

The social fabric of the Jelbang killings, Nepal

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Abstract Sixty-eight people from the village of Jelbang in western Nepal are documented to have died in the course of the decade-long ‘People’s War’, making it perhaps the village that suffered the highest number of casualties in the entire country. This paper, which is based on empirical research and the analysis of secondary data, examines the circumstances behind the unusually high number of deaths in Jelbang. The analysis shows that the killings were due to a complex interplay of events, personalities and timing as well as particular interrelationships between the central administration and its local representatives and the state security forces. In an atmosphere of impunity, and with the support and facilitation of the administration, the police brutalised the local population.

Keywords Nepal · Maoist insurgency · Human rights · History of conflict

Introduction

In this paper, we analyse the story of the village of Jelbang in Rolpa District of western Nepal which suffered an unusually high number of deaths during the decade-long ‘People’s War’ launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). Sixty-eight people from this village are documented to have died in the course of the

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decade-long conflict, making it perhaps the village that suffered the highest number of casualties in all of Nepal. Of these, 30 were killed in Jelbang itself, and that, too, within the first 3 years of the start of the conflict which had till then been confined mainly to the two districts of Rolpa and Rukum. Most of these killings were at the hands of the police. We ask why, in relation to other communities in the area, there was such a high number of deaths in Jelbang. What particular circumstances made Jelbang different from other villages in the area? To answer this question, we examine what was particularly significant about the history of Jelbang.

We argue that the high number of deaths in Jelbang were due to a complex interaction of events, circumstances and interrelationships. In the initial stages of the ‘People’s War’, revenge killings increased antagonism between the Maoists and their opponents, and this played an important role in perpetuating violence. The most significant contributing factor to the high number of killings in the village, however, was police brutalisation of the local population. Police brutality was supported and facilitated by the administration and took place in an atmosphere of impunity.

Our work is based on documentary sources and interviews conducted over a period of 6 years. Ogura visited Jelbang in 2007 and is currently writing a history of Rolpa in the Maoist insurgency. Thapa has also visited the village. Much of the information in the following sections is based on documents Ogura has collected and on interviews conducted with key individuals, including the most senior Maoist in the village, Chandra Bahadur Budha, PLA division commander ‘Sarad’,¹ and Rolpa district committee secretary ‘Raktim’, all of whom are originally from Jelbang.² ‘Raktim’ provided an important document on the political history of Jelbang and personal data on the 60 ‘martyrs’. This material was supplemented by interviews with key informants carried out by the authors in Kathmandu. Where necessary, the information has been supplemented through other sources, mainly, the annual Human Rights Yearbook published by the Nepali human rights organisation, Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC).

The village of Jelbang

Jelbang, or, rather, Jelbang VDC (village development committee, the smallest administrative unit in Nepal), lies in a remote part of central Rolpa, the district that has become synonymous with the rise and spread of the Maoist movement. It lies in a gently sloping valley formed by the Fagam River. It is a day’s walk away from the district headquarters of Libang but can also be reached in a few hours from the roadhead at Sulichaur. Its seclusion is partly because of the high mountains that rise more than 3,000 m at its head, and although there is a foot trail that leads across the high mountains north to Thabang, the ‘cradle’ of communism in Rolpa, the main

¹ Maoists are generally known by their *noms de guerre*. Whenever these are used in this paper, they are placed in quotation marks.

² The police stationed at Jelbang over the years could have provided the other side of the story, but the national police force continuously moves personnel around and tracking them down and convincing them to talk about their experiences would have involved considerably more time. In any event, although the police always reported killings they often billed them as suicides, accidental deaths and the like.

walking route from Sulichaur to Thabang, and further to Rukum District, follows the adjoining Lungri River valley to the east, bypassing Jelbang altogether.

Like all VDCs in Nepal, Jelbang is made up of nine wards, namely, Majibang (Ward no. 1), Ainselukharka (2), Dalitgaun (3), Korbang (4), Thulogaun (also called Jelbang) (5), Sulkabang (6), Guthalbang (7), Rulbang (8) and Khibang (9). Wards are generally named after a hamlet and include other settlements and isolated homesteads within the geographical area covered. They are known by the name of that hamlet, a combination of the hamlet name and ward number, or simply by the ward number. Thus, Ward No. 1 of Jelbang VDC can be called Majibang village or just Jelbang VDC 1. In this paper, we use names and not ward numbers.

According to the last census, held in 2001, Jelbang VDC had a total of 519 households with a population of 2,815 people. Since it lies deep in the Kham Magar heartland of west Nepal, the demographic distribution is very clear-cut: 95% are Kham Magar, a branch of the Magar, the third largest population group in Nepal, and the remaining 5% are Dalit (deemed the lowest in the Hindu caste structure, and also called the service castes as they provide services such as tailoring and blacksmithing). Agriculture is the main occupation although only around 35% of the land in the VDC is cultivable. The main crops are maize, wheat, barley and potatoes. Income has traditionally been supplemented by animal husbandry and employment in foreign countries. The latter was concentrated mainly in India in the past, but nowadays more people have been seeking employment in the Gulf region and Malaysia.

