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IN HOPE AND IN FEAR
Living Through the People's War in Nepal

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CHAPTER 11

Negotiating Nepal's Two Polities: A View from Dolakha

Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin

Coming Down the Mao-ntain

In the summer of 2003, we returned to Nepal overland from the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China. While in the TAR, we were impressed by the long reach and resources of the Chinese state. Having benefited from affordable broadband internet and other modern amenities in the Chinese border town of Zhangmu, thousands of kilometres away from Beijing, we crossed the Friendship Bridge into the Nepali border town of Kodari—not more than 200 kilometres' drive from Kathmandu—to find a desolate outpost. Corrupt immigration officials, a transport strike and potholed roads, not to mention the absence of a phone line (thanks to a Maoist attack on the transmitter pylon), reminded us that Nepal was in a state of crisis. From interviews we conducted with businesspeople at the border, it was clear how much the relative affluence and security of the two countries had shifted over time. Less than twenty years before, entrepreneurs and well-heeled tourists from China would cross into Nepal to avail themselves of imported goods and interact with global modernity. Now, middle-class Nepali residents of Kodari had Chinese-made mobile phones with Chinese SIM-cards in their pockets.

That evening, we walked towards our village home in Dolakha district, only a few kilometres from the Chinese border as the crow flies. To celebrate our homecoming, we stopped at a local watering hole and ordered a round of homebrewed spirits for ourselves and our Nepali walking companions. In a hushed voice, the innkeeper flatly stated that she could not serve us

alcohol, and shot her eyes towards a darkened corner of the lodge. A group of young men were conspicuously drinking black tea, clustered around a tall, bespectacled character in his early '30s. We had chanced upon Navin, the area commander of the political wing of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). After our initial trepidation at this unplanned encounter, and Navin's equally obvious discomfort at having been discovered by two foreigners in a tea shop, we thought to make the best of our first meeting with a high-ranking local Maoist leader.

We had been living and working in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts for the last seven years, conducting anthropological and linguistic research with the Thangmi, an impoverished ethnic group dominant in the area.¹ In a previous article (Shneiderman and Turin 2004) we documented in detail how the Maoist movement took root in this area in the late 1990s and the local responses to the campaign. We argued that Maoist ideology could be attractive to rural Nepalis who had suffered exploitation and deprivation at the hands of the state. Perhaps most importantly, we aimed to show that villagers were not unwitting victims of an external ideology that was beyond them, but active participants in a transformative political movement which had meaningful local resonance. In that article, we suggested that at least in Dolakha, many villagers were willing to give the Maoists a chance as a legitimate political alternative after overcoming their initial fears. In this chapter, we document the next phase of the insurgents' confrontation with the state, during which villagers learned to live in between the two competing armed forces. Local farmers had to keep up relations with a slow-moving, over-centralised failing democracy full of promise but short on delivery, while simultaneously having to put ever more effort into staying on the right side of a radical leftist regime, marketed as a grassroots answer to people's economic and social woes, but unproven and frequently violent.

We too found ourselves occupying an uneasy middle ground, where we faced the challenge of maintaining workable relationships with both sides.² Over time, it appeared that our presence in the area was not threatening to the Maoist agenda. While foreign-funded development organisations and outside business interests had been forced to leave Dolakha, after exchanging a series of hand-carried messages with the Maoist leadership we had been assured (at least temporarily) that we could continue our research work. Despite this written agreement, and being acquainted with a handful of low-ranking Maoist cadres from the surrounding villages, we had not met any Maoist leaders until we happened upon Navin that evening.

Navin invited us to join him for a cup of tea and a chat. It turned out to be a largely one-sided conversation, with him extolling the virtues of

Prachandapath and its applicability to the poor citizens of Dolakha. Our meeting took place in the dying days of the August 2003 second ceasefire between the Maoists and the state, and Navin made it clear that his military counterparts were already preparing to resume full-scale operations. Having questioned us about our commitment to democracy as a form of governance, which he derided, Navin asked us to confirm our nationalities. There was no point pretending, as it was apparent that he knew full well that we were American and British respectively. He then launched into a tirade against the imperialism of our countries, and warned us that while he could be personally counted upon to distinguish between citizens of a country and their governments, he could not vouch for others in his movement. We would always be under suspicion as spies due to the accident of our nationalities, Navin continued, but if we stayed out of politics and remained well-liked by the local community, we could continue to reside in the village we had come to think of as home.

