling a whole house” (2067 v.s.: 65). This is despite the fact that the Maoists cause a huge explosion while they are preparing mines, in which two PLA members are killed. Similarly, Tara Rai too recalls the way in which the ordinary people expressed their support for her and her comrades:

The villagers went to such pains for us, they would pick up a handful of corn and make *sāttu* for each of us, and we would set out on the journey of the people’s liberation eating that *sāttu*. Everyone showed me great affection. Whichever house we arrived at in the evening, I would receive a glass of milk. The village mothers and fathers used to look at me and say, ‘why did you set out, when you are so young?’ (Rai 2067 v.s.: 71).

Ajayashakti writes about being seriously injured in battle at Salleri on 25 November 2001 and abandoned in the jungle, and dedicates his book to the three villagers who shelter and care for him for nineteen days. He later discovers that the Party has declared him a martyr. However, he does not trust people he meets along the way sufficiently to tell them the truth about his condition. Although the people support the Maoists, a few are informers (*surāki*) and it would be unsafe for him to reveal his identity to all and sundry along the way. Others are simply too frightened to assist a Maoist combatant:

‘The enemy say they burn down houses. If the enemy finds out we are sheltering you they will kill us too.’ The mother seemed very frightened. Other members of the family too (Ajayashakti 2066 v.s.: 63–64).

Gangabhadur Lama also encounters people who are too frightened to help or shelter him. While he was used to being able to make regular recourse to safe houses (*śeltar*) in Kathmandu, in Nuwakot he and his friends have to threaten to break a door in before the residents of a house

will admit them. The only reason given in most Maoist accounts for the people refusing to help or shelter them is the people's fear that the army will punish them, but here Gangabhadur is unusually frank, suggesting that it is not only the enemy that causes their fear, but also the Maoists:

Because of the emergency the people were afraid. I had sensed this too. The army and police would come, calling themselves Maoists, and the Maoists would come too. The people were in between both sides of the conflict. So they were terrified. The friends told us of many examples where if the police or army came to know that Maoists were staying they came and killed or disappeared people. Similarly, there were cases in which Maoists had found out that they had fed army or police and had taken actions (Lama 2065 v.s.: 35).

Gangabhadur Lama's harrowing account of his injury and abandonment sheds a rather different light upon the relationship between Maoist guerrillas and the people than that shed by other authors. The episode occurs when his propaganda and social work campaign along the Budhi Gandaki river takes him to Chailung village. When the army suddenly attacks the village Gangabhadur escapes by throwing himself down the hillside, across several field terraces. He narrowly escapes capture but discovers that he has been shot in the leg and is bleeding heavily. He lies in the field all night. The next morning an old man comes by grazing his goats, but refuses even to bring him water. Then a large group of villagers returning from the funeral of a young woman killed by the army the previous night finds him where he lies, but offers him no help. Later the old man returns and Gangabhadur tries to persuade him to fetch him water, first offering him money then threatening him with reprisals, but the old man says that if he gives him water the army will kill his family. When Lama asks him again he turns hostile:

When I told him I was thirsty and hungry he picked up the water jerkin and poured it all over my head, then flung the jerkin off the hillside. Then he went up the hill, delivering his fit of anger to an uncontrolled climax and muttering to himself. 'It would have been better if a strongbodied man like that had joined the police-army, or had worked with a hoe and spade to make his living, or gone abroad' he said, as he moved slowly away. 'Because of you people a fire of non-peace (*aśānti*) has been lit in our peaceful beautiful village. Innocent villagers have lost their lives for nothing. They have suffered...' (Lama 2065 v.s.: 72).

Gangabhadur is also the only one of these authors to mention any action being taken by the Maoists against the people. At Chailung village, he is told by an old woman about a man who is suspected of being an informer. The man cannot be found but his family are located and his

daughter is told that her father has caused injuries to several people and also great fear. She is made to provide meals for eight of the Maoists as a punishment (2065 v.s.: 63). The ‘enemy’ (*duśman*) is a category into which anyone can fall, regardless of their position: “all that is necessary is animosity towards the Maoist movement” (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a: 387). So the *janatā* support the Maoists because the supporters of the Maoists are by definition the *janatā*. Any member of the *janatā* who opposes the Maoists automatically becomes identified as a *duśman*.

