

# Jana Andolan

## *The People's Movement in Nepal*

By Fritz Tucker



### Post-War Kathmandu

Every day, hundreds of European, American, Australian, and Israeli tourists walk the streets of Thamel, downtown Kathmandu. Nearby is the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, the Nepali Royal Palace that was converted into a museum after the Nepali People's Movement of 2006 (in Nepalese, *Jana Andolan II*). Most of these tourists are unaware that the crowded, winding streets of Thamel were much more crowded in April 2006—filled, in fact, with millions of stone and torch-wielding Nepalis battling and defeating the automatic-rifle bearing Royal Nepal Army. With the Maoist and Royal armies confined to their barracks, Parliament's blue-shirted police patrol the streets of Kathmandu, the village outposts, and the Indian borders.

Most of the urban rebels, party-affiliated or not, have gone back to their full-time jobs. Many of them work in one of Nepal's largest industries, tourism. This is why a tourist doesn't have to walk half a block to purchase a bicycle-rickshaw ride, tiger balm, hashish, a prostitute, or a trekking expedition. These victorious urban rebels are trekking guides, waiters, hotel and hostel employees, doctors, teachers, and now government employees. Nepal's urban workers are unionizing rapidly, usually in affiliation with a political party, usually the Maoists.

Some Western tourists know this. In fact, it is why they have come to Nepal—to meet the Maoists. These comrades are whisked out of Kathmandu by the Maoist trekking companies and taken to the countryside, to Rolpa and Rukkum, the main Maoist base-area during their 13-year rural guerrilla war against Nepal's monarchy. This tradition of Western comrades visiting the Maoist-controlled countryside is so prevalent that the Maoists have recently opened their official Guerrilla Trek in order to “capitalize on the memory of the war,” according to Prachanda, Chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).<sup>1</sup> Given that the trauma of war is all too real for the ordinary Nepali—who also doesn't hire trekking agencies to go hiking—it is obvious that what Prachanda means is to “capitalize on Western fantasies of the war.”

One of the greatest fantasies propagated by the Maoists is that *Jana Andolan II* was not as important as the 1996–2006 Maoist People's War in the overthrow of the Nepali Shah dynasty. Not to be outdone, the non-Maoist political parties propagate fictions in which *Jana Andolan II* was just as antiwar, and therefore anti-Maoist, as it was anti-monarchy. My goal is to help detail the dynamic between the people of Nepal—urbanites, villagers, political parties, armies, monarchies, classes, castes—and both their geographical and political neighbors, India and China, and the United Kingdom and the United States. Using historical documents, as well as conversations I had during the three months I lived in Nepal in 2008 and 2009, I will show why, without one another, neither the rural Maoist insurgency nor the urban Nepali People's Movement would likely have overthrown the Nepali Shah Dynasty—the last Hindu monarchy in the world.

## **The Land**

North of India's Ganges River lies some of the world's most fertile land. These plains (the *Terai* in Nepalese) are the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, and home to cities

like Varanasi, considered to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.<sup>2</sup> North of the Indo-Nepali *Terai* lie the Himalayas, disabling practically all human transportation to Tibet and China from South Asia.\*



The Himalayas have three distinct climates, which come in three colors—green, black and white. White Mountains, such as Mount Everest (*Sagarmatha* in Nepalese), are covered in a glacier system that provides fresh water to over 1.3 billion people from Kazakhstan to Vietnam and Beijing.<sup>3</sup> The Black Mountains are low enough to be glacier-free, but are too high for vegetation. According to Krishna, my guide in Gorkha, three of the only things that can survive in the Black Mountains are a black fungus that lives on the rocks, yaks that live on the black fungus, and Sherpas that live off yak milk and meat, and boiled black fungus.

The Green Mountains, covered in subtropical forests, are verdant year round. On the entire Indian subcontinent, there is only one valley deep in the Green Mountains that is sizable enough to sustain a modern city; this is Kathmandu, with an area smaller than New York City. The Kathmandu Valley was an important outpost in the Sino-Indian silk and spice trade, and sits across the Himalayas from Lhasa, the holy city of Tibetan Buddhism. The Valley's relative flatness makes it one of the few places in Nepal suitable for farming. Much of Kathmandu, however, still requires backbreaking human and animal labor to create the beautiful terraced farms that resemble staircases in profile, and crop circles from an alien's eye view.

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\* Map of Nepal accessed in November 2012 from <http://www.discoverasia.com.au>.



Nepal's entire Green Mountain range is dotted with villages that carve terrace farms into whatever mountainside they can.\* The Green Mountains are unsuitable for tractors, leaving farmers completely dependent on large mammals. Cows, however, are used almost exclusively for milk; South Asians are generally careful to not abuse the animals they consume. I heard, while in Kathmandu, that the Nepal's Hindu Kings had outlawed using cows to plough farms in the Valley. Buffalo had taken over plowing duties, and were rarely used for milk.

