

Fear and everyday life in rural Nepal

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Abstract This paper analyses fear in a village in central Nepal during the ‘People’s War’. Spanning the years from 1999 to 2008, the paper illustrates how the different phases of the insurgency and individual circumstances resulted in people’s relationship with fear changing over time. By presenting a chronological analysis of fear, the authors draw attention to the interrelationship between fear, temporality and sociality and show that fear is always contextually situated, differently experienced through time and related to personal circumstances. Villagers had strongly developed coping strategies which they drew upon to support themselves and decrease their fear. Some people, however, suffered such a degree of structural violence that experiencing fear was seen as a privilege. Others denied their fear as part of their performance of manliness while others coped by ridiculing fear. Although a certain amount of suspicion and mistrust lingered, most people recovered from the impact of chronic fear. They fully returned to their field and forest work as well as their previous social activities following the peace agreement of 2006.

Keywords Nepal · Maoist insurgency · Fear · Temporality · Coping strategies

Introduction

Although the ethnography of political violence has received considerable attention over the last decade, the study of conflict-related fear has received relatively limited consideration (for exceptions see Green 1995; Lysaght 2005; Skidmore 2004;

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Suárez-Orozco 1992). Our paper makes a contribution in this area by analysing fear in a Tamu (Gurung)¹ village in central Nepal during the People's War.² By presenting a chronological analysis of fear over time we draw attention to the interrelationship between fear, temporality and sociality and show that fear is always contextually situated, differently experienced through time and related to personal circumstances.

For the purpose of analysis, we have divided the Maoist insurgency into four different phases. Phase one corresponds to the late 1990s when Maoists first entered the village of Kwei Nasa.³ With their arrival, non-aligned villagers became frightened of what the changed political realities might mean. Some feared that pre-existing conflicts would become superimposed onto Maoist agendas, and this period marked the beginning of conflict-related suspicion of intimates. People were influenced by what had happened elsewhere, and what they feared might happen in Kwei Nasa. The situation changed markedly with the escalation of the insurgency in 2001 and the imposition of a State of Emergency. In this second phase, the Maoists went underground and the Royal Nepalese Army actively engaged in a counter-insurgency. Villagers were deeply fearful of being accused by the Maoists of acting as army spies, and of being viewed as Maoists by the army. People feared the Maoists but they were much more frightened of the army who remained aloof. In the violent aftermath of a soldier's killing, non-aligned civilians from neighbouring villages were killed, and Kwei Nasa villagers feared for their lives.

The third phase spanned the years from 2003 to 2006 when the village was *de facto* under Maoist control. The army visited rarely but the Maoist culture of surveillance penetrated deeply. Villagers supported *and* betrayed each other and people's fear focused on who was an insider and who was an outsider. Some villagers concealed their fear because of their gender and social position whereas others suffered from such a degree of structural violence that they saw fear as a privilege that they could not enjoy. The conflict ended in late 2006, and the fourth phase covers the post-conflict era up until the elections of 2008. Most people were no longer frightened, but some were not able to forget what had happened and remained distrustful or afraid. Others experienced extreme fear during the conflict but this did not prevent them from later becoming Maoists themselves.

¹ 'Tamu' is the singular of 'Tamu-mai', the term that the people who are better known as 'Gurungs' apply to themselves when they speak their own language Tamu Kyui (a Tibeto-Burman language indigenous to the Tamu-mai). As this paper is based on research carried out in a predominantly Tamu village and conducted primarily through Tamu Kyui we use the term 'Tamu' throughout. Most conversations in this article took place in Tamu Kyui (and non-English words included in the text are Tamu Kyui unless otherwise indicated). Pettigrew is responsible for translating them into English. Both authors are responsible for translating Nepali conversations into English.

² Our work is based on twenty fieldtrips ranging from 2 days to 2 weeks conducted between 1999 and 2008 which builds on Pettigrew's earlier work which commenced in 1990. For the purposes of analysis, we have broken the conflict into four different periods that we witnessed in the village. Some of these phases correspond to different nationwide phases, others do not.