Before the administrative reorganisation in the 1960s, the area covered by Jelbang VDC was under the nominal authority of five *mukhiyas* (headmen), of whom the one from Thulogaun was considered the most senior. Although an apolitical 69-year-old man from Rulbang now living as an internally displaced person (IDP) in Libang,³ he does not remember any major conflict among the five *mukhiyas*, and recalls the village as being generally peaceful. The account provided by the local Maoists in Jelbang is quite different. According to the latter, the *mukhiyas* in charge of Thulogaun, Rulbang and Khibang were well known for ‘exploiting’ the people, whereas those of the other villages were more progressive in their outlook and supported the people in their fight for justice (‘Raktim’ 2006). This history of Jelbang being under the jurisdiction of different local authorities is believed to be a major factor for the divergent political outlooks of the people here.⁴

Evidence of this division was clear during the first parliamentary elections in 1959. The votes from Jelbang were divided between the Nepali Congress (which won a landslide victory nationwide) and the Gorkha Parishad (the party that emerged as the main opposition in parliament). Thulogaun, Rulbang and Khibang voted for the Nepali Congress with the others supporting the Gorkha Parishad. Both sides were presumably influenced by their respective *mukhiyas*. It is worthy of note that the then Communist Party of Nepal did not figure as a political player at all in Jelbang in the 1959 election even though it managed to secure all the votes cast in

³ The reason this man had to leave the village had nothing to do with his politics or lack of it. Rather, it was because he was a close relative of a local leader who had been targeted by the Maoists and also because the police post at Rulbang was housed in a building he owned.

⁴ Interview with Santosh Budha Magar, 17 Feb 2008.

nearby Thabang (Ogura 2007). It would be another two decades before communism as a political ideology arrived in Jelbang (Ogura *ibid*).

The political setting, pre-1990

During the formation of local bodies following King Mahendra's dismantling of the multiparty democratic system in 1960, the *mukhiya* of Ainselukharka, Iman Singh Budha, became the *pradhan pancha* (chair) of Jelbang Village Panchayat (corresponding to today's Jelbang VDC). Assisting him as his deputy was his cousin, the former Indian army serviceman, Khojbir Budha of Majibang. According to the Maoists, both these individuals were quite progressive in that they sought to develop the village ('Raktim' 2006).⁵ It was while they were in office that the first primary school was established in Jelbang. That was in 1964, and Khojbir took over as *pradhan pancha* soon after and remained in this position until his death in 1977. Khojbir was said to be a strong leader who unified the village and his term was characterised by a lack of conflict in the village. He was also instrumental in developing the primary school into a lower secondary school and for starting an irrigation project in Jelbang. Khojbir's son, the local Maoist leader Chandra Bahadur, described his father, saying,

My father was a tall and physically strong man with an exceptionally strong right arm and people used to be afraid of him. Both he and his cousin, Iman Singh, never took alcohol or smoked cigarettes and they didn't gamble. So villagers used to call him a Bahun.⁶

The path taken by Khojbir's son, Chandra Bahadur, is important to map out an understanding of how communism came to be established in Jelbang. Since there was no school in Jelbang at that time, Chandra Bahadur had gone to study in Thabang, the communist stronghold to the north, where a primary school had been established in 1959. Chandra Bahadur was strongly influenced by communist ideals while attending the Thabang school, which had been founded by Barman Budha, a local leader and the person largely responsible for turning Thabang communist. Some of the teachers there expressly imparted lessons on communism (for further discussions on the role played by Budha, see de Sales 2008; Ogura 2007). In 1956, when the famous communist leader from Pyuthan, Mohan Bikram Singh, visited Thabang, he formed a peasant committee under the leadership of Barman, who went on to become the *mukhiya* of Thabang a couple of years later. Under his active leadership, Thabang began to display anti-establishment leanings. It is said by the old-timers there that all the votes from the village in the 1959 general election were cast in favour of Khagu Lal Gurung, candidate of the Communist Party of Nepal.

⁵ 'Raktim'. The Maoists use the Nepali phrase 'samaj pariwartan', which can be translated as 'transformation of society' or 'social change', to describe what they wanted to bring about in the village. Presumably, any action aimed at undoing the status quo, socially, culturally, economically or politically, can be construed as 'pariwartan'.

⁶ The reference to Bahun, as the hill Brahmins are known in Nepal, with their past taboo on alcohol is made in contradistinction to the Magar, one of the *matwali*, or alcohol-drinking, groups to which Khojbir belonged. Personal communication by Chandra Bahadur Budha Magar to Ogura.

During the Panchayat period of authoritarian rule by the king that lasted from 1960 to 1990, many communist activists stayed in Thabang. Later, the Maoists successfully made this village the centre of their insurgency.

According to Majibang's 'Sarad' (the *nom de guerre* of the current commander of the 5th Division of the Maoists' People's Liberation Army), Jelbang's Khojbir Budha himself was exposed to communist ideas through Dharma Bahadur Roka, another prominent communist leader in Thabang. Due to his father's relationship with Dharma Bahadur, Chandra Bahadur stayed at the latter's house while studying in Thabang. As there was no high school in Thabang at that time, Chandra Bahadur went to the neighbouring district of Pyuthan to complete his studies, becoming the first Kham Magar student in eastern Rolpa to pass high school. In 1976, he returned to Jelbang and became the headmaster at the primary school that had by then been established by his father. At that time, a number of students from Jelbang were studying at the middle high school in Thabang, and like Chandra Bahadur, they, too, were influenced by communist ideas through local leaders and school teachers there.

Around the time of the 1979 students' movement, in which student organisations belonging to the then 'outlawed' political parties launched nationwide agitations against the Panchayat system, the first students' organisation was set up in Jelbang. As part of the ongoing student unrest, a group of Jelbang students, including 'Sarad', set off for Libang, the district headquarters, to participate in a strike call. But they had to turn back when they came under police attack. This was the first confrontation between the state security forces and Jelbang activists.

In November 1981, a military operation took place in Thabang in response to a complete boycott by villagers of the general election earlier that year. The boycott had been called by the CPN (Fourth Congress), the party from which the CPN (Maoist) eventually emerged in 1995 through a number of splits and mergers. Some activists, including Santosh Budha Magar,⁷ now a ranking Maoist party official but then a Class 10 student at the high school in Thabang, sought refuge in Jelbang. Some of them stayed with Chandra Bahadur in Majibang and it was around this time that Chandra Bahadur joined the CPN (Fourth Congress), thus becoming the first person from Jelbang to take up membership of a communist party.