### *Treatment at the Hands of the Enemy*

Shobha Kattel is arrested on 6 May 2002 while she is travelling toward Shivanagar with a comrade, Asmita, with whom she is sharing a bicycle:

I bit his hand as hard as I could. ‘He said ‘Eyya, this one’s a witch!’ and jerked his arm away. They threw me into a field as if they were throwing back a frog. I kicked out with all the strength I had and struck the pistol at his waist. There was no limit to my hatred for the enemy. I abused them with every name that came to my lips, and fought back. I was saying ‘either kill me or let me go.’ They were ordering me to go to the barracks. I wanted death on the road in preference to insults, torture and death at the barracks. When it is far away, the picture of death is terrifying and tragic. When death comes to the doorway, then fear runs away like a jackal. So I kept fighting back with my hands, legs and teeth. Then they grabbed my hair and dragged me along the road, which had only recently been spread with gravel. In the villages I had seen cowherds dragging a snake they had killed in order to throw it away, holding it by its tail and dragging its head along the road. They were dragging me just like that (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 39–40).

She is held at army barracks for seven months, during which time the army make strenuous and repeated efforts to persuade her to become an informer (*gaddār*) and she narrowly escapes extrajudicial execution; then she spends a further six months in police detention and in jail.

Ganga Shrestha is arrested with seven others by eleven armed police on 6 May, 1996 at Amle VDC. Once they have been arrested, all of the Maoists are subjected to extreme brutality, locked in a room without windows, then taken out one by one for further assault. Shrestha spends 37 days undergoing beatings and torture and loses the sight in his right eye before being forced to put thumbprints to “false statements” (*nakkali bayān*) and sent to Sindhuli jail. He is subsequently transferred to Birganj jail and then to Kathmandu. In both of these jails he is confined in a *golghar* (literally, “round house”), a kind of jail within a jail where conditions are especially harsh.

Ajayashakti is arrested from a house in Simra in February 2002. He is taken to a nearby military camp and made to lie in the mud outside, surrounded by guards. There he and his two fellow prisoners are thrashed with *lāṭhīs* and pipes and interrogated before being fettered and handcuffed for the night (Ajayashakti 2066 v.s.: 76–80). Thereafter they are beaten constantly, subjected to a mock execution and a mock burial, transported with large stones in their mouths, laid naked on cement and whipped with nettles, and so on.

The physical details of these experiences of brutality and torture are generally recounted in a matter of fact manner. All three authors emphasize that their ordeals in captivity greatly strengthen their revolutionary commitment and resolve.

Tara Rai's account of her experiences in detention is very different. She is arrested at a health post where she has just been given her regular injection for the rheumatic heart disease from which she suffers. Two fellow party members, Ruben and Suresh, have recently arrived there to meet her. They eat some food, then suddenly find themselves surrounded by nine or ten soldiers. Her two friends try to break out of the circle, but Tara drops her plate and remains where she is because she feels too weak to flee. After her friends have run away she hears gunfire. She is slapped and interrogated, but she denies being a Maoist and lies that she is a guest at the house, but then a 'pockmarked' soldier finds her Maoist student card (All Nepal National Independent Students' Union-Revolutionary [ANNISU-R]) and slaps her again. She eventually admits to being a Maoist when the soldiers begin to rough up the other woman in the house. After this she is blindfolded, her hands are tied and she is taken away across the fields (Rai 2067 v.s.: 16–19).

In a conversation with Girish Giri, recounted in the Introduction, Rai refers to the slaps she received when being arrested as "the only torture I got from the security forces..." (2067 v.s.: 3), though elsewhere in the *Diary* she claims to have received "insults, hatred, and physical and mental torture" (2067 v.s.: 148). Here she appears to be using a form of words that is fairly standard in Nepali accounts of political detention, regardless of whether it is literally true that physical torture was suffered. At various stages of her detention she suffers verbal cruelty and for the first few hours after her arrest she fully expects that she will be killed:

After walking for just a moment they told me to stand still. I guessed that I was standing on a field terrace. From close by there came the sound of digging. My heart jumped and I went cold with fear. I thought: they are planning to bury me. If they kill me first that will be all right, but if they

bury me alive I will surely suffer. A picture of my mother, father, brothers, sisters and friends came into my eyes all at once. Then I thought, the soil will come into my eyes, how hard it will be to breathe when I am buried under the soil.