Nepal's shortage of valleys makes it impossible for urban sprawl to occur. Regular earthquakes thwart upward expansion. As a result, Nepal remains one of the least urban nations on the planet, behind only Bhutan and Timor-Leste in Asia.<sup>4</sup> Nepal's sparse roads and electricity leave the average Nepali with little access to the capital, Kathmandu. The difficulty of traveling to Kathmandu—a multi-day trip for many—and the inability to communicate directly with those in Kathmandu makes it impractical for Nepalis to hold their government accountable. These same conditions, however, also make it difficult for the state to control rural uprisings. Even as Nepal's army modernizes—with airplanes and helicopters provided by India, Britain, and the United States—the most rudimentary guerilla force can stay alive in Nepal's rugged, evergreen terrain as long as they enjoy a certain degree of support from the locals.<sup>5</sup>

## The Shahs

Nepal's social dynamic has been dominated for over a thousand years by the caste system. Castes (known in Hindi as *jatis*, and in the West as clans) are extended families living in

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\* Picture on left accessed in November 2012 from <http://www.photoanswers.co.uk>. Picture on right accessed in November 2012 <http://www.nepembassy.org.uk>.

segregated villages. The caste system mandates marriage within one's caste, limited use of water touched by people outside one's caste, and strict hierarchies between castes, and between members of the same caste, regarding gender, age, and occupation. Warrior castes (known in Hindi as *kshatriyas*) battled one another for territory, levied taxes on the people in their territories, and subdued the occasional popular rebellion. Religious, and intellectual elites (known in Hindi as *brahmins*) dominated popular culture, monopolized literacy, and collected tithes. Most castes engaged in manual labor and paid the taxes and tithes.

Until 1768, the Kathmandu Valley was divided into three warring city-states.<sup>6</sup> The Shahs—a warrior caste from Gorkha, a region one hundred miles west of Kathmandu—crossed Nepal's Green Mountains, expanding their empire wherever they went. In 1768, the Shahs entered Kathmandu, conquering and uniting the three city-states under King Prithvi Narayan Shah. They made their capital in Kathmandu, but went on to conquer everything east to Darjeeling—now part of the Indian state of West Bengal—then moved south into the *Terai*.<sup>7</sup>

In 1792 the Shahs went north, crossing the White Mountains into Tibet, where they finally met their match. They were defeated by China, whose army drove the Shahs back across the Himalayas, but stopped short of invading Kathmandu. Rather than having their capital occupied, sacked, or burnt, the Shahs agreed to pay tribute to China.<sup>8</sup> In 1814, the Shahs were again defeated, this time by the new imperial power in South Asia, the British. Like China's, Britain's military did not invade Kathmandu. The 1814 terms of peace with Britain define Nepal's contemporary borders with India, leaving Nepal with very little of the *Terai*, forcing Nepal to depend almost completely on terrace farming in the Green Mountains.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Nepal remained independent of the British, who incorporated everything else in the region—besides Bhutan—into their Indian, Afghani, and Burmese colonies.

In 1846, the Shahs were deposed in a palace massacre by another Gurkhali warrior caste—their Prime Ministers, the Ranas.<sup>10</sup> Like the shoguns of Japan, the Ranas kept the royal family alive and under house arrest in the palace, allowing each King to produce just one son, who was kept in uneducated ignorance.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, the Rana coup shifted Nepal's imperial alignment toward British India, ending Nepal's tribute to China.<sup>12</sup> For the next century, Nepal's status was similar to the Indian princely states of Hyderabad and Kashmir. The Ranas allowed Nepalis to be recruited by the British. These Gurkha regiments

were used in Britain’s regional wars and rebellions, like India’s Great Rebellion of 1857 (known by the British as the Sepoy Mutiny).<sup>13</sup> Unlike Hyderabad and Kashmir, however, Nepal survived the independence and consolidation of India and Pakistan and is a twenty-first century “sovereign” nation. After Indian independence in 1947, Nepal’s own anti-British mass movement began.