Jelbang gradually evolved into a regular stop in the itinerary of roving communist leaders who had to conduct all their activities clandestinely due to the then prohibition on political activities. 'Kiran' (Mohan Vaidya), now a member of the central secretariat of the CPN (Maoist), often visited Jelbang on his way to Thabang. Other young communist leaders like Krishna Sen, a poet and journalist killed by the police in 2002, also started coming to Jelbang and communism began to gradually spread in the village. As the most educated person in Jelbang, as a teacher and a social worker, Chandra Bahadur had a lot of influence among the youth, and given the level of deprivation in Jelbang, it would not have been all too difficult to attract the young to leftist ideas.

⁷ Budha Magar is now the secretary of the Magarat State Committee, the would-be 'government' of the Magarat autonomous region as envisaged by the Maoists.

In terms of electoral politics, after the death of Khojbir Budha, a former British Gurkha,⁸ Sarbajit Budha of Thulogaun, became the *pradhan pancha*. Jelbang's Maoists claim that the villagers soon became divided into two groups, one led by Sarbajit and the other by Chandra Bahadur. According to Maoist sources, Sarbajit soon began exploiting the villagers and appropriating development resources for his own benefit. He received political patronage from Balaram Gharti Magar and Reg Bahadur Subedi, both originally from nearby villages and long-time representatives from Rolpa in the then national legislature, the Rastriya Panchayat. Maoists sources claim that Sarbajit, with the support of these two national-level politicians, tried to suppress his opponents. In the 1982 local election, Chandra Bahadur and his group successfully supported Sete Roka of Majibang for *pradhan pancha* with Chuk Bahadur Roka⁹ of Rulbang as his deputy in order to prevent Sarbajit from gaining office for a second time.

In the last local election before the fall of the Panchayat System in 1990, former deputy *pradhan pancha*, Chuk Bahadur Roka from Rulbang, became the *pradhan pancha* with the support of Chandra Bahadur and his followers. However, Chuk Bahadur slowly lost the confidence of Chandra Bahadur, according to Maoist accounts, because he became corrupt ('Raktim' *ibid*).

At the national level, the political divide within Jelbang so evident during the 1959 general elections was further highlighted in the two elections to the Rastriya Panchayat held after 1980 when legislative elections were held on the basis of universal franchise.¹⁰ While Sarbajit and his supporters voted for Balaram Gharti Magar and Reg Bahadur Subedi, Chandra Bahadur and his followers chose to support those opposed to Magar and Subedi, regardless of their political affiliation ('Raktim' *ibid*).

Often, the antagonism between the different wards within Jelbang VDC, especially Rulbang on one side and Majibang and Ainselukharka on the other, was played out during village festivals. The role of village festivals in exacerbating tensions assumed the greatest importance in 1995, which we address in the following sections.

⁸ Many Jelbang men joined the British army during the Second World War, especially from the ward of Majibang, where almost all the men left to fight. A local Maoist said that because many men who went abroad to fight for the British army had told about their hardships in the battlefields after they came back very few from Jelbang joined the army or the police in Nepal. However, there were several, including Chandra Bahadur's brothers, who joined the British army. Joining the British Army used to be and still is the quickest way for men in Jelbang to become rich.

⁹ For reasons of sensitivity this person's name has been changed. A pseudonym has also been used for an additional individual. Both these individuals stand accused by the Maoists of collaborating with the district administration, thus implicating them in the deaths of some of the Maoist sympathisers. While it would be clear to Jelbang residents who these particular individuals are from the context of the narrative, their identities have been protected since they have both begun a new life in places where their past would be not so well known.

¹⁰ For the Rastriya Panchayat elections, the whole district was considered an electoral district. Of the 75 districts in the country, nearly half sent two representatives to the Rastriya Panchayat while the rest sent only one. Thus, the electorate of a district with two representatives voted for two candidates, while those with only one representative voted for just one.

With the restoration of democracy in Nepal in April 1990, party politics entered Jelbang, and the local leaders also chose sides. Sarbajit Budha and his supporter, Kul Bahadur Gharti,¹¹ entered the Nepali Congress, while Chuk Bahadur Roka opted for the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), a conservative, pro-monarchist force comprised by politicians active in the Panchayat system. Chuk Bahadur had close personal links with Balaram Gharti Magar, a leading member of the RPP, and it is possible that this connection led to his joining the RPP. Meanwhile, Chandra Bahadur and his supporters organised a cell committee of the CPN (Mashal) in Jelbang, and later joined the United People's Front Nepal (UPFN). (The CPN [Mashal] and the CPN [Unity Centre] were among the organisations that the CPN [Maoist] evolved into en route to becoming today's CPN [Maoist]. The UPFN was the political wing of the CPN [Unity Centre], which was formed by the merger of the CPN [Mashal] and other radical left groups in 1990 [see Thapa with Sijapati 2004 for a detailed discussion of these splits and mergers]).

In the parliamentary elections of 1991, the Nepali Congress won an outright majority nationwide and formed the national government. In Rolpa, however, the UPFN made a clean sweep and won both seats, with the constituency in which Jelbang lies going to Barman Budha of Thabang. According to 'Sarad', more than 90% of the valid votes in Jelbang went to the UPFN.¹²

The results emboldened the UPFN supporters into taking on those who had controlled the village administration in earlier times, leading inevitably to violent confrontations. The first serious clash in Jelbang took place in the run-up to the local elections of 1992 when supporters of Chuk Bahadur Roka of the RPP beat up some UPFN activists, followed the next day by a serious encounter between the two groups in Rulbang. In the elections, however, the UPFN candidates were 'unopposed' since the only other party with candidates, the Nepali Congress, withdrew at the last moment under intimidation from UPFN activists. As a result, all the seats of the VDC, including the chair and deputy chair, went to the UPFN.