‘Dig quickly! This is the girl we have to bury, see her? What is your final wish, girl?’ A voice issued orders to someone and then asked me this (2067 v.s.: 27).

She listens to the soldiers discussing her and her likely fate and takes some crumbs of comfort from the fact that they refer to her as “poor thing” (*bicari*) but is still in considerable terror. Then her blindfold is removed and she is shown the dead body of her fellow activist, Ruben:

One soldier had already told me quietly, ‘Sister! Your friend has been killed’ but I had not believed him. I had thought that the army must have mistakenly killed a non-Maoist.

Seeing me silent, one soldier became furious. His eyes turned red and he shouted, ‘Speak! Whose body is this? Do you want to live or don’t you? Are you going to rebuke us? I’ll give you a slap that will show you the three *lok* and the fourteen *bhuwan!*’ (2067 v.s.: 29).

Tara Rai spends only a short time in army detention and is then made to sign a confession and is handed over to the police, who deliver her to the first of a series of jails. As a very young woman of slight build, who moreover suffers from a heart complaint and requires regular medication, she is not subjected to physical brutality; on the contrary, she recalls numerous acts of kindness from both her jailers and her fellow prisoners, in strong contrast to the other accounts considered here.

### *The Humanity/Inhumanity of the Enemy*

In Maoist texts it is standard to describe the deaths of Maoist combatants in terms of them achieving martyrdom (*śahādat*) or becoming martyrs (*sahid*), while the deaths of members of the state security forces are described either in neutral terms or contemptuously:

Death loses its character of reciprocity: one’s own warriors are noble and heroic, while the valour of one’s opponents is denied or scorned. The rebel meets a ‘glorious death’ and becomes an ‘eternal martyr’; however, the RNA soldier or oppressor is ‘eliminated’ or ‘cleansed,’ or meets ‘an infamous death’ (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009b: 239).

Of these authors, it is Shrestha who most thoroughly dehumanizes the enemy. In his account of the capture of the Sindhuli police post on the very first day of the People’s War on 13 February 1996, he expresses some sympathy for the hapless police (Shrestha 2067 v.s.: 5), but sympathy and compassion for the enemy are conspicuously absent from

the essays written after his arrest and detention, and from the accounts of the military actions in which he took part after his release in 2001. For instance, while he is in jail he hears the news on the BBC Nepali service of the deaths of seven members of a Maoist cultural troupe in a *dohoro bhiḍanta* (“two-sided encounter”):

When the bloodthirsty butchers begin to chew innocent lives at will, they stage the performance of a *dohoro bhiḍanta* to cover their shame. But when there is a real encounter they don’t even make a squeak. They do not even have the courage to speak. Indeed, how would the wretches have the courage? (Shrestha 2067 v.s.: 29).

Although his account of the PLA’s military fortunes is frank in its assessments of the mistakes that were made and the losses suffered, his disgust and hatred for the government and security forces are unbridled and unequivocal. He expresses great love for those he regards as the fallen heroes of the Maoist insurgency and sheds tears at their demise. But the enemy are not worthy of any such consideration. They are *duśman* who require *saphāyā*, “cleansing.” They are the “domestic reactionary feudal royal regime that has already descended into fascism” (2067 v.s.: 76).

Truly, what a difference there is between the deaths of the worthless dog police and the deaths of the PLA. While the deaths of worthless dogs give birth only to disgusting death, the deaths of the PLA give birth to fresh new (*jarjharāundo*) life. That must be why Comrade Mao compared death to a mountain and to wings. Immortal martyrs who die deaths as heavy as mountains, Lal Salam! (2067 v.s.: 54).