### **Nepal, India and *Satyagraha***

Until 2006, power relations in Nepal were defined primarily by traditional rural warfare and palace intrigue. The urban populace, however, was not dormant. In 1578, a rebellion in Kathmandu convinced King Sadasiva Malla to abdicate the throne to his more popular brother, Sivasimha.<sup>14</sup> In the early eighteenth century, urban outrage at King Mahendrasimha’s appointment of a Muslim Chief Minister led to the King cancelling his appointment, and to a communal massacre of Kathmandu’s Muslims.<sup>15</sup>

In his *History of Nepal*, Shew Shunker Singh says of Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana: “His word is law, and his power seems unlimited.”<sup>16</sup> Later, however, Singh admits:

as regards throwing open the country to Europeans, I believe that he himself would not be unwilling to do so; but the measure would be so unpopular among all grades of the inhabitants, that to attempt it might endanger his position, if not his life.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the less armed and more disorganized inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, likely numbering fewer than 100,000 in 1847, may have been a major factor in Nepal retaining a degree of economic independence from Britain.<sup>18</sup> The monarchy’s ability to mobilize 50,000 soldiers throughout Nepal, however, makes it seem unlikely that ordinary people in Kathmandu posed an existential threat to the Nepali state.<sup>19</sup>



In 1947, India gained independence from Britain. The dominant force in this struggle was the Indian National Congress (INC), led by Mahatma Gandhi. The INC used *satyagraha*—nonviolent, mass demonstrations organized and implemented with military-like discipline and hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> With this tactic, the INC was able to confront the crumbling,

war-weary British Empire while retaining the moral high ground in the eyes of the world.

After independence, India quickly helped form a Nepali Congress party, which struggled violently against the British-backed Rana regime. In 1950, King Tribhuvan Shah fled his Kathmandu palace for India.<sup>21</sup> The Nepali Congress waged a rural war against the Ranas, with the help of Gurkha soldiers trained in India.<sup>22</sup> A subservient Nepal, however, was more important to India than a mass, democratic movement. Prime Minister Mohan Shamsher Rana stepped down under an Indian-brokered peace deal that returned power to King Tribhuvan Shah, not to the Nepali Congress. The Shahs promised the Nepali Congress and the emerging Soviet-aligned Communist Party of Nepal that they would hold elections for a constituent assembly.<sup>23</sup> Not only did they not fulfill his promise, the Shahs repaid their Indian backers with a series of neo-liberal treaties that ensured total freedom of movement along the Indo-Nepali border. These treaties allowed unfettered Indian corporate access to Nepali markets, and unabated streams of Nepali migrant workers into India.<sup>24</sup>

The struggle for a constituent assembly during the 1950s primarily took the form of urban *satyagraha*. Women's groups carried out *satyagraha* in 1951, after Tribhuvan Shah failed to nominate a single woman to his thirty-five member constitutional advisory assembly.<sup>25</sup> In 1957, a Nepali Congress *satyagraha* ended with King Mahendra Shah calling for a popular election.<sup>26</sup> Nepal's first popularly elected parliament failed, however, to put together a constitution acceptable to the Shahs, who dissolved parliament in 1960, banned all political parties, and implemented their own constitution, Nepal's first.<sup>27</sup>

There were no urban uprisings in response to the dissolution of parliament. There are two different explanations for this, both of which are partially true. One is that, with the political parties unable to publicly organize, there was nobody to lead *satyagrahas*. The other explanation is that the urban populace viewed the political parties as self-interested, and was unwilling to defend them in the streets. The timing of both Nepali People's Movements—*Jana Andolan I* and *II*—suggest that most urbanites were not willing to sacrifice themselves for the political parties.

The Nepali Congress again resorted to traditional rural warfare against the monarchy.<sup>28</sup> India again supported the Nepali Congress, this time by enforcing an economic blockade on Nepal. Given that the Shahs had been India's chosen leaders a decade earlier, India's support of the democratic aspirations of its neighbors is doubtful. India promptly ended the blockade after India was invaded by China and needed Nepal to stop the Chinese army from crossing the White Mountains.<sup>29</sup>

India's duplicitous, self-serving involvement in Nepali affairs—in the 1960s, and later during the Maoist war, as well as during *Jana Andolan II*—can also be understood as an effort to simply destabilize Nepal, and to be on good terms with whichever side might win any internal conflict. In his book *Harvest of Empire*, Juan Gonzalez argues that the political and economic destabilization of Latin America—caused by United States wars of aggression—has been a boon to the United States economy. The resulting humanitarian crises have led to increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees, who make up much of the United States workforce.<sup>30</sup> India has an abundance of migrant laborers from within its own borders to exploit, partially because of the Maoist (*Naxalite*) conflict that has raged through the Indian countryside for more than forty years. Nevertheless, anywhere between one and ten million Nepalis live legally and illegally in India, where they have practically no recourse in the case of abuse by their employers, due to the Nepali government's subservience to India.<sup>31</sup>

India blockaded Nepal again in 1988. The Shahs had dared to assert their sovereignty over Nepal by renegotiating the trade and transit treaties with India, and by buying weapons from China.<sup>32</sup> India responded by blockading thirteen of the fifteen Indo-Nepali border crossings for more than a year, causing a two-year recession in Nepal.<sup>33</sup> The recession, in turn, became a major catalyst for *Jana Andolan I*, the first Nepali People's Movement.