Emboldened by his openness and willingness to talk, we explained that we had just returned from the Tibetan region of China, where Chairman Mao had been conspicuously absent from public displays and discourse. Aside from an old, cracked flower vase bearing Mao's face being hawked outside of the Potala Palace in central Lhasa, we saw no evidence that we were travelling in what had been an important testing ground for the philosophy that Navin and his comrades espoused. What did he think of China today, we asked. "Well," said Navin, dismissively shrugging his shoulders, "China has obviously gone the wrong way. They missed a great opportunity. We certainly won't make the same mistakes." Our question had obviously pleased him, and led to a protracted monologue in which he used his now empty tea glass as a metaphor to illustrate a wide range of ideological points. Suddenly, with a flash of the two revolvers hidden under a leather jacket too heavy for the weather, he and his colleagues jumped up and set off into the dusk without engaging in any of the typical Nepali farewell formalities which we all knew so well.

Almost two years later, we learned that Navin had surrendered to the army along with many of his colleagues after the April 2005 Maoist attack on the district headquarters at Charikot. Since we have not had the opportunity to remeet him, we do not know what motivated such an apparently committed cadre to give up, but exhaustion and internal squabbles within the area leadership may have been contributing factors. In exchange for working as a cook in the army barracks and an extensive debriefing, he had been offered amnesty by the security forces. His fall from grace mirrored

the increasing distaste felt by villagers for what had become a long-drawn out war with apparently little immediate hope of resolution. Despite their continued enthusiasm for certain aspects of Maoist ideology, many villagers were by 2005 rapidly losing confidence that the Maoists would deliver on their promises.

In this account, we offer a series of structured vignettes taken from our own experiences and those of many close village friends, of interactions with the Maoists and state security forces over the last five years. The individuals we profile are those we happened to encounter through our own existing relationships in a particular corner of Nepal, and show a range of possible perspectives, but are not necessarily representative of the situation throughout the country. What becomes clear from these anecdotes is that Dolakha's villagers were constantly negotiating between two competing forces—the aspirational ideologies of angry radicals and a repressive and untamed state—and in many cases made the decision to join one of the two for periods of time.³ While most rural citizens remained unaligned with either side, they had nonetheless become ever more discerning in their day-to-day engagement with politics, and conscious of the ramifications of their words and actions in the larger strategic battles for control of the countryside which had become part of their daily lives.

Meeting the Maoists

In our previous work on the rise of the Maoists in Dolakha, we outlined the uncertainty and anxiety with which villagers first looked upon these unknown revolutionaries. From 2001 onwards, the presence of Maoists throughout the region became far more commonplace and the aura of mystique which had first 'wowed' some locals gave way to a more cynical view of the Maoists as opportunistic political actors capitalising on existing local tensions. Over this period, as the party's recruitment drive started in earnest, the Maoists completed their transition from unknown outsiders to insiders embedded in the complicit webs of village rivalries. Although Anne de Sales (2000 and see also Chapter 5 in this volume) had already documented similar intrigue among the Kham Magar community of Rukum and Rolpa where the Maoists had a much longer history, such dynamics had not yet emerged in Dolakha at the time of our previous article.⁴ We suggested at that time that the variations between our observations and those made by de Sales were likely due to the different time-scale of Maoist involvement in each area, and we predicted that the Maoists of Dolakha

might well take the path of their comrades in western Nepal as they became more established in the region. In many ways, this hypothesis has been borne out, as the following episode illustrates.