Despite being trenchantly Maoist in its analysis of Nepal’s social ills, Tara Rai’s *Diary* is generous towards the *duśman*, and particularly the men of the then Royal Nepal Army. Rai writes that they too are “the sons and daughters of the poor” who belong to “the class that has to work to eat” (*kām garikhāne varga*). She writes that whenever someone died in the conflict, whether they were a soldier, a policeman, or a Maoist guerrilla, “a mother’s lap became empty” (Rai 2067 v.s.: 28), that she could not think of them as “class enemies” and that it seemed to her that “it was the rulers who used them” (2067 v.s.: 113). Although she uses the “martyrdom” vocabulary regularly, on one occasion she departs from these norms and describes Maoist deaths simply as loss of life (*jyān gumāyekā*) and uses the Army’s own term for the death of a soldier, *bīrgati* (2067 v.s.: 54). Her account also makes repeated references to the kindness of two particular soldiers, who she calls the “party chief” (*ṭolī pramukh*) and the “deep-eyed soldier” (*gahiro āṅkhā hune sainik*):

I looked all around, I did not like the barrack environment at all. But the gentle behavior of the *ṭoli pramukh* and the guardianship of the deep-eyed soldier brought a change to my negative conceptions about the army (2067 v.s.: 76).

The most fulsome statement of her warm feelings for the Army officers who she felt had protected her during the early days of her detention comes in the penultimate chapter of the *Diary*:

The army's slaps and the army's love and goodwill woke me from a dream, had already woken me. Due to that brief period of living with the army, that closeness, I had understood the importance of life, the world and a handful of breath. Speaking truly with my soul as the witness, I found the meaning of living in the kind heart within the army. I never had bad feelings towards the army, nor do I now, I have watched from close quarters the army life that is caught up in obligation and powerlessness. Even today I still think the same of the soldier who is seeking his own and his family's life in the bonds of guns and barbed wire. I respect the soldier who cuts the steps of life on another's orders. Today in this present time I understand that soldier who slapped me. He was obliged to do that. Those same soldiers take pleasure in the parts of their rifles, but carrying such sorrow and suffering kept inside their hearts. The soldiers, they decorate all their happinesses inside the bunker and the trench. I have understood the reality inside a soldier, 'in my view the barrack is a temple and the soldier a priest,' a temple is always clean and pure but the priests can be changed (2067 v.s.: 153).

### *The Individual and the Party*

Given their positions, one would not expect Ajayashakti, Kattel or Shrestha to indulge in criticism of their party in their texts. Kattel expresses some unhappiness over the fact that after her release she is quarantined by the party hierarchy for several months before she is allocated a new role in Syangja. "Was it an offence to get captured by the enemy?" she writes (2068 v.s.: 105). But these feelings of disappointment are dispelled once she has been rehabilitated, and her criticisms of the party are brief and muted. Shrestha offers critical assessments of mistakes made in the military campaign, but his politics are very closely aligned with those of the party leadership, which he does not otherwise criticize. Ajayashakti seems to have a flicker of doubt when his comrades leave him lying seriously injured, but any doubts he may have about his allegiance to the Party are quickly dispelled, first by the kindness of the people who rescue him, and later by the extreme brutality to which he is subjected during the early weeks of his detention. By the time he writes

his account from a UN-supervised cantonment, he is content to do whatever the Party requires of him:

Experiencing even suffering as happiness, we continued to carry out the Party's directions. We knew this: that to live in a disciplined manner in the camp is revolution! We have to stay and wait for the Party's directions. We will stay in the cantonment for as long as the Party tells us. When it tells us to come out we will come out. And again we will go amongst the people and join with them in revolution (Ajayashakti 2066 v.s.: 165).

Gangabhadur's memoir is written in a very different tone. Although he quickly ascends to a position of authority within the Party during the early months of the People's War, and becomes the chairman of the Tamang National Liberation Front, his narrative expresses a growing suspicion that he is being marginalized by being given responsibilities in ethnic sister-organizations that he sees as being on the fringe of the movement. He complains regularly about internal power struggles and factionalism among the Maoist leadership, and about communication problems between the Maoist leadership and the grassroots (Lama 2065 v.s.: 27–30). He is critical of the senior Maoist leader Ram Bahadur Thapa [Badal] (2065 v.s.: 29) and complains bitterly about the Party's decision to give the position of secretary of Kathmandu district to an individual who had recently been released from jail on the basis of a "surrender" (*ātma-samarpan*), instead of to him (2065 v.s.: 32). Sections of his text are a veritable catalogue of grievances.