*Jana Andolan I* seems to have been the first time Kathmandu's urban populace represented an existential threat to the Nepali state. By 1990, Kathmandu's population had surpassed one million, whereas the monarchy's army and police forces numbered only 35,000.<sup>34</sup> From February to April 1990, the streets of Kathmandu were filled by Nepalis engaging in *satyagraha*, organized initially by the mainstream political parties—the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist.<sup>35</sup> Calling for the election of a new constituent assembly, the street demonstrations gradually gained popular support from broad sectors of Nepali civil society, including student organizations, the Nepal Engineers Association, the Nepal Medical Association, Nepal's Bar Association, and the Teacher's Association.<sup>36</sup>

The more radical factions of *Jana Andolan I* began calling for the complete removal of the monarchy and for state power to be given to a new constituent assembly. These more militant elements coalesced around two new communist parties: the Communist Party of Nepal (Masal) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Mashal).<sup>37</sup> These parties developed a



distinctly Nepali version of *satyagraha*—nighttime torch rallies.<sup>38</sup> In a nation with little electricity, torches (*masal* or *mashal* in Nepalese) were ostensibly lit to illuminate the streets.

On April 6, 1990, an estimated 200,000 Nepalis took part in uprisings throughout Kathmandu.<sup>39</sup> The government still refused to cede to the crowd's demands. That night, torches were used to raze Kathmandu's City Hall and the Nepali Ministry of Commerce.<sup>40</sup> The *mashal* rally then marched toward the Shahs' palace. Police fired on the demonstrators, killing dozens.<sup>41</sup> The next morning, the Shahs reinstated the political parties and called for new elections and a constituent assembly.<sup>42</sup> This combination of massacre and appeasement ended *Jana Andolan I*. The unfulfilled aspirations of *Jana Andolan I*, however, helped ignite *Jana Andolan II*, sixteen years later.\*



### **The Maoists**

Upset with the lack of political progress made through parliament—where the reconstituted *mashal* parties held a mere 4 percent of the seats—a faction split off and resorted to guerilla warfare. They renamed themselves the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), joining a collective of Maoist parties known as the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM).<sup>43</sup> The RIM's Third World members—in Peru, Turkey, Iran, India, and the Philippines—were engaged in rural, guerilla wars at the time, and still are as of 2012. The RIM's First World members—in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy—sell communist literature on college campuses and hold international Maoist conferences in Europe to encourage Maoist guerrilla wars in the Third World.<sup>44</sup>

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\* Picture of Nepali torch rally accessed in November 2012 from <http://www.openthemagazine.com>.

One main difference between the Maoist war and the Nepali Congress' two previous wars against the Shahs was that the Maoist guerrillas did not aim to immediately strike at Kathmandu. Following the model developed by Mao during the Chinese People's War of 1927-49, the Nepali Maoists took over the Nepali countryside, creating a state-within-a-state at the village level. By 2006, most of rural Nepal was affiliated with the Maoists.



In the United States, one's parents, family, and community have an obvious effect on one's political orientation. In urban South Asia, where illiteracy is the norm, this effect is magnified. As a result of widespread illiteracy, electoral ballots contain each party's emblem. Most people vote according to these pictures.<sup>45</sup> In the months surrounding elections, the city streets are filled with party flags; party graffiti decorates the city's walls.\*

In South Asian villages, party affiliation is primarily caste-based. In general, an entire village associates with one political party. In peacetime, village elders and caste leaders decide party affiliation in typical patrician fashion, according to whichever party has done most for the village. During civil wars, villages are simply affiliated with the army that controls the territory. Caste-based politics stimulates little dialog between citizens and is certainly not driven by ideology. Even if one happened upon propaganda, could read it, and was swayed by the arguments, to espouse an opposing political belief would be anathema to the entire caste order. None of this is incredibly different from politics in the United States, where the average citizen can read, but seldom does, generally doesn't read ideologically driven political pamphlets, and is generally ostracized to the degree that his or her political beliefs differ from that of his or her community. The main difference between rural South Asia and urban United States is the ease with which citizens of the US can leave one community and adopt another one.

In 2008 and 2009, after the war was over and the Maoists were the dominant party in the post-monarchy parliament, I visited two Maoist-affiliated villages in Gorkha and Rolpa. In Rolpa, the Maoists had created a model village, with a commune, a model school, and their model hospital nearby. The goal of these model institutions was to plant the seeds of the non-oppressive social dynamics that were to flourish under a Maoist-controlled socialist

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\* Picture of graffiti in Kolkata accessed in November 2012 from [www.behance.net](http://www.behance.net).

state, en route to Mao's final goal—a stateless, communist society with no oppressive social relations, no oppressive economic relations, and no oppressive ideas.