A major turning point in the approach to Jelbang's impending political violence came in 1994, soon after the mid-term general elections held on 15 November. By then, the UPFN (and with it, the CPN [Unity Centre]) had split, with the faction that eventually became the CPN (Maoist) calling for an election boycott. The influence of this faction in Rolpa was considerable, indicated in part by both the members of parliament elected in 1991 joining it. In Jelbang VDC, therefore, four wards completely boycotted the election, while in the other five a total of just nine votes were cast (INSEC 1996).

During the election itself, a contingent of the then Royal Nepalese Army set up temporary base in Jelbang. Soon after the army left, a major clash occurred between supporters of the UPFN and the Nepali Congress, during which Sukhe Budha, a Nepali Congress supporter close to Kul Bahadur Gharti and who also happened to be the younger brother of Sarbajit Budha, was beaten to death by several young men. Following his death, an arrest warrant for murder was issued for more than 30 people from various walks of life, including teachers, students and farmers. Among

¹¹ Name changed.

¹² Personal communication by 'Sarad' to Ogura.

those under warrant was Chandra Bahadur, who was in Dang, the neighbouring district to the south of Rolpa, at the time of the incident.

A number of people mentioned in the warrant went underground, fearing for their safety. Maoist informants from Jelbang claim that most of these people were innocent. Many Maoists in Rolpa are of the view that the Nepali Congress people used the state machinery to accuse hundreds of supporters of the UPFN in trumped-up charges. This incident also led Sarbajit Budha to use his contacts in the administration to establish a police post in Jelbang. The police had initially planned to be stationed in Thulogaun, but given the strong opposition from UPFN supporters, they moved to Rulbang. The arrival of the police was to prove devastating for Jelbang in the years to come.

With one faction of the CPN (Unity Centre) having changed its name to CPN (Maoist) in early 1995, preparations were on to launch an armed uprising, a 'People's War', in Nepal. As part of the warm-up, the CPN (Maoist) began a political awareness campaign throughout Rolpa and Rukum, during which, in October 1995, a clash took place between supporters of the RPP and the Nepali Congress on one side and the CPN (Maoist) on the other at a village fair at Gam, about one day's walk to the east from Jelbang. The Gam incident was provoked by activists of the Nepali Congress and the RPP who disrupted a cultural programme being staged by the Maoists. Hundreds of people were reportedly injured.¹³

Fights in local festivals are quite common throughout Nepal but after 1990 such fights in Rolpa took the form of political confrontation. It should be noted here that Balam Magar of the RPP had been elected to parliament in the 1994 election, and the RPP and the Nepali Congress were coalition partners in the government led by the latter that had taken office in September 1995. Magar himself became a minister after the cabinet was expanded in December the same year.

Given the strong presence of the CPN (Maoist) and the challenge it posed to the Nepali Congress and the RPP, the government set into motion a police operation against the Maoists in November 1995. (For a discussion of the Gam incident, see Ogura 2007.) Codenamed 'Operation Romeo', this operation was launched mainly in north-eastern Rolpa, where most of the inhabitants are Kham Magars. On the first day of Operation Romeo, 17 supporters of the UPFN were arrested by the police in Jelbang. Of these, eight were charged with the murder of Sukhe Budha and spent more than 4 years in jail. One of the eight claimed that most of them were innocent and that the real culprits who had beaten the victim to death had run away to India.¹⁴

The 'People's War'

1996: The beginning of the war: Maoists arrested, tortured and killed

On 13 February 1996, the 'People's War' began with an attack, among other incidents, on a police station in Holeri in southern Rolpa, and this hitherto marginal district was

¹³ Bharadwaj et al.

¹⁴ Personal communication by Dil Bahadur Budha Magar to Ogura.

soon to enter the national consciousness as the Maoist bastion. The government's use of indiscriminate force to tackle the Maoists continued in places like Jelbang. In August 1996, five Maoist activists were arrested in Damphu village of Jelbang VDC and taken to the police post in Rulbang and tortured before being killed. The detailed account of the incident (paraphrased here) given by 'Raktim', currently the secretary of the Rolpa district committee of the CPN (Maoist), explains what happened.

The policemen in the traditional dress of Kham Magars, including the Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police, the in-charge of the Rulbang police post, came to his ('Raktim's') house in Damphu searching for him. 'Raktim' was not there but his mother was. Upon learning that the person they wanted was not to be found they left, but soon came upon five villagers, two peasants and three students, one of whom had just become a squad commander of the Ladaku Dal (Fighting Squad, the precursor to what later became the 'People's Liberation Army'). The policemen called out 'Lal Salaam' ('Red Salute') to them pretending to be Maoists. As the unsuspecting five responded with a 'Lal Salaam', they were detained by the policemen and taken to the police station in Rulbang. Two of the five, including a squad commander, were beaten to death in the police station. The police took the other three to the jungle in neighbouring Jaimakasala VDC in the early morning 2 days later and shot them. All the five bodies were buried there.¹⁵

Whether these killings had anything to do with the beating up of a group of people, including Sarbajit Budha and the VDC secretary Lal Bahadur Budha, a nephew of Sarbajit's, by the Maoists a few days after the uprising had begun, is not clear. But local Maoist informants in Jelbang said that this incident played a huge role in turning the people against the state. They claim that the relatives of some of those killed, including the brother of one, went underground and joined the Maoists in order to avenge their deaths. This incident triggered a subsequent sequence of revenge killings by the Maoists.