One of the most fervent recent converts to the Maoist cause was Gopal Bahadur, the 35-year old brother of a close friend of ours.⁵ We choose the word 'convert' carefully, since Gopal Bahadur had previously embraced Christianity and approached Maoist philosophy in much the same way that he had earlier evangelised the gospel. There was, he explained, a clear convergence between Maoist and Christian ideologies: both recognized that all people were equal and that the poor had the power to transform the world's injustices. In Nepali, he repeatedly emphasized the phrase: "the meek shall inherit the earth", although he was unsure whether this was of Christian or Maoist provenance. Even before his short-lived affair with Christianity, Gopal Bahadur had shown a predilection for experimenting with various belief systems and their associated forms of power: he had been one of the village's most impressive self-taught shamans. Due to his flirtations with various world-views, and as many women, he had become the object of some ridicule in the community. He openly told us that he had joined the Maoists in the belief that doing so would help him regain some of the status he had lost, and in particular to settle an outstanding land dispute.

Gopal Bahadur was in danger of losing a corner of his farmland to a popular local shopkeeper who claimed it as his own. The shopkeeper had mobilised considerable village support, and apparently thought that he had no chance of losing when he filed a suit against Gopal Bahadur in the district court. But the shopkeeper had not taken into account that the case might be referred to the Maoists. After the court suit was filed, Gopal Bahadur finally went through with the move that he had long considered, and made a public show of leaving home to seek out the rebels in their jungle camp some hours' walk away. The next day, the Maoists affixed a poster at the village tea shop, proclaiming that they were bringing a case against the shopkeeper, thus taking the side of their new recruit. Many villagers were shocked by the speed with which the Maoists had taken up Gopal Bahadur's cause, transforming a non-political land dispute between two neighbours into a political *cause célèbre* overnight. Soon after the Maoist poster appeared, the shopkeeper withdrew his official suit—apparently out of fear of being targeted as 'a class enemy'—but he then ratcheted up his informal harassment of Gopal Bahadur's extended family.

Gopal Bahadur was pleased with the results of his efforts, and became more convinced than ever that the Maoists were truly devoted to the cause

of the oppressed poor like himself. He told us that he had joined the CPN (M)'s political wing as a travelling 'evangelist' for the Maoist cause, and received a monthly stipend for his work 'convincing' (he used the English word) Thangmi villagers throughout the region to support the revolution. More importantly, his wife and two children were now provided for entirely by the Maoist 'welfare state'. Gopal Bahadur showed us his family's new clothes and sacks of rice in storage, which amounted to far more than most village farmers could ever hope to stockpile at one time. When we asked whether all Maoist cadres received the same treatment, he responded with pride that all resources were allocated according to need. Each cadre was required to make a public disclosure of his or her own personal assets upon joining the movement, and those who had some means not only received no hand-outs, but even had to make a contribution in cash or kind to support the indigent members of their unit. In this manner, the poorest of the lot, like Gopal Bahadur, received cash as needed. In the Maoist camp itself, however, everyone was treated as an equal, and as Gopal Bahadur announced with pride, "If there are 50 people and only 50 lentils in the *daal*, each person will receive only one lentil." At the time of writing, Gopal Bahadur was still an active Maoist in the field.

Not all recruits from the village were so impressed with life 'under the red flag'. Sudip had joined the cause in early 2001, and had participated in the watershed Maoist attack on Salleri in the neighbouring district of Solu-Khumbu later that year. Unlike Gopal Bahadur, Sudip had little ideological reason for joining the Maoists. Rather, at 19, he was an unemployed, over-educated youth with few prospects for success in the village, and all too aware of the 'glass ceiling' for rural Nepalis from minority ethnic groups like himself. Sudip joined the Maoists along with a group of friends from school, seeking adventure and the vague promise of future opportunities in a more equal Nepal. He was at first taken in by the promised power of the gun, but after a few years under the thumb of leaders who were mostly from high-caste groups, he began to realize that his own status within the organization was unlikely to advance any time soon. With that, he started to question whether the political structure of the CPN (M) was any different from that of mainstream society in caste-constrained Nepal.