As a Westerner with no experience with the caste system, it was impossible for me to understand the caste dynamic at the commune. I was told that the commune had *dalits* (castes known widely throughout the West as “untouchables”). According to members of the commune, many Nepalis had been hesitant to visit the commune and experience their model way of life, due to perceived pollution of the commune's water and other facilities by *dalits*. I was told that those who did visit the commune were often ostracized when they returned to their castes, having supposedly become contaminated. The commune's immediate neighbors, however, allegedly began to accept the idea of inter-caste mingling after seeing it done day in and day out without negative consequences. Later, in Kathmandu, I spoke to the founder of a commune in Nepal's east. He said that after a flood destroyed the commune, the neighbors believed this was because they had allowed *dalits* to live with them.



Having had limited experience in the Nepali countryside, it was difficult for me to gauge the changes in gender roles at the Maoist commune.\* One thing that I immediately noticed was the extreme deference toward men exhibited by the women of the commune. I was used to this by the time I reached the commune, but had expected something radically different, having read so much Maoist propaganda. The main difficulty at revolutionizing gender roles at the commune, however, was this: the Maoist commune was populated by widows and orphans of the war. It is impossible to act out new gender relations on a daily basis when all the men are dead. During my time at the commune I was often reminded of the words of one of America's most popular poets, 2Pac, whose mother, Afeni Shakur, was a member of the American Maoist group, the Black Panther Party.

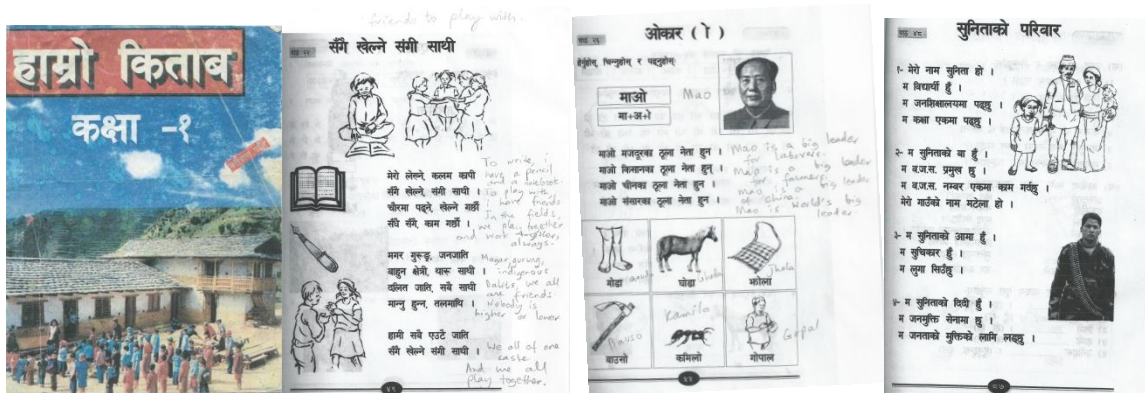
See, you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity. We would all love its will to reach the sun. Well, we are the rose. This is the concrete. And these are my damaged petals. Don't ask me why. Thank god. Ask me how.<sup>46</sup>

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\* Picture accessed in November 2012 from <http://archives.myrepublica.com>.

My other trip was to a Maoist controlled village in Gorkha, home of the Shahs. As at Rolpa, there was also a noticeable shortage of men, many of who had left to find work in cities like Kathmandu, Bangalore, and Dubai. The men who were there, however, did little for themselves. The Gurkhali women did most of the farming and all the housework. I spent my nights drinking *chai* with the men, while the women made and served us dinner, refilled our teacups, and cleaned up after us. For the first few days, I served myself and did my own dishes. I offered to help cook, but was refused entry to the kitchen. This was likely due less to my maleness and more to my caste impurity—being outside the fold of the village’s caste. My efforts at challenging gender roles through domestic labor came to an end, however, when the 14-year-old girl of the house confronted me. She told me that it made her happy to serve me, and unhappy when I tried to do things for myself. This confrontation was upsetting in more ways than one, partially because it was one of the closest things to a feminist act I witnessed in the Nepali countryside.

I spent five days attending the local school, which was under Maoist control, but was not a Maoist model school. The teachers continued to use the Shahs’ textbook, having nothing else to educate their children with. The principal/health teacher/head of the local Maoist organization complained to me that their education was not practical. I sat in on a class where he taught his students the rules to American basketball. At one point he took me to the window and told me to look into the courtyard. I saw nothing remarkable, at which point he pointed out that there was no basketball hoop or basketball.