³ All personal and place names are pseudonyms. We have chosen to give the village a Tamu Kyui pseudonym rather than a Nepali one, as although official names are in Nepali, all Tamu villages have a Tamu Kyui name that is always used when speaking Tamu Kyui. Certain ethnographic details have been disguised in this piece in an attempt to protect the identity of our informants.

Kwei Nasa appears to have been a good place to have lived during the insurgency. No one was killed, although Maoists beat villagers for perceived misdemeanours, and others were briefly abducted or forced to leave. However, between the years of 1999 (and especially post-2001) and 2006 most Kwei Nasa villagers experienced periods of deep fear. In this paper, we consider how fear was understood, expressed and concealed. We draw attention to the manner in which public conversations concealed inner concerns about disruptions to the social fabric and the transformation of social relations and cultural practices.

The Tamu Kyui term for fear is *nghiba*, and the word for terrified is *nghinghinghan*. The latter, however, is archaic and rarely used. Instead, most people use the word *lhe* (very) *nghiba* to describe extreme fear. When people stated they were *lhe nghiba*, we translated this into English as ‘very frightened’ and when they stated that they were *lhe, the nghiba* we translated this as ‘terrified’. In interviews conducted through Nepali in April 2005, we used the Nepali term *dar* for fear and the words *dheri dar lagyo* for ‘very frightened’ and *besari dar lagyo* for ‘terrified’.

By focusing on fear, we run the risk of over privileging it at the expense of other emotions. This attention is justified, however, as fear (or lack of fear) was the main characteristic which people used to differentiate the insurgency from the pre- and post-insurgency periods. Our aim in this paper is to provide a nuanced discussion that shows how fear is always contextually situated and differently experienced through time and social experience. Fear is not universal—not everyone is frightened all of the time, and people experience, express and conceal fear differently. Conflict related fear co-existed, interacted with, exacerbated and diminished other fears. People were also frightened (in different measures and in different ways) of vengeful neighbours and kin, ghosts, witches, political opponents, their enemies, indebtedness, impoverishment and destitution as well as the havoc created by hailstones and landslides. Villagers have strongly developed coping strategies which they drew upon to support themselves and decrease their fear.

Fear is not permanent in communities that have experienced conflict. It is strongly tied to the social world and social expectations. For those individuals who felt that the social world became more predictable and who felt that they had agency, fear subsided after the conflict. For people who continued to feel that social relations remained extremely unpredictable and the political situation gloomy, some degree of fear remained. Even when fear shifted, however, the impact of the changed social relationships remained—the increased suspicion around social interactions—would not rebound as easily.

Kwei Nasa

The village of Kwei Nasa contains several hundred households located along the upper slopes and top of a ridge in the Himalayan foothills. It has a health post, rice mill, teashops that serve as general-purpose stores, and a kerosene distribution centre, but it has no electricity. Kwei Nasa was founded by Tamu-mai who continue to be in a majority, but about 20% of the population is Dalit (previously

“untouchable”),. The outlying hamlets are home to other ethnic groups (Tamang and Magar) as well as Bahuns (hill Brahmins) and Chhetris (both of which are relatively privileged ‘high’ caste groups). The primary occupation is farming and the staple crop is rice, but maize and millet are also grown. Many villagers have relatives in foreign armies or working overseas, and remittances make a significant contribution to the local economy.⁴ Vegetable sellers visit weekly and other merchants come less regularly to sell dry goods, glass bangles, and sundry items. For everything else people make shopping trips to the town, which is less than a day’s walk away.

Pre-conflict fears

Prior to the conflict, people feared thieves, ghosts and otherworldly beings, the destruction of crops by hailstones, lightning, landslides, wild animals and the spirits of the forest. People were especially frightened of witches who were believed to be women from families with secret traditions of witchcraft. Villagers supported and depended on others but they also feared them, their snubs, their jealousy, their anger and its consequences. People feared giving offence and making social transgressions. They feared being humiliated and they feared social exclusion. Failure and its related loss of prestige, along with indebtedness, incapacitating illness, lack of access to healthcare and the loss of loved ones were primary village fears.