Towards the end of his memoir, when he has completed his medical treatment at Bharatpur, escaped army arrest and gone into hiding, Gangabhadur decides that he is of no further use to the party and that it does not care for those injured in the conflict, so he tries to submit a letter of resignation, but this is not accepted by the district secretary (2065 v.s.: 110). After some time, he decides to take control of his life. He takes a bus to the nearby town of Hetauda, where he eats momos, drinks beer and wanders about aimlessly. His hair and beard are long and he has just one set of ragged clothes, so he finds that he is not recognized. "I didn't want to go back to that village because it was meaningless to live with no plans among villagers, separate from the party's activity plans (*kāryayojanā*) and discussions" (2065 v.s.: 111), so he decides to return to Kathmandu. He therefore hitches rides on a succession of trucks, telling drivers when they ask that he lost his leg in an accident in a carpet factory and pretending to be a Buddhist devotee who is returning from a pilgrimage to take darshan of Rambahadur Bamjan, who took the form of the Buddha in

Bara jungle (2065 v.s.: 112). He finally reaches Kathmandu on 6 or 7 February 2006 and his narrative ends with an account of the *Jana Āndolan* of 2006 (JA II) and the political developments that followed. He is still firmly committed to the revolution and extremely suspicious of the path his party is taking. The final words of the memoir are ‘The victory of the revolution is certain. The revolution continues’ (2065 v.s.: 128).

Gangabhadur Lama’s memoir presents a challenge for a *Janādeś* book reviewer. Its author remains active in the UCPN-M and the sacrifices he made for its cause can hardly be denied.<sup>22</sup> Raju Kshetri’s lengthy review of this book praises his sacrifices very highly, but Gangabhadur’s criticisms and grievances and his attempt to resign from the party cannot be ignored, and Kshetri clearly believes that it was inappropriate for him to have written so freely about them. His gentle reprimand contains a surprising reference to God:

This book is also a story of the punishment (*sāstī*) one must receive because of setting out opinions within a communist party that are different from those of the leadership. That is his own private suffering. As a warrior of the pen I sympathize with his suffering; however, I do not agree with his turning his internal pain into a story and presenting it, and I have told him this. Many people believe that god (*paramātmā*) has made a place where the suffering of the inner mind can be kept, I think it is appropriate to put such things in his safekeeping (Kshetri 2065 v.s.).

When Tara Rai is arrested, she has been actively involved in the Maoist movement for only three months, and only as a singer in a Maoist cultural troupe, but her understanding of the Maoist cause and her dedication to it are reinforced by her close association in jail with Dharmashila Chapagain, and when she is released in the wake of the JA II of March–April 2006 she resumes her work for the Party:

After I was released from jail I dedicated myself to the Party, expecting that something would happen, it would honour me, understand my sorrow, for one thing this was my obligation. I couldn’t give it up, I had invested in the Party (Rai 2067 v.s.: 153).

However, even in jail, Rai writes of her disappointment with the Party. She is dismayed to discover that party activists have not conveyed news of her place of detention, or indeed of her subsequent hospitalization, to her family, and notes that when this is done it is done not by the Party but by “the Royal Nepal Army I called the enemy” (2067 v.s.: 121). Her final disillusionment with the Party comes in May 2007, after her release. She

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<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Manarishi Dhital, Kathmandu; 4 March 2011.

and a group of fellow activists are attacked by local villagers from whom the Maoists had borrowed money and provisions four years earlier, which they have not yet repaid. A local journalist phones the district administrator and, ironically, the Maoists are rescued by the police (2067 v.s.: 154). No senior party activists come to their aid or to enquire after their wellbeing until three days later:

I found it distasteful, I felt regret that those I thought of as alien had been sent for my security. My friends had suffered a beating, the leadership didn't care. I think it would be all right not to call me a Maoist. Some say the Maoists have ruined the country.