Rolpa’s Maoist “model textbook” certainly can’t be criticized for being irrelevant. One lesson for first-graders went like this:

By Bajju river, there lived a group of farmers. Next to the river they had a road. They put bombs on the road. They waited in the Martyr’s Shade. When

the police and the Royal Army arrived, the bomb blasted. Some collapsed while some fled. The farmers came down, took their guns and explosives. They gave it to the People's Army. All were happy.\*

At first glance, the militarism and martyr-worship in the model textbook caught me off guard. I then remembered my elementary education included Revolutionary War and Civil War history. Upon further research, I found out that M.S. 51 William Alexander—my alma mater—was named after a martyr of the American Revolution.

The most revelatory experience I had in Nepal was in the seventh grade classroom at the Gurkhali school. The girls sat on one side of the room, the boys on the other. While gender segregation remains problematic, it deserves mentioning that the presence of girls in the schoolhouse was a very good sign. The seating arrangement in the classroom, however, was not separate but equal. The boys sat on benches, with larger benches in front of them, which they used as tables to read and write on. The girls also sat on benches, but with no larger benches in front of them. Instead, the girls read and wrote in their laps. I asked the teacher why the girls didn't have desks. He laughed and said: "This isn't a First World country. We don't have enough desks for everyone." I asked if the desk situation rotated every day. Seeing where I was going with this, he cut me off and said, "Don't worry, everything's equal." When I pointed out that everything was blatantly not equal, he laughed again, saying, "Don't worry, everything's equal," and escorted me out of the classroom.

During my last day at the school I was asked to fill out a survey. One question was: "What would you like to see done differently?" I wrote, "More attention paid to gender roles." One of the village's three female teachers was observing me. Upon seeing this, she

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\* From *Our Book: Grade 1*, the Maoist model textbook in Thawang, Rolpa. The first picture (on the previous page of the current text) is the cover page of *Our Book: Grade 1*. The poem in the second picture is, "Friends To Play With." The lyrics are:

To write, I have a pencil and a notebook. To play with, I have friends. In the fields, we play together, and work together always.

Magar, Gurung, indigenous Dalits, we all are friends. Nobody is higher or lower.

We are all of one caste. And we all play together.

The text in the third picture says, "Mao is a big leader for laborers. Mao is a big leader for farmers. Mao is a big leader of China. Mao is world's big leader." The fourth picture is titled, "Sunita's Family." The text says:

My name is Sunita. I am a student. I study in public school. I study in Class 1.

I am Sunita's dad. I am Ba Jha Sa head. I work at Ba Jha Sa Number 1. My village's name is

Matel.

I am her mom. I am a tailor. I sew clothes.

I am her sister. I am People's Liberation Army personnel. I fight for people's freedom.

snatched the paper off the desk and walked around the room, putting my answer under the noses of her male colleagues, saying, “See! See!” I wondered if she’d been saying this for the past decade, or if she’d started before the war. When she showed my answer to the principal, he came over to me, somewhat annoyed, and said: “Don’t worry, everything’s equal.”

I found it almost surreal that the male teachers seemed to genuinely believe that the girls and boys were treated equally. Even more surreal was their repetition of the same refrain: “everything’s equal.” It wasn’t until I was back in Kathmandu that I more fully understood my experience, thanks to Amrita Thapa Magar, a commander of a women’s battalion during the war and General Secretary of the Maoist feminist organization, the All Nepal Women’s Association (Revolutionary), when I interviewed her in 2008. (In 2012, she is a member of the Constituent Assembly.)

When I told her what I’d seen, Thapa Magar wasn’t surprised. She told me that when she joined the war her male comrades treated the female comrades poorly. The Maoist propaganda that all the soldiers were educated with had implanted an idea of equality in the men’s heads, but for the most part hadn’t affected their behavior. Instead, like many Western liberals, the men continued treating the women poorly, while claiming that everything was equal.

Things, however, according to Thapa Magar, did slowly improve as the years went on. Because the armies were segregated by sex, the men had to do everything for themselves, including tasks traditionally considered women’s work. Experiencing how much hard work cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks entailed gave the men greater respect for women. Likewise, the women had to do what was traditionally thought of as men’s work, which in this extreme case involved a life or death struggle with the Royal Army. The women proved themselves both on the front lines and in the generals’ headquarters. Because this approach to consciousness raising was largely limited to the army, Thapa Magar claimed that some of the most radical feminists in the world—in thought, feeling and action—were members of the Maoist People’s Liberation Army.