After seeing many of his friends killed or injured during the two years he spent as a fighter, Sudip was despondent about the prospects for real change under Maoist leadership when we interviewed him in Kathmandu in the summer of 2003. At that time, he had just left the Maoists and was in hiding in the city, fearing repercussions from their ranks. While he had many

reasons for leaving, the straw that finally broke this fighter's back was the sheer monotony and exhaustion of life as a Maoist militiaman. Shaking his head with frustration, Sudip concluded, "They just don't give us any holidays. It's all fine and good fighting for the people's war, but every now and then they should let you go home to see your family. They're no better than any other employer, and the work is far more dangerous." Somewhat ironically, Sudip ended up working in Kathmandu as a construction worker renovating one of the city's major army barracks. He said that he wasn't concerned about being discovered by the army—there was no way they could know about his past—but was more afraid of being hunted down by the Maoists. He had chosen the unexpected hideout of a military camp precisely because his former comrades were unlikely to look for him there.

As the Maoists became an established political force in the region, respected members of civil society in Dolakha's bazaar towns began to act as conduits for information between the two parties involved in the conflict. Businessmen, journalists, school-teachers and development workers had pre-existing relationships with the political elites, bureaucrats and security forces in the towns of Dolakha and Charikot. Through their professional engagements in rural areas, however, they had also come into contact with the Maoists and many were left-leaning enough in their own politics to take the revolutionaries seriously as a political force. The Maoist leadership outside the area would relay messages to their cadres through such middlemen, in exchange for which the cadres would forewarn these members of civil society of impending attacks and political activities. In an ironic twist that called into question the Maoist's public disavowal of Hindu religious observances, several commanders used such civilian middlemen to deliver cash 'bonuses' to their cadres during Dasain. Perhaps Sudip might have stayed on with the Maoists had he been lucky enough to be in such a unit.

One of the Maoist leaders using the services of such townsfolk was Asmita, a high-ranking woman in the CPN (M)'s political wing, who was well-respected by many villagers. She was the sister of Rit Bahadur Khadka, a charismatic Robin Hood-like figure who had been area commander of Dolakha and the surrounding regions from the beginning of the movement until he was killed in an encounter with the army in 2001. We tried several times to meet her, carrying on a lengthy correspondence via intermediaries in order to arrange a rendezvous. Asmita sought us out as much as we her: we were interested in interviewing her as a senior female Maoist leader who had a dynasty-like family connection to the politics of the region, while she appeared interested in meeting with us in order to gauge our

level of involvement with the community with whom we worked, and perhaps to assess our understanding of Maoist ideology.

Circumstances dictated that we never met: just before our long-awaited meeting was scheduled to take place in June 2005, the Maoists bombed a passenger bus in Madi, Chitwan. In the tense period that followed, we reconsidered our trip to Dolakha after receiving the message that while Asmita was still willing to meet us, Maoist cadres could no longer guarantee our safety in the areas they controlled, particularly since one of us was American. We were impressed that they had made the effort to inform us of the potential risk, implying that they were eager to keep up good relations. We later learned that Asmita took a temporary leave of absence from her position in order to give birth, during which she remained underground.

Her successor as area commander was a man who had never worked in the Dolakha area before, and was not aware of our intermittent presence there until Gopal Bahadur brought up the topic in one of their meetings at the Maoist 'office' in the jungle. The new commander was at first irritated that there were foreigners in the area whose presence he had not personally approved. But when Gopal Bahadur mentioned our contact with Asmita, the new commander checked the office paperwork to find our visiting cards and earlier messages all neatly filed, with a note in Asmita's hand: "Granted permission to stay".

Meeting the State

The village in which we spent most of our time lay along an unspoken fault line between the influence of a slowly retreating state and the long tentacles of an expanding Maoist *jansarkar* (people's government). Unlike settlements further in the interior, up to four days walk from the district towns of Dolakha and Charikot and firmly under Maoist administrative control, the hamlet in which we resided was only a 90-minute walk from the roadhead. Villagers continued to make daily trips to the market towns to make phone calls, collect supplies and seek work, even as the influence of the national government in their settlement receded. By 2003, schools were only intermittently open, postal services were suspended until further notice and the VDC (village development committee) office was locked up. It was in precisely such borderline areas that the state and the Maoist forces battled for operational and ideological control.

The agricultural road which wound through the village on its way to Singati bazaar became a key site in the ongoing contest for dominance.