While the spirit world and fellow villagers were objects of fear, people also feared strangers: outwardly friendly people, who might abuse their hospitality, steal and deceive them. They also feared the police whose heavy-handed behaviour often characterised their occasional visits to the village. It was acceptable to talk about some of these fears but not about others. Fear of wild animals, thieves, landslides and hail were openly discussed, but social fears about the anger of others, about witchcraft and its accusations and counter-accusations, were considered *norbe ta* (‘inner talk’) and only discussed with trusted confidantes.

The Tamu emphasis on communal solidarity means that there are powerful restraints against the expression of difficult feelings. The situation is similar to Robert Desjarlais’s account of the social constraints on the communication of distress among the Yolma Wa of Helambu. He states that villagers,

...value the ability to “hold” one’s heartmind—to “hide” ones’ thoughts within the body and not let on, when faced with grief, pain or anger, that one is hurting... Yolma Wa evince a “rhetoric” of silence, holding that they must hide their sorrows... Just as...[they] disapprove of the social expression of personal turmoil, so they learn to shun it privately. A villager realizes...that it is an entirely sensible strategy to avoid emotional distress and so keep the heartmind “clear” (1994 [1992]: 142–143).

⁴ Particularly, in the Gurkha Brigade of the British Army and in the Indian Army. The largest proportions of those outside the country are migrant workers employed in India, the Gulf states, East Asia or South East Asia.

Fear and its concealment have always been part of village life. People hide emotional distress and in doing so attempt to self-support themselves and cope with turmoil by ‘smoothing’ their heartminds.⁵

The arrival of the Maoists

Armed Maoists first appeared in Kwei Nasa in the late 1990s. Initially, they made speeches, gave cultural performances and asked for financial donations and guns. While most Maoists were not local, there were Maoist activists in nearby hamlets where families with long histories of communist activism live. There were also Maoist sympathisers in the village, although the degree of sympathy was difficult to gauge, especially once the conflict escalated. The majority of villagers, however, were non-aligned.

The middle-aged and elderly, predominantly middle-income, non-aligned female villagers Pettigrew spoke to in 2000 saw the Maoists as a threat, which increased in relation to relative wealth. People with large houses, guns, money, and gold felt more at risk than poorer, less well-resourced ones. Human danger in the forest was not new—the lower trails that lead to the town are perceived to contain thieves and other categories of ‘bad people’ like murderers. Villagers minimised their risks by travelling in large groups, avoiding carrying large sums of money, and not wearing expensive jewellery. ‘Maoists’ were a shifting expanding category, which included the insurgents and a frightening mixture of thieves and bandits who masqueraded as Maoists. Pettigrew frequently heard villagers comment that, “Maoists want money and guns but they speak politely and explain their ideas and their programmes whereas the others just want money”. ‘Fear of Maoists’ was also fear of what people thought could be done in the name of the Maoist movement. As a villager explained,

Anyone could kill you these days and say it was the Maoists and nothing would be done about it. You could be killed by your enemies or by people who are angry with you for some reason and want revenge.

These comments were manifestations of fear, rather than actual occurrences. They reflected the new uncertainties and people’s concerns that the changed political realities could become entangled with pre-existing conflicts.

When asked why they were frightened of the Maoists, people replied “because people have died”. What was also shocking and unexpected to many older and middle-aged villagers was that locals, including young women, were among the Maoists. When Maoists ran a cultural and propaganda programme in a friend’s village, the images that she and her relatives emphasised were those concerning the membership of the group and their behaviour. It was local, young Tamu women with guns who threatened them. With Tamu youth involved, previous understandings of social relationships based on a relatively orderly progression of age overlaid

⁵ The *sai* (‘heartmind’) governs emotions, volition and cognition and morality. People talk of having a “full (happy) *sai*” (*sai toba*), a “small (unhappy, sad) *sai*” (*sai chyoba*), a “crying (unhappy, sad) *sai*” (*sai kroï*), a “full (satisfied) *sai*” (*sai mreï*). The *sai* is also the place of memory, thought and competency.

with ideas of gender-appropriate behaviour (men join armies, women stay at home), were completely undermined. People feared this new uncertainty.

Escalation of the conflict

By 2001, a Maoist training camp was based a day's walk above the village. Propaganda and cultural events, which included dancing, were held in Kwei Nasa and some villagers visited the camp in the high pastures. The number of Kwei Nasa Maoist activists, however, remained low and most people were sceptical about the rebels, viewing them with a mixture of fear and fascination.