1997: Revenge killings by the Maoists

The first of these acts of vengeance took place in May 1997. A former CPN (Maoist) member who had defected to the Nepali Congress and been elected VDC chairman, Amil Pun of Rulbang, and Ker Singh Pun of Khibang, a ward chairman, were killed within days of one another. A Maoist in Jelbang said that they had killed the latter because of his involvement in the murder of the five villagers mentioned earlier. It has been reported that he was on way to fish in the nearby Khibang River when he was hacked to death with *khukuris* (traditional Nepali knives) (INSEC 1997).

Perhaps sensing danger from the rising level of violence from the Maoists, in August 1997, a second police post was set up in Jelbang VDC. The police moved into the house of the Nepali Congress supporter, Kul Bahadur Gharti of Thulogaun. This time the police were armed, and their deployment in Jelbang appears to have been a direct provocation to the Maoists.¹⁶ At the same time, another police post was also

¹⁵ Personal communication by 'Raktim' to Ogura.

¹⁶ This armed police force is the armed wing of the civilian police and to be distinguished from the Armed Police Force, raised specifically to take on the Maoists in 2001.

set up in Narabang of the adjoining Jaimakhasala VDC but since it was located just outside the border of Jelbang VDC, this post was also presumably meant to keep the Jelbang Maoists in check. It was very rare for a single VDC to host two police posts (three, counting the one at Narabang), let alone a contingent of the armed police (which was generally restricted to the district headquarters).

The role of Kul Bahadur in exacerbating the conflict is worth recounting here. He had come back after democracy had been restored in 1990 after spending some time in India, and had become the main person to challenge the UPFN in Jelbang. Kul Bahadur had received some martial arts training in India. Maoists claim that he had first tried to join the UPFN and gone to Thabang, where he had taught martial arts for some months. But following some personal problems, he went to Libang, the district headquarters of Rolpa, and joined the Nepali Congress. He had begun living in Libang in 1992 and had developed close ties to the police. Later, he got a government job to teach martial arts in Libang by using his close connections with the police and the local administration there. He also became a member of the Nepali Congress district committee. Local Maoists state that Kul Bahadur did not live in Jelbang at all but whenever he visited he used to behave violently towards other villagers, most of whom were supporters of the UPFN. Maoists also say that he sometimes brought the police from Libang to attack villagers. In 1996, during a visit to Jelbang, the Maoists had shot at him, injuring one of his family members, following which he took his family with him and began living fulltime in Libang.¹⁷

1998: Killings by both sides

A spate of killings took place from both sides in March 1998. On the 20th, Purna Bahadur Pun of Korbang was returning home after planting potatoes when he was hacked to death by the Maoists. He is also reported by the Maoists as having been involved in the killing of the five Maoists in August 1996. On the 23rd, Lalu Sunar of Rulbang was taken by the police to Rulbang police station where the police poured kerosene on him and burnt him. He survived but the police later shot him to death. On the 24th, Lal Bahadur Budha, the secretary of Jelbang VDC and thus a government employee, was killed by the Maoists. The same day, Sete Roka, Bagbir Roka, Bahadur Roka and Kal Sing Gharti, a ward chairman elected on a Nepali Congress ticket, who were all related to each other, were called to the Rulbang police station. They were all accused of being Maoist supporters and killed near the Ri River 2 days later. The Maoists say that Sete and Bagbir were members of their 'volunteer squad'.¹⁸

In October 1998, 51-year-old Nanda Lal Pun of Rulbang was killed by the police in Damphu. According to Maoist sources, Nanda Lal was staying in a relative's house at that time. He was a member of the Maoist farmers' group and a 'whole-timer' (a person who works full-time for the party) and so was required to provide

¹⁷ Ghanshyam Acharya, INSEC, personal communication to Ogura.

¹⁸ By 'volunteers', the Maoists mean anyone who is not a fighter with the 'People's Liberation Army' but who provides auxiliary support such as carrying ammunition and evacuating the wounded without taking part in the actual fighting. 'Volunteers' could either be part of the larger Maoist organisational structure, comprising of the party, united fronts, etc., but they could also be ordinary folks forced to join the group on a particular campaign.

food and lodging to the insurgents. But since his house was close to the Rulbang police post, he felt insecure and had gone to live with a relative. Not long after Nanda Lal's death, Kum Bir Pun of Rulbang was beaten to death by the Maoists at his home for being a *fataha* (cheat) and a *suraki* (informant). Then, in a case similar to Nanda Lal's, in November 1998, police shot dead Katake Pun, also in Damphu. He, too, had left his house near the Rulbang police post and gone to live in Damphu.

1999: Maoist strengthen their attack against the police

In January 1999, Ratha Roka of Ainselukharka was surrounded by the police at his home. When he tried to escape, he was shot and wounded. He was taken to the Rulbang police post and later killed. Ratha had been suspected of being a Maoist and arrested in November 1995 and taken to Rulbang police post before being released on bail. The Maoists now claim that he was one of them¹⁹ but he did not have a *nom de guerre*, a must for anyone who has joined the Maoists.

In May 1999, the Maoists carried out simultaneous attacks on the three police stations in Thulogaun and Rulbang (both in Jelbang VDC), and nearby Narabang. A police constable was killed in the attack and the Thulogaun post burnt down. After this coordinated attack, the police withdrew from Thulogaun and regrouped in Rulbang. But there was no letup in police action against Maoist supporters. In September 1999, Chandra Bahadur Budha (not to be confused with his more famous namesake) and Bahadure Budha of Khibang were arrested by the police from their homes and shot dead by the Sirbang River. Of these two, Bahadure was a Maoist while Chandra Bahadur was not.