Built in 1998 by foreign donors with local labour, the road was a mixed success in terms of usage and economic improvement. The donors could never have predicted that the road would become such a politicised artery, crucial to the logistical campaigns of both parties in the conflict. While the army streamed out of their Charikot barracks on daytime patrols along the road, the Maoists trod the same path by night. Villagers who lived near the road had a good vantage point for observing both types of patrol, and found it difficult to tell them apart.

Both forces usually travelled in civil dress and demanded services from the local population. The army were known to dissemble, disguising themselves as Maoists in order to flush out insurgent sympathisers. Local friends told us that they were often challenged in this manner. One time, three village men sitting at a tea shop on the agricultural road were approached by a group dressed as Maoists, who asked whether they had seen army patrols come by recently. Eager to preserve their neutrality, the villagers answered that they had seen nothing. Then the 'Maoists' asked them to join their campaign, promising a life full of excitement living in caves and eating wild food. The villagers said no thank you, and then the 'Maoists' changed their attitude: no longer friendly comrades, they became aggressive and started jabbing one of the village men, who was growing a beard, with the butts of their guns. "Who do you think you are, Baburam [Bhattarai]?" they sneered. At that point, the three villagers began to suspect that these 'Maoists' were not what they seemed, and when a full army squad came up the road just minutes after the 'Maoists' took leave, their suspicion that they had in fact been interviewed by an undercover army patrol was confirmed.

We too had a similar run-in with the army. On our return to the village from Dolakha bazaar, having spent the day observing Dasain festivities there in October 2005, instead of using the main road we chose to take an older route that wound through the jungle. Enjoying the shaded, leafy path that crossed several streams, we were taken aback when we saw five young T-shirted men approaching us with rifles slung over their shoulders. We and our local companions were sure that we had encountered the Maoists. The young men looked very confused as they neared us; perhaps they had no idea how to deal with two foreigners on this largely unused path. To our surprise they walked straight on, without speaking a word.

After they had passed, we sat down for a moment, and then heard the sound of a large group approaching. We steeled ourselves for the next encounter with the rebels, but to our surprise instead found ourselves facing

a platoon of about sixty uniformed Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) men. It appeared that they had sent an advance guard disguised as Maoists in order to intercept any insurgents or sympathisers they might meet along the way. The soldiers surrounded us and waited for their commanding officer, who was bringing up the rear. When he finally arrived, he had already been radioed about our presence, and had prepared a volley of questions to ask us. In crude English, he asked how we had come to be there, how long we intended to stay and who our local contacts were. We responded in Nepali, which seemed to perplex him further, and explained that we were making a short visit from Kathmandu for Dasain. He asked who we were staying with and for how long, and when we responded that we would only be there for another two days he seemed relieved. The officer gathered his troops together and prepared to continue on his way, and then turned back to issue us an ominous warning, "Be careful" he said, "You never know who you might meet out here." Shortly after our departure, we learned that the army had launched a major search operation for Maoists in the region, during which several of our local friends had been harassed.

The RNA is but one arm of the state deployed in regions such as Dolakha. Both the Nepal Police and the more infamous Armed Police Force (APF) are also present, particularly in the bazaar towns. Before the formation of the unified command in November 2003, which for all practical purposes put the two police forces under RNA tactical control, the police were the more visible agents of the state. On one of our trips to Dolakha bazaar, we narrowly avoided being knocked to the ground by a speeding pickup truck full of policemen hanging out of the back with rifles trained on the ground, wearing bandanas and smoking cigarettes like gangsters out of a Bollywood film. The sheer wildness of their presence concerned the residents of the market town, who ran for cover when they saw the truck careening towards them.

The lawlessness and nervousness of local police was clearer still during one of the important public Dasain rituals of 2000, when a young officer accidentally discharged a shot into the festival-going crowd. Luckily the bullet only grazed a man's foot, but his anger and pain was all too apparent when he shouted at the policeman for an explanation. With a sneer, the police cadet responded "Don't give me trouble, old man, or else I won't be there to protect you when the Maoists come." The crowd retreated, but the policeman's behaviour only served to lower the status of the security forces in the eyes of the local population. In terms of hearts and minds, then, the unified command has done very little to win the trust of civilians. Many continue to make a distinction between the seemingly random violence

perpetrated by the army and police, versus the ideologically consistent and relatively predictable, if no less brutal, violence of the Maoists.