This discussion will now turn to look more closely at the publication and reception of Tara Rai's *Diary*, which presents a very different case from the other four memoirs considered here.

### **Tara Rai's Diary: Maoist Memoir or Reactionary Conspiracy?**

That Tara Rai's *Diary* came to be published was largely due to the efforts of the *Kāntipur* journalist Devendra Bhattarai. He had traveled to the eastern district of Ilam with Girish Giri, a journalist who worked for *Nāgarik* newspaper, to visit a friend named Ganesh Rasik. Rasik had been given the manuscript by Tara Rai some weeks earlier. He invited her to visit him while his journalist friends were there, and she walked the three hour trail from her home in Athghare. At this stage, according to Bhattarai, the book was in a diary form with dated entries, typed up by "some local person" and Rai had already read out parts of it on a program broadcast by Kanchenjunga FM. Bhattarai brought the manuscript back to Kathmandu with him and made a few changes to it before submitting it to Ratna Pustak Bhandar. He told me that he deleted a number of phrases, including references to "parasite Gyanendra," with the author's permission. He said this was because the book was going to be published by one of Nepal's oldest and most prestigious publishers, and would not be just "a book from the streets." He also divided the text into chapters and added chapter titles. However, he maintained that the author's language was good and required little further editing. After the *Diary* had been accepted for publication he returned the manuscript to its author, who added some further details about herself and her family background at his suggestion.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Personal communication with Devendra Bhattarai, Lalitpur; 29 September 2010.

1000 copies of the *Diary* were printed for its first edition. Its cover bore a close-up softly lit photograph of its author's face that Bhattarai had taken at his first meeting with her. By the time of the book launch on 31 July 2010, one month after publication, the first edition had already sold out. The first speaker at the book launch was Dharmashila Chapagain, now a UCPN-M member of the Constituent Assembly. At the launch Chapagain related the story of how she had had nothing but a cherished old petticoat to give as a gift to Tara Rai on her birthday, and broke down in tears as she spoke. Rai also wept on stage, as did many members of the audience. The launch, and the coverage it received in the Kathmandu media, ensured that the book continued to sell<sup>24</sup> and two weeks later Tara Rai had to discontinue signing copies at the National Booksellers and Publishers annual book exhibition in Kathmandu because the second edition had sold out (*Nāgarik*, 14 August 2010).<sup>25</sup>

According to Devendra Bhattarai, Nepali readers had tired of reading “one-sided stories” of the conflict. In his review of the *Diary*, Amar Giri dismissed most of the Maoist memoirs as “superficial and biased” but described the *Diary* as “largely free of these deficiencies” (Giri 2067 v.s.)<sup>26</sup> Another reviewer, Ujjwal Prasai, quoted from Arundhati Roy's article on the Indian Maoists, “Walking with the Comrades,” and clearly saw the *Diary* as a testament that was distinctive for its truthfulness (Prasai 2010: 7). However, Nepali Maoist reviewers see the success of Tara Rai's book as the product of a conspiracy hatched by the

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<sup>24</sup> On 1 August 2010, the day after the book launch, the following coverage appeared in the mainstream print media: “Diary of a Rebel” by Dikshya Karki (2010) in *Republika*; “Tārako Ḍāyarīmāthi Rūndai” [Weeping over Tara's diary] in *Kāntipur* (2010); “Chāpāmārle Ruwāye” [A guerrilla causes tears] in *Nāgarik* (2010); a photograph of Tara Rai weeping at her book launch in *The Kathmandu Post*.

<sup>25</sup> When I interviewed Dharmashila Chapagain she defended the *Diary*, and said that the party leadership “needs to be able to digest criticism.” She said that on an institutional level the security forces were the *duśman* but that without individual acts of kindness from army and police officers she and her daughter (who was in jail with her) would have died. Personal communication, Kathmandu; 11 April 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Giri's review appeared in *Budhavār*, a UML-aligned weekly newspaper, and Giri is a member of the UML's Central Disciplinary Commission, and former UML-nominated chair of the Film Development Board (personal communication with Pratyoush Onta; 4 April 2012). The UML lost a great deal of political ground to the Maoists during and after the conflict, and Giri's positive assessment of a text that he knew had been rejected by the Maoists may not be wholly devoid of political motivation.