Eleven days later, Chun Bir Pun, the 59-year-old former ward chairman of Rulbang who had been elected on a UPFN ticket in 1992 was beaten to death at his home by supporters of the Nepali Congress and the RPP. Following this incident, and probably fearing retaliatory attacks, the police abandoned the Rulbang police post and consolidated their position in Narabang. Also in May, the Maoists beat to death 60-year-old Iman Sunar of Rulbang, a Dalit who had been elected ward member on a Nepali Congress ticket, for voting in the parliamentary elections held a week earlier despite the boycott call by the Maoists (INSEC 1997).

2000: Police withdrawal from Jelbang area

In the face of continuing attacks, the police were retreating all over Rolpa and other Maoist strongholds. They moved out of Narabang as well and went down to the roadhead of Sulichaur following a successful Maoist assault on the Area Police Office in Ghartigaun in western Rolpa in February 2000 left 15 policemen dead, causing concern over the safety of isolated police positions.

¹⁹ The practice of claiming anyone killed by the state as one of their own was a common practice with the Maoists. One suspects that this was intended to gain sympathy for their cause since it could be claimed that the deceased were targeted precisely because of ideological reasons even though quite a few who died at the hands of the security forces just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. It also helped inflate the number of Maoist 'martyrs'.

The police withdrawal made non-Maoists like Sarbajit Budha and Chuk Bahadur Roka vulnerable and they left Jelbang to begin life as internally displaced people (IDPs). Most of them settled in Libang while some went to towns in the Tarai plains. In Rolpa District alone, more than 1,300 persons were registered as IDPs with the administration.

Jelbang became completely 'red' after the police posts were vacated and the Maoists set up 'people's governments' in the village (for a detailed discussion of 'people's governments' see Ogura 2008). After forming village-level people's governments in almost all VDCs in Rolpa, Maoists formed the first district-level people's government in March 2001. In effect, Jelbang had become a 'liberated area'. But that had come at a considerable cost. Thirty people from Jelbang VDC had been killed. State killings far outweighed those by the Maoists. To put it all in context, all of this happened at a time when the Maoist threat was still not considered to be serious by the state. It was only after the latter half of 2000 that the conflict began spreading to other parts of the country and the Maoists proved themselves capable of attacking larger government installations. Even by the time the July 2001 ceasefire had been declared, just over 1,500 people had died all over the country, and the cost to this small community had been around 2% of all that.

2001: The state of emergency and the confrontation of two armies
(the RNA and the PLA)

Jelbang was to suffer more in the years to come. In November 2001, a 4-month-long ceasefire with the government broke down. The army was called in and a nationwide State of Emergency imposed. The initial phase of army deployment was characterised by the state trying to take back control of territory in Rolpa that had been abandoned by the police retreat. As part of the military action in eastern Rolpa, 46 people were killed in an operation in Gumchal VDC not so far away from Jelbang in March 2002. Ten of those killed were from Jelbang, and nine of them were women who were members either of the women's organisation or of a cultural group. They were in Gumchal in training to become part of the 'area level squad force'. The Maoists had officially formed the People's Liberation Army the previous year during the ceasefire period and were intensively enlarging their armed forces in their 'base areas'.

In May 2002, the Maoists carried out a successful attack on the army's outward post in Gam in which over 70 security personnel and 35 Maoists were killed. Nine unarmed 'volunteers' from nearby Jelbang returning home after the attack were ambushed and killed by a security patrol of the army that was away from base at the time of the Maoist attack (for a detailed discussion on the role of 'volunteers' in Maoist attacks, see Ogura 2004).

In September 2002, the Maoists attacked the district headquarters of Arghakhanchi, a district to the east of Rolpa. During the 'search operation' that followed, government troops arrived in Jelbang and killed a party activist. A 3-year-old child

was killed in the crossfire as well. During this operation, the security forces also burnt down 14 houses in Jelbang, including those belonging to the Maoists.²⁰

The account given earlier does not include the many others who died in the course of Maoist attacks elsewhere. According to the Maoists from Jelbang, 60 of their comrades, ‘martyrs’ in their parlance, died in the decade-long fighting, while dozens were wounded or disabled. By the time the fighting ended in April 2006, around 90 persons from Jelbang were serving in the ‘People’s Liberation Army’ in various capacities. Of the total 519 households in Jelbang, members of 250 of them had been directly involved in the conflict on the Maoist side.

Making sense of the Jelbang killings

Politically motivated killings were common throughout Nepal during the conflict, but why were there such a high number of deaths in Jelbang? What circumstances made this village different from others in the area? In answering this question, we examine the main contributing factors. These include the long history of factionalisation in the village; the role of particular individuals in spreading violence, the deployment and brutality of the police and a particular pattern of police–Maoist revenge killings.

Factionalisation

There is a long history of factionalisation in Kham Magar villages (see de Sales, this volume). Villages in north-eastern Rolpa, such as Thabang, Jelbang, Gam and Khureli have been factionalised since the time of the Panchayat regime. After multiparty democracy was reinstated in 1990, factional fighting centered on conflict between political parties, especially between the Nepali Congress, the ruling party at the centre, and the United People’s Front Nepal, which swept Rolpa in both the first general election and the first local election. Jelbang, too, had been divided into two factions with Thulogaun, Rulbang and Khibang ranged against the rest of the village, and factionalisation became more intense after party politics entered the village after 1990. What seems to be different in Jelbang is that key individuals with ties to the administration used these connections to bring an exceptionally large police presence into the village.