This is the most optimistic view of the Maoist People's War that I am comfortable presenting.\* While in Kathmandu, I became good friends with Roshan Kissoon and Chandan Boju—both of whom had lived with the Maoist army for two years, teaching English to the commanders. They had a different take on the political and social awareness of the average Maoist soldier. They said that the women and men's brigades seldom interacted. Their days were consumed by cooking and cleaning, their military training on top of that, and their literacy classes. Some of the few co-ed events the soldiers attended were speeches by Prachanda—the Maoists leader—at which the men and women sat separately and generally didn't communicate. Kissoon and Boju said that while the literature used to educate the soldiers certainly espoused anti-sexist, anti-caste ideology, overwhelmingly it was militaristic, hierarchal leader-worship towards Prachanda. Far from being ideologically driven, most soldiers simply wanted peace so that they could go home and start a traditional family. According to Boju and Kissoon, it was the Maoist leaders—mostly Brahmins educated in India—who were the most conscientious and intelligent, which is to say that they were generally about as politically advanced as any sloganeering, sectarian Western intellectual.

Undoubtedly, the Maoists were unsuccessful in developing model communities and model people. They did, however, fight one of the most successful rural guerilla wars of the twentieth century. From 1996–2001, the local police forces were unable to control the Maoists, who eventually established Maoist People's Governments in over twenty districts.<sup>47</sup> These People's Governments assumed most of the core functions of the Shahs' state,

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\* Picture accessed in November 2012 from [www.mtholyoke.edu](http://www.mtholyoke.edu).

including collecting taxes, holding elections, conducting judicial arbitrations, conscripting an army, and undertaking public works projects with conscripted laborers and their children.<sup>48</sup>

King Birendra Shah, however, refused to mobilize the Royal Nepal Army. In 2001, he and most of the royal nuclear family were murdered. The official story—which lacks verifying evidence—is that Crown Prince Dipendra shot his father, mother, brothers, sister, some of the extended family, and then himself, less than a half hour after being too drunk to stand.<sup>49</sup> King Birendra's brother, Gyanendra Shah—who many Nepalis blame for the massacre—inherited the crown amid riots in Kathmandu.<sup>50</sup>

If Gyanendra Shah was truly behind the palace massacre, it was only his first in a series of violent, tactless, and culturally insensitive moves. Much to the delight of India and the United States, Gyanendra Shah mobilized the army against the Maoists.<sup>51</sup> When this failed to diminish the Maoists' influence, Gyanendra Shah dissolved parliament and declared a state of emergency, in which civil liberties were severely restricted and the Royal Nepal Army was deployed on the streets of Kathmandu.<sup>52</sup> Having simultaneously attacked the Maoist state-within-a-state, and having disenfranchised every political party and every member of civil society, King Gyanendra Shah had set the stage for *Jana Andolan II*, one of only a few urban uprisings in history to succeed in overthrowing the state.

### **Occupy Kathmandu**

Street demonstrations and clashes with the police began immediately after the emergency was declared, and continued on a daily basis for over a year.<sup>53</sup> The non-Maoist political parties formed the Seven Party Alliance. Journalists, teachers, artists, and lawyers formed the Citizens Movement for Peace and Democracy, which discouraged party politics.<sup>54</sup> Somewhat peaceful protests occurred during daylight. At night urban rebels battled the police with torches and stones. The uprising spread to every major city in Nepal. Demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people occurred in cities with populations in the tens of thousands, indicating that people in rural areas recognized the importance of taking over cities, and the Royal Nepal Army's failure to prevent the people's literal movement throughout the country.<sup>55</sup> Solidarity demonstrations were held in New Delhi, London, and Tokyo.<sup>56</sup>

On April 6, 2006, the sixteenth anniversary of the massacre on the final day of *Jana Andolan I*, major parliamentary parties and the Maoists called for a four-day general strike



(*bandh* in Nepalese).<sup>57</sup> In Spring 2009, I got to witness two incredibly thorough *bandhs* in Kathmandu. Everything was shut down—international banks included—save for one or two restaurants to keep the tourists alive. On April 9, 2006, what was to be the *bandh*'s final day, the parties extended it indefinitely.<sup>58</sup> On April 21, hundreds of thousands of dissidents took over most of Kathmandu.<sup>59</sup> The Maoists began attacking police posts inside Kathmandu for the first time.<sup>60</sup> On April 24, a 2-million person march past the King's palace was announced—in a valley with a population of 1.5 million.<sup>61</sup> Wisely, Gyanendra Shah restored parliament and abdicated the throne, thus ending the 238-year Shah dynasty.\*



*Jana Andolan II* is perhaps the only revolution in history to end without an army restoring order, as was the case in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Egypt's Tahrir Square uprising in 2011. To this day, both the (no longer Royal) Nepal Army and the Maoist People's Liberation Army are confined to their

barracks. The people of Kathmandu regularly demonstrate their control over the Valley with *mashal* rallies and *bandhs*, while castes in the *Terai* display their power by shutting down Nepal's major east-west highway for days.