liberal reactionaries of Kathmandu civil society to create and disseminate false history. Writing in *Janādes* one week after the widely-reported book launch, Raju Kshetri criticized the “Tara Rais” who he said had returned to their “narrow little worlds” after the end of the People’s War. Accusing Ganesh Rasik of understanding her political significance and cynically “delivering” her to the mainstream media, he alleged that it was actually Devendra Bhattarai who had written her life story, thus turning the suffering (*vedanā*) of an innocent hill girl into a commodity that could be sold in the capitalist marketplace. Kshetri went on to say that the book was an attempt by reactionaries to bring the history of the people’s struggle into disrepute, and that it was no surprise that Tara Rai had been duped by them. He believed that capitalism was exploiting the disappointment of “the Tara Rais” to launch a continuous assault upon socialism (Kshetri 2067 v.s.).<sup>27</sup> Ashok Subedi took a similar line in his review of the *Diary*, describing it as a “frightful conspiracy, hatched by a counterpolar camp (*pratidhruviya khemā*) against class struggle, Marxism, and Nepal’s People’s War” (Subedi 2067 v.s.: 88). Another reviewer alleged that the *Diary* took the side of the upper classes: the lessons it gave were that it is pointless to struggle for change, that an individual will suffer if they desert their mother and father, and that only the army is true [*sahī*] (Chamling 2067 v.s.).

In China, works that transgressed the principles enunciated by Mao at the Yan’an conference in 1942 were publicly denounced at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. For instance, *The Red Sun*, a novel by Wu Qiang, characterized CCP soldiers as courageous but criticized them for their ‘peasant mindset.’ Even worse, it showed enemy commanders to have “real emotions, a resolute spirit, and, like their opponents, a firm belief in what they thought was right” (Xiaomei Chen 2010: 68). Thus, the novel (and a film based upon it) was branded as an antiparty work “that had seriously tarnished the image of the people’s superb army while exalting the enemy of the people” (2010: 68) Like Wu Qiang, but unlike every other Nepali Maoist memoirist, Tara Rai does not dehumanize her opponents, and her memoir commits the cardinal sin of appearing to endorse human kindness as a means of transcending class conflict.

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<sup>27</sup> Similar allegations were made by Ashok Subedi in his review in *Janajvār* (Subedi 2067 v.s.). Tara Rai responded to Raju Kshetri’s allegations in an interview published in *Sāghu* on 16 August, 2010. She challenged him to sit at the same table with her, where they would both write on a topic someone else had chosen for them. Then they would judge whose composition was the better (Dhakal 2010: 5).

According to Wayne Booth, the author of any text “creates...an image of himself and another of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement” (Booth 1961: 138, quoted in Iser 1974: 30). Wolfgang Iser observes that “the manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror” (1974: 281). Booth and Iser were both writing about fiction, but much of what they say can be applied to autobiographical writings too, and it is clear from the above discussion that an avowedly Maoist reader could never find “complete agreement” with Tara Rai’s text. However, it should be noted that it is not only Maoists who feel ambivalent about Tara Rai’s *Diary*. Many left-leaning readers who agreed with the Maoists’ diagnosis of the ills of the Nepali nation state but found their remedy too radical and violent also felt ambivalent about the book. They felt that its author’s account of her ordeal was too simplistic and subjective, ignoring wider structural issues and forming judgments mainly on the basis of her interactions with particular individuals.<sup>28</sup>

Devendra Bhattarai believes that Tara Rai has become a symbol, but if he is right one must ask: a symbol of what, and for whom? I suggest that for those readers who have evaluated her book positively Tara Rai embodies and represents the conflict’s collateral damage. As a young girl, for them she represents innocence and purity: she went astray during the conflict but has since repented. When asked by an interviewer whether she thought the People’s War was wrong, she replied, “This is something for the ordinary people to say. I am not going to raise my fist and say it was right. I am not going to bang the table and say it was wrong” (Dhakal 2010: 5).