It has been the practice in Nepal for politicians at the centre to rely on district leaders and the latter on the local leaders. The difference here was that political parties made no attempt to reach out to the people themselves and left it to the local leaders to rally support for whatever party they were affiliated with. In almost all cases all over Nepal, with the exception of the CPN (Maoist), the other parties tapped the local notables to serve as their representatives. This was evident in Jelbang as well after 1990. Both the former *pradhan panchas* of Jelbang found new

²⁰ The burning down of houses was a common method of punishing villages for ‘supporting’ the Maoists. Government troops burnt down many houses in Thabang in March 2002. The most infamous incident took place in Khara VDC, Rukum district in February 2000, and an inquiry into the event had been a long-standing demand of the Maoists in the initial rounds of peace talks.

political patrons, with Sarbajit Budha joining the Nepali Congress, and Chuk Bahadur Roka opting for the RPP. The RPP has by now almost faded out of relevance but during the crucial period between 1996 and 1999 they were very much in the power equation. Relations with the district administration were also patterned along similar lines, and the links between the village notables and the district headquarters made it easier for the former to manipulate the situation to their own advantage, which in this case would be suppressing their opponents while enhancing their own personal security. Thus, it was that the first police post in Jelbang was set up in 1994 at the request of Sarbajit Budha, following the killing of his brother, Sukhe. That it was housed in Rulbang in a house belonging to a close relative of Chuk Bahadur Roka's is also instructive of how these links between the notables and the administration worked. The second, located in the Thulogaun house of Kul Bahadur Gharti, was also near Sarbajit's house.

Revenge killings

At least six people were killed by the Maoists in Jelbang after they started their insurgency. The document by 'Raktim' mentions that most of them were targeted because they thought those people had been involved in the killing of villagers by police. Revenge killings were one of the tactics adopted by the Maoists when the police posts were still in the villages with the intention of making their village free of the police. Around the time of the local election in May 1997, the Maoists in Rolpa launched a campaign known as 'Hattilai Andha Banaune' (literally, 'Make the Elephant Blind', where the reference to the elephant is the state). The purpose of this campaign was to rid the village of 'spies' who were close to the police. In the course of this campaign two people, Amil Pun and Ker Singh Pun, were murdered in Jelbang by the Maoists.

For the Maoists, there was no more egregious crime than being an 'informer'. The 'informer' ranked on a scale lower than the 'class enemy'. Whereas action against the latter generally consisted in running them out of the village using various tactics, there was no reprieve possible for an 'informer', with *bhautik safaya* (physical elimination) being the preferred mode of dealing with them. It also has to be mentioned that unlike the security forces which were rather indiscriminate in their use of violence, the Maoists always knew who they were targeting even if this was based on faulty information. It was thus that people like the Jelbang VDC secretary, Lal Bahadur Budha, whose very nature of work required constant interaction with the district administration, was considered to be an 'informer' and killed in 1998. His killing took place just some months after the second police post came to Jelbang, and it is perhaps more than a coincidence that Lal Bahadur happened to be a nephew of Sarbajit's and was also very close to Kul Bahadur Gharti.

Revenge was a common behavioural motif for both sides. Killings by the Maoists caused retaliatory killings by the police. For example, as soon as Lal Bahadur Budha was killed in Korbang, five villagers from there were detained by the police on suspicions of being Maoists and later killed.

The police

When recounting the story of the Maoist insurgency, the role of the police in actually fanning the flames of rebellion while trying to stamp it out comes up time and again (Gautam et al. 2003 [2001]; Karki and Seddon 2003; Pettigrew 2003; Onesto 2003 [1999]; Thapa with Sijapati 2004). To understand why the police acted in the way they did, it is worth recounting the background of the Nepali police in the modern era.

The Nepal Police is modelled after the Indian Police Service, a force that had been created by the British for the express purpose of perpetuating their colonial rule. ‘No system of police has ever worked better for the suppression of political agitation, or agrarian disorder than the [royal] Irish constabulary,’ Sir Hugh Rose, the commander-in-chief of the Indian army is reported to have said while the reorganisation of the Indian colonial police was being considered in the mid-nineteenth century.²¹ Thus, it came to be that the British adopted a model for India that had worked well for British rule in Ireland. The military character of the Irish police was grafted on to the system then existing in South Asia, which has been described as ‘ruler-appointed...to protect and defend the ruler and the establishment’ (Dhillon 2005). It was this form of policing and the administrative structure guiding it that was introduced by Indian experts in Nepal as part of the administration reforms following the downfall of the one-family Rana regime in 1951.

Integral to this arrangement has been the office of the Chief District Officer (CDO), ‘the representative of the centre—the eyes and ears of the central administration’ (Shrestha 1985). The CDO is the district’s administrative head responsible for maintaining law and order and also has quasi-judicial functions that grant him the authority to place people in detention. Assisting him is the police which is ‘the sharpest sword of the CDO which is used in the prevention of crime, enforcement of law and maintenance of peace’ (Shrestha 1985). The centralised character of the police with no local accountability explains to a large extent the police brutality that has been a hallmark of law enforcement in Nepal.

CDOs report directly to the Home Ministry in Kathmandu, which in 1995 was headed by Khum Bahadur Khadka of the Nepali Congress, who had been elected from Dang, Rolpa’s neighbouring district to the south. It has been argued that Khadka took the Maoist activity in Rolpa as a personal affront, and made use of the district administration and the police at his disposal to try and crush it (Thapa with Sijapati 2004).

The police first set up base in Jelbang soon after the 1994 elections. That was at the time of the minority government of the CPN (UML), itself no friend of the Maoists. But the atrocities came later when the Nepali Congress was back in power a year later along with the RPP as coalition partners. As has been described earlier, the Nepali Congress and the RPP were the main political rivals to the UPFN/Maoists in Rolpa. In Jelbang itself the main opponents of the Maoists were Kul

²¹ Cited in Kirpal Dhillon, *Police and Politics in India—Colonial Concepts, Democratic Compulsions: Indian Police 1947–2002*, Manohar, Delhi, 2005.