The geography of Nepal leaves it susceptible to economic domination by India, but has also enabled the Nepali people to enjoy a unique amount of freedom from military domination. With subtropical forests and the most mountainous land in the world, Nepal has become one of the only nations whose capital has not been invaded by foreign forces since 1768, when the Gurkhali Shahs first entered Kathmandu. The monarchy, however, was itself a foreign occupation for most Nepalis, the majority of whom do not speak Nepalese. The Shahs were Gurkhali, and based their state on the creation and maintenance of caste privilege, mandating all education be in Nepalese. One of the main reforms currently demanded by the Maoists is a federal restructuring of Nepal that would ensure education in the native tongues of all forty-plus major linguistic communities in Nepal.<sup>62</sup>

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\* Picture accessed in November 2012 from [www.pireview.info](http://www.pireview.info).

Almost no major political reforms have taken place since 2006, however, due to a lack of consensus by the Maoist and non-Maoist political parties, and meddling by India. The Maoists hold nearly forty percent of the seats in the Constituent Assembly, leaving them with too few seats to pass their own constitution, but enough seats to veto any non-Maoist constitution. The constant reshuffling of alliances has left Nepal with four ruling coalitions and five Prime Ministers in the last five years. When I was in Nepal, the United Marxists Leninists led parliament; Kathmandu experienced two planned four-hour blackouts every afternoon and night. Later, when the Maoists led parliament, India cut Nepal's electricity supplies in half in an effort to undermine the Maoists' popularity, leading to sixteen hours of blackouts a day.

Two cables published by Wikileaks in 2010 helped to further uncover India's disruptive influence in Nepali politics. One quotes India's Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao warning a United States delegate against funding the Taliban in Afghanistan, based on how badly India's funding of the Nepali Maoists had backfired—this coming from a government that was selling the monarchy most of its weapons.<sup>63</sup> Another cable shows that India and the United States refused to sell ammunition to the Royal Nepal Army after March 2006, a fact that is certainly a major component in the relative lack of state repression during *Jana Andolan II*.<sup>64</sup> If one shooting could have stopped the demonstrations, however, as happened during *Jana Andolan I*, this shortage of ammunition would not have been a problem for the Shahs. Furthermore, if Nepal had its own weapons factories, they would have been primary targets for Maoist attacks and worker takeovers, which could have exacerbated the situation for the Shahs.

The Maoists' ability to overrun army barracks and air bases throughout Nepal and police posts in Kathmandu with their People's Liberation Army suggests they too can take some credit for protecting the urban revolution from the kind of state repression happening in Syria now, and which occurred in Libya before NATO's intervention. Maoist control of the countryside also ensured that villagers—who make up around eighty percent of Nepal's population—could converge on the cities. The Maoists claim to have sent over 90,000 people to Kathmandu from nearby Kavre District alone. During the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the Mubarak regime's virtual monopoly on violence in Egypt's less densely populated areas stymied movement to and between cities. With more than forty percent of the

Egyptian population urbanized this lack of mobility mattered less, and simply caused the Egyptian revolution to spread to cities other than Cairo.

As far as political parties were responsible for mobilizing people during *Jana Andolan II*, the Maoists were easily the most popular, as is indicated by their winning nearly twice as many seats as any other party during the 2008 elections. The disproportionately high percentage of seats won by the Maoists in the Kathmandu Valley's three districts suggests that they were not merely a force in rural warfare, but in urban civil society as well.<sup>65</sup> These facts help falsify the claim made by the non-Maoist parties that *Jana Andolan II* was an antiwar, anti-Maoist movement.

The Maoists' success highlights the importance of having a revolutionary army to match the government's army. The Maoist efforts in the countryside during the war, as well as their current efforts in Kathmandu, however, highlight the dangers of a hierarchal, militaristic organization eventually becoming the very government that it is trying to get rid of. For all the Maoists' accomplishments, their rural guerrilla war—one of the most successful in modern times—resulted in approximately 13,000 deaths and failed to capture a single city for more than a few hours. In less than a year the practically unarmed urban populace took over every Nepali city in a relatively bloodless revolution.

Nepal's geographic, economic, and political climates stymied Nepal's urbanization, but not the ability of Nepal's urbanites to rebel. Distinctly urban forms of anti-state struggle flourished in Nepal not in spite of its lack of urbanization, but because of it. Nepal's strong rural communities and hostile terrain allowed a semi-traditional rural army to conquer vast territories, weaken the monarchy, and the stage for Nepal's flourishing civil society to enact *Jana Andolan II*, one of the greatest urban revolutions in world history.

## Endnotes

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