The consequences of conflict

On the night of April 10, 2005, a large group of armed Maoists attacked Charikot, the district headquarters of Dolakha. The Maoists killed two members of the security forces, burned many major government buildings to the ground, and freed more than thirty prisoners from the district jail. In this section, we focus on notable points of the attack and its aftermath from the perspective of local villagers.

In keeping with the unspoken agreement between the Maoists and Charikot middle classes described above, a number of journalists, businessmen and teachers had been warned of the imminent attack and had left town with their families the day before. Part of the Maoist attack strategy was to call in a number of favours with town-dwellers, such as commandeering the ambulance from Dolakha's Gauri Shankar Hospital, along with several buses belonging to Rolwaling Yatayat, the local transport association. The Maoists were 'bussed in' along the agricultural road that passes through the settlements in which we worked, giving villagers advance warning of what was to come. Locals were therefore unsurprised when they heard a gun battle erupting over the ridge in Charikot as the Maoists ambushed the town. Later that night, as helicopters circled overhead, throwing their spotlights on village homes, several wounded Maoists were transported back along the same road in the commandeered buses with dimmed headlights to avoid detection. Villagers were reluctant to leave their homes the next morning, for fear of meeting army patrols out searching for stranded Maoists.

By the middle of the day following the attack, villagers were venturing out to their fields to work. Soon afterwards, several people noticed smoke rising from the community forest high above the settlements from which they routinely collected firewood and fodder. Calling upon the existing community forest patrol system, the villagers roused an emergency patrol to investigate what appeared to be widespread fires. When the patrol reached the burning area, while there was no one to be seen, there was evidence that the fires were man-made. They worked the rest of the day to douse the flames in order to save their precious fodder and firewood resources. On the second day after the attack, villagers woke to see fires burning once again on the high ridge that separated them from Charikot.

Increasingly upset, the patrol went out again, and this time encountered a group of masked men in army fatigues. They shouted rudely at the villagers, telling them not to meddle by putting out the fires again. The villagers suspected that the masked men were from the army, and that they were setting the fires in order to quite literally smoke out any remaining Maoists, and perhaps also to teach the villagers a lesson for permitting the Maoists to travel through the area unchallenged. After this encounter, fires continued to burn for several days. The community forest group held an emergency meeting, but decided that it was simply too dangerous to try extinguishing the fires, and too risky to lodge a formal complaint against the army. Over the coming week, they watched helplessly as forest areas worth approximately 500,000 rupees burned to the ground.

Aside from such damaging economic consequences of the conflict for the local community, social and cultural life was also being affected by the ongoing confrontation. Major Thangmi life cycle rituals normally draw large crowds and usually occur at night, which in the tense conflict environment attracted unwanted attention from the security forces. Villagers told us of at least two occasions when wedding festivities were abruptly halted as the revellers realised that they had been surrounded by armed security forces who had mistaken their large midnight party for a Maoist meeting. On one of these occasions, despite the crowd's attempts to identify themselves as nothing more than wedding celebrants, a number of young men were badly beaten and the wedding ended on a sour note. For several months afterwards, villagers were reluctant to organize weddings or other large rites, and people bemoaned the fact that cultural life had to be indefinitely suspended on account of the conflict.

The problem was compounded after the royal power grab of February 1, 2005, when an ordinance was promulgated stating that villagers needed to apply for advance permission from the Chief District Officer (CDO) for all gatherings of more than 20 people. A group of incredulous villagers went to the CDO's office to ask whether this regulation also applied to personal events such as weddings and funerals, and were told that it did. In this way, the spontaneity of traditional social life was challenged, and people began to explore ways of reorganising their rituals to comply with the new regulations.