The People's War reached a new height in November 2001, when the Maoists withdrew from a ceasefire and initiated a series of attacks across the country, including ones targeted at Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) barracks. This was the first time the Maoists directly challenged the army, rather than just the poorly armed police. In response, the Government of Nepal imposed a State of Emergency, called out the army and put into place an Ordinance granting the state wide powers to arrest people involved in 'terrorist' activities. During the first month and a half of the emergency the Nepali human rights organisation INSEC (Informal Sector Service Center 2002: 65, 67) reported that 687 people were killed by the security forces, with a further 184 killed by Maoists. In the following months, the conflict deepened with the Maoists launching several large-scale attacks on the security forces.

Following the introduction of the State of Emergency, the camp above Kwei Nasa was disbanded, and Maoists, now deemed to be terrorists, changed their relationship with the village. As their camps became targets for army raids, they moved out of the jungle and into the villages requesting daily food and shelter. Their movements became clandestine and their arrival and departure, although primarily timed for late afternoon or early morning, was less predictable. Villagers' fears were realised as the deployment of the army meant that their homes became a target when the Maoists were present and after they left. Both sides unrestrainedly operated in the public spaces of paths, schools, fields and teashops *and* the private spaces of courtyards, verandas, and homes. As an elderly woman explained, "There was no hiding place"⁶

Upon arrival in the village in July 2002, a neighbour invited us for tea. Pettigrew asked Purna Kumari and her husband Kancha about life in the village. "How are things? Are there Maoists around?" she asked. "Yes, almost all the time", replied Purna Kumari. "Does the army come?" Pettigrew asked. "Yes, they come" replied Purna Kumari and continued,

A couple of months ago Kancha and I were working in the fields below the village. We were alone, just the two of us. Suddenly I saw the helicopters

⁶ Writing about Northern Ireland Lysaght (2005) draws attention to the interrelationship between political violence, space and fear. In the Northern Irish case relatively safe spaces existed (segregated enclaves). This is in contrast to villages like Kwei Nasa where there were no safe spaces during the insurgency. This significantly contributed to the degree of fear experienced in rural Nepal.

coming, there were two of them. I watched them from the time they were like tiny moving ants in the distance until they landed. As they came closer and closer I nearly fainted with fear and I said to myself, “Maybe this will be the day I die.” I was terrified that the soldiers would behave as they have behaved in other villages where they hit and killed people. The soldiers stayed one night and patrolled around the village and the surrounding area. They asked us if the Maoists come and if we feed them and we said that we hadn’t seen the Maoists and that we don’t feed them. We had no choice but to lie. We didn’t want to be beaten and we didn’t want to die. They left, we were lucky.

Terrible things have happened in my friend’s village. Some months ago Maoists killed an army officer. Shortly afterwards the army came to search the village and hit everyone with rifles. They hit old and young alike and they even hit people in the stomach. During the search a helicopter circled overhead and fired into the village and the nearby forest. The firing was aimed at houses where the soldiers thought they saw smoke. A few days later somebody told the army that Maoists were eating a meal in the next village. By the time the soldiers arrived the Maoists had left and only the family remained. The soldiers came in with their guns firing and killed the newly-married daughter and her husband who was home on leave from his job in Saudi Arabia. She died with her hand full of rice. The Maoists escaped but they were arrested the next day.... They were apprehended in the school grounds but they were not killed in front of the children, they were taken a little way into the forest and killed there. The radio said that they were killed during a fight but this wasn’t true—they were killed after they were caught. One day shortly after that a *lato* [a man with a hearing impairment] was shot dead by the army as he ran away when he saw them. He didn’t understand and couldn’t speak to them and as he was frightened he ran. They killed him because they thought that he was a Maoist. The army killed a friend of my mother’s when she was cutting grass for her buffalo in the forest. They heard something moving and they just shot, they didn’t bother to check who it was and so my mother’s friend died. Nowadays we are very frightened of going into the forest...

The army were waging a counter-insurgency, and this was our introduction to the type of fear they evoked which was based on aloofness and seemingly callous randomness and was of a different nature to the fear evoked by the Maoists.