Bahadur Gharti (Nepali Congress) and Chuk Bahadur Roka (RPP). With the district administration doing the bidding of the ruling coalition, and a very willing Home Minister backing them, it was only to be expected that the police would resort to extreme measures in tackling the Maoists.

Police high-handedness that began with Operation Romeo in Rolpa would be exacerbated in later years.²² In mid-1998, the Nepali Congress-led government launched another police operation, Kilo Sierra Two, in a number of districts, including Rolpa. By then, the extent of impunity granted to the police had reached such a height that the regional police chief even went on record to say: 'If they [the Maoists] don't respect the Constitution, we don't have to stick to the Constitution and take them to court'.²³

Mass involvement in the insurgency

Many Kham Magar villagers were collectively involved in the Maoist insurgency, which sometimes led to tragic massacres, such as the mass killings in the Gumchal Maoist camp and the 9 people from Jelbang killed on their return from the Gam attack. Other VDCs in this area have similar experiences of massacres, such as that in Gam VDC where 13 villagers were detained and killed the next day by the security forces during the counter-operation launched after the Maoists attacked Arghakhanchi in 2002; in Bhabang VDC where 11 members of non-armed cultural group were surrounded and killed by the police in 1999. Jelbang, however, remains unique as it had two instances of massacres, in which all the victims were unarmed. Although the Maoists have not disclosed the exact number of party members in Jelbang, they have confirmed that the number of party members, the number in the armed front, and the number of households involved generally in their movement was higher in Jelbang than anywhere else in Nepal. Further research remains to be done on this issue, but there does seem to be clear indication of a much higher level of involvement of Jelbang villagers than from any other VDC in Rolpa, higher even than the famous Thabang.

According to the information provided on the 60 'martyrs', a remarkable 87% of these people joined the Maoists around the time preparations were being made for the 'People's War' or after it had begun, indicating that the Maoists had not struck deep roots in Jelbang before 1996. This is corroborated by the fact that in comparison with other villages in Rolpa, such as Thabang, Libang and Gajur, Jelbang had fewer communist activists in the years preceding the insurgency. What was different in Jelbang compared to other villages was the level of police brutality.

²² The Dhimi Commission set up by the CPN(UML) to provide a better understanding of the Maoist movement specifically pointed out that a large number of innocents had been victims of police brutality.

²³ Deputy Inspector General of Police Sahabir Thapa (and later chief of the Armed Police Force) quoted in *The Kathmandu Post*, 8 July 1998.

Conclusion

Sixty-eight people from Jelbang died during the decade-long conflict, thirty of whom were killed within the village. Based on chronological analysis, our paper examined the circumstances that led to the high numbers of deaths in the village. A history of social activism, which predated the spread of the Maoist movement, and interrelationships between Jelbang villagers and well-known Maoists in Thabang led to the development of a support base for the movement in the village. The first communist in the village, Chandra Bahadur Budha, became the headmaster of the school and played an important role in radicalising local youth.

There is a long history of factionalisation in Jelbang which intensified when party politics entered the village. What seems to be different in Jelbang is that key individuals with links to the administration used these connections to bring an exceptionally large police presence into the village. Thus, the village ended up in the most unusual situation of hosting two police stations and a third one close by. These individuals were also able to use their party positions to influence the police to suppress their opponents. In Jelbang, the police far exceeded their remit. The brutality practised in the Rulbang police post, which characterised the state's counterinsurgency efforts, can be attributed to the attitude of the district administration, the role of sponsoring individuals, and an atmosphere of impunity. Those who have perpetuated the violence in Jelbang have not been called to account for their atrocities. In rural Nepal, the construction by the urban middle-class intelligentsia of a 'backward peasantry' who were perceived to support and fuel the insurgency allowed the state to participate in the worst kinds of violence and with impunity. A detailed analysis of the Maoist dead showed that the majority had joined rather late, a sign that the Maoists had not penetrated deeply in Jelbang before 1996. The motivation to join the Maoists seems to have arisen to a large extent from police brutality.

The Maoists have also played a contributory role to the high degree of violence experienced in this village. There was a pattern of revenge killings between the Maoists and the police. The killing of five villagers by the police 6 months after the Maoists started their insurgency caused at least two revenge killings by the Maoists. In 1998, two more villagers were killed by the Maoists under the charge of giving information to the police, which led to the killing of another five villagers by the police. A Maoist policy in the early stage of the insurgency, named 'To make the elephants blind', led to the death of at least four villagers in Jelbang. This cycle ended after the police stations in Jelbang were abandoned. But in the initial stage of the insurgency revenge killings clearly increased the antagonism between the Maoists and the anti-Maoist groups, before the former's simultaneous attacks on the three police stations made Jelbang a 'free zone' for the rebels.

The high number of deaths in Jelbang was due to a complex interplay of events, personalities and timing as well as particular interrelationships between the central administration and its local representatives and the state security forces. In an atmosphere of impunity, and with the support and facilitation of the administration, the police brutalised the local population. This was the most significant contributing factor to the high number of killings in the village. Although Jelbang arguably

suffered a greater number of deaths than any other community in Nepal, there are villages right across the country which have experienced (albeit to a lesser degree) conflict-related violence. Based on empirical research and the analysis of secondary data, our work draws attention to the need for historically and contextually situated analyses of what happened in places like Jelbang during the ‘People’s War’. Such insights show how violence was produced and experienced in diverse communities and have the potential to facilitate peace building in the post-conflict era.

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