Liberal metropolitan readers see her *Diary* as a text that understands the motives of those involved on both sides and recognises their shared humanity. It demonizes neither the Maoist cadreship nor the ordinary members of the security forces, and thus offers the prospect of reconciliation between them. Readers are helped to empathize with Tara Rai by the fact that she is young and female, that her health is fragile, that she was never involved in lethal conflict, and that she was politically active for only a short period; also that she was not treated brutally in detention and that she has since left the Party. It has assessed her memoir

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<sup>28</sup> Personal communication with Aditya Adhikari, Kathmandu; 5 September 2011.

as ‘better’ or ‘more honest’ than other memoirs partly because of her expressions of doubt and the inconsistency of her political position. In this they find some reassurance: Tara provides them with an example of a redeemable Maoist as they look forward to a future in which the Maoists have put away their guns and joined the country’s political mainstream.

Critics of Tara’s book have never accused her of actually lying, which they might well have done, given the inconsistencies within her account. Instead, they deny her authorship on the one hand, while on the other objecting to what they perceive as the *intention* behind the production of her text. However it may have been written, Tara Rai’s book was not published with a Maoist readership in mind. Her memoir may well achieve a dominant position as a part of the authoritative discourse on the People’s War because its author’s voice has gained a much longer reach than those of other memoirists and has benefited from substantial media amplification. However, although Tara Rai was a Maoist for a period of time, her *Diary* will never be accepted as a Maoist memoir for three very simple reasons: it is not a testament that enshrines a Maoist-approved version of history; it is not a manifesto for a revolutionary future; and the only warning it conveys is one about the threat posed to the revolution by liberal metropolitan readings of the past.

## Conclusion

All narrators of autobiographical stories claim, either implicitly or explicitly, that their experiences are authoritative. But an autobiographical text may often be read and assessed ‘for what it does, not what it is’ (Smith and Watson 2010[2001]: 19). Rather than being simply the story of an individual life or segment of life, an autobiographical text may often “encode or reinforce particular values in ways that may shape culture and history” (Smith and Watson 2010[2001]: 19). Remembering and the relating of memory to others has a politics. After a conflict ends there are inevitable struggles over *who* is authorized to remember and *what* they are authorized to remember. The recording and retelling of past events amounts to nothing less than the creation of history; hence the sharp division of opinion over the authenticity and political intention of Tara Rai’s *Diary*.

Although it is not gathered together in the same physical space, the Maoist readership that is imagined by Maoist critics and ideologists has some of the characteristics of a crowd, as defined by Richard Butsch (2008): the same homogeneity of mind, the same monopoly on membership, the same preference for forcible action over reasoned

agreement. It exists in distinction from a “public,” which can retain differences of opinion and constitutes “a society of equals where various parties can reason with each other and achieve a consensus or settlement without result to force” (Butsch 2008: 15). I think it should be clear from my discussion of these texts that four of the five memoirs considered here have at their core the key ideological elements of the classic Maoist memoir, as identified by Paudel: “boundless faith in the revolution, harsh hatred for the enemy class, and sympathy for the labouring people” (2067 v.s.: 673). One (Tara Rai’s) does not: the “boundless faith” with which it commences is heavily compromised by its end; it expresses feelings of tenderness towards members of the “enemy class” from time to time; and its “sympathy for the laboring people” is blunted when those very people turn on its author after her release from jail.

However, it is equally clear that none of these memoirs is entirely the work of a party automaton writing to a prescribed formula, because each displays some measure of individuation. For instance, although Shobha Kattel routinely refers to the army as *śāhī jallādhārū*, ‘Royal executioners,’ she is also able to take a more nuanced view. She records instances of minor kindness and one of active assistance from soldiers, and draws a clear distinction between the ordinary soldiers and the officer class (Kattel 2068 v.s.: 71). This and other instances of Maoist memoirists adopting perspectives that deviate from the approved norm suggest that the intended readership for this literature retains more of the characteristics of a “public” than is assumed in Maoist critical discourse. Some distance exists between the narrow circle of Maoist ideologues and the authors of these texts, who offer their readers some affirmation of their common non-ideological humanity, even as they exert themselves to establish the historic meaning of a period of violent class war.

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