Over the last few years, then, villagers in Dolakha have had to become skilled at negotiating multiple powers and publicly reiterating their neutrality in the face of polarised ideological and military forces. This state of affairs resonates with the situation Pettigrew (2004 and also in Chapter 7 of this volume) has described elsewhere in Nepal, and it is likely that villagers all

over Nepal face similar challenges. As the above vignettes illustrate, Dolakha's citizens were being asked to declare where they stood: by the Maoists, by the security forces and even by their own neighbours. Fear of spies and a general climate of mistrust meant that newcomers to the area were treated with suspicion, and people were very wary of declaring their political allegiances to anyone outside of their immediate family. Individuals who took an overt political stance in one direction or another risked strong repercussions against their extended kin networks.

One young man whom we knew well, desperate to become financially independent from his family in order to support his wife and young child, chose the employment of last resort when he answered the recruitment call of the armed police. Several family members followed him to Kathmandu with the intention of talking him down; and under intense family pressure he left the police academy after two days. It was our understanding that his choice to join the police force was financially motivated and had no ideological underpinning. His family so urgently wanted him to desist because, in the politicised and polarised village environment, his move would make them a target for Maoist retribution.

Future prospects

At the time of writing in spring 2006, pro-democracy protests across Nepal had just compelled King Gyanendra to end his autocratic rule which began in February 2005, and return power to the political parties. While the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) of the major political parties had earlier reached a 12-point agreement with the CPN (M), it remained to be seen how this agreement would be implemented in practice as the SPA resumes the responsibilities of governance.

How will the recent political changes affect villagers in Dolakha? Early signs were mixed. After the initial announcement of the 12-point agreement in November 2005, villagers came under increasing Maoist pressure, while much of Kathmandu celebrated. Rather than viewing the agreement as marking the Maoist re-entry into mainstream party politics—as it was hailed by many urban observers—village-level Maoist cadres took it as evidence that the parties approved of their methods, and were further emboldened in their interactions with villagers. The Maoists openly joined mass rallies organised by the SPA in Charikot in late 2005 and early 2006, leading locals to jokingly rename the agitating group the Eight Party Alliance. Maoist cadres demanded that each village family send one person to participate in the rallies, apparently in the belief that large turnouts would advance their

republican cause more quickly. The Maoists insisted that there was no longer any danger in complying with their demands, since the mainstream parties had now joined the Maoist cause. Many villagers disagreed, feeling that any overt political activity put them at risk of reprisals from state forces, but those who failed to follow Maoist orders faced severe harassment from the rebel side. In some ways, the 12-point agreement opened previously closed spaces for political expression and provided a long-awaited source of hope, but it also compelled villagers to make a new set of compromises to stay afloat in constantly shifting political waters.

This ambiguity also highlighted the potential for disagreement between the Maoist leadership and their local cadres in implementing the terms of any future peace settlement. Although the Maoist leadership have now chosen to re-enter mainstream politics to join an interim government and constituent assembly, they will need to address the concerns of the thousands of young men and women who have been radicalised and armed over the past decade, many of whom remain ideologically committed to achieving a genuine Maoist republic. At the practical level, the process of decommissioning arms and finding alternative employment for individuals like Gopal Bahadur and Sudip, who at least for a time found a modicum of economic stability and a personal *raison d'être* in the Maoist movement, will continue to require careful consideration.

Regardless of how the complex riddle of Nepal's political future is solved, the political consciousness of many rural Nepalis has been irrevocably heightened. As the narratives presented here have shown, essential aspects of social life such as ritual practice, economics and kin networks have been altered in dramatic ways, and are unlikely to return to pre-conflict patterns once the dust settles.

REFERENCES

1. While the Nepali designation for this ethnic group is 'Thami', the Thangmi themselves reject this non-native term in favour of the indigenous ethnonym Thangmi. We therefore use the term 'Thangmi' in our writings.
2. For further details on this process of negotiation, see Shneiderman's account in Pettigrew, Shneiderman and Harper (2004).
3. Pettigrew has identified a similar dynamic elsewhere in Nepal (2004).
4. The material we presented in Shneiderman and Turin (2004) was based on fieldwork conducted between 1998-2001.
5. All personal names have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality, except in the case of Maoist leaders, where we use their assumed *noms de guerre* since these are already in the public domain.