Several hours later, we chatted with Dhan Kumari, Pettigrew’s village ‘sister’. Pettigrew told her that she was thinking of visiting nearby villages to get details of recent army killings. Dhan Kumari looked horrified; she did a quick scan of the veranda and courtyard and told Pettigrew in a hushed and hurried voice,

You cannot go there, it is terribly dangerous, and you cannot talk about the killings. They are secret things. It is very dangerous to talk about what the army does. Do you not know that the Maoists are here nearly every day? They come and force villagers to feed them, there is no choice. And then the army

comes and they blame people because they fed the Maoists. It is a very dangerous time now...

This brief 'inner talk' was communicated in a whisper. Dhan Kumari considered it to be dangerous to even talk about "secret things" whereas Prem Kumari talked openly about army killings. Dhan Kumari was more fearful than her neighbours and friends and so interpreted situations as being more dangerous.

On the second morning of our stay, Pettigrew visited one of the teashops to have a chat with the owner. In hushed tones, Man Maya told her about a recent visit of the Maoists,

In the early evening a group arrived. They were heavily armed and they wore belts with bullets around their waists. One of the girls was very young—she couldn't have been more than thirteen. It upset me to look at her as she was about the same age as my eldest daughter.... The leader of the group told me that they wanted food and to stay the night. I told them that I could feed them but I pleaded with them not to sleep in the house. I said "If you stay here and the army arrives then all my family will be killed." One of them laughed and replied, "Then we'll die together." I begged them not to stay and they left after they had eaten.

It is such a frightening time, things that we could never have imagined are now happening on a regular basis.

Later that day, Man Maya saw us, and laughingly told us that the first time Adhikari had visited her shop she assumed that he was a Maoist (this was his first trip to the village). She explained that on seeing him she felt frightened but tried to appear calm while struggling inwardly to conceal her fear. This approach to 'smoothing' the heartmind was a common coping strategy. It described a person's inward struggle to control fear so as to prevent it from increasing. It also referred to an attempt to hide fear from the Maoists so that people could maintain their dignity and not let the insurgents see how much power they in fact held.

Fear of the army

The security forces were viewed as distant, terrifying and unpredictable and were deeply feared. As they sometimes visited by helicopter there was little opportunity for people to be forewarned of their arrival. They brought an intimidating array of military hardware and although the Maoists also carried the paraphernalia of war the army was more heavily equipped. The soldiers maintained a physical and spatial distance (in contrast to the Maoists who spoke to people and ate with them). Villagers commented, "It is impossible to speak to them; they only ask questions and give orders". The soldiers' physical presentation, combined with their aloofness, distanced them from the local population in a manner that was in contrast to the Maoists. The Maoists were also frightening but less so as they fitted into the social fabric in a way that the army did not. It was partly the sociality of otherness that made people so frightened of the soldiers.

While the security forces were present, people feared that they would learn about villagers' relations with the Maoists. When the army left, villagers worried that the Maoists would interpret villagers' interactions with the army as traitorous. Several people in the locality had been punished by the Maoists for allegedly spying.

Late 2002

The State of Emergency ended in August 2002. On a cold December morning in 2002, we set out for Kwei Nasa. We met a group of people from a nearby village who explained that they were going to take a path that avoided travelling through the forest, since the Maoists were there. They suggested that we walk with them. As we followed a barely discernible path that traversed the open fields, the middle-aged woman, dressed in her best going-to-town clothes, looked towards the forest and commented, "They have been in the forests for the last 3 days. They must be hungry and hungry people are angry people, so they could be dangerous". A few minutes later she added, "Don't worry; we are just ordinary people so they won't hurt us". This combination of fear followed by self-reassurance was a common coping strategy.

Several hours later, we parted company from our companions and walked the last half hour up to the village. On arrival, we were told that 400 Maoists had been in the area a few days previously, but had left. In another village, they had ransacked the development project's office and had slaughtered and eaten the pet deer. The small project office in Kwei Nasa was untouched, but the staff had fled. As she served us tea Dhan Kumari said, "When you were here in the summer we were frightened of them. Now we aren't frightened anymore. We had 400 of the red army to stay and we are not frightened any longer".⁷ When she discovered that some researchers she knew were visiting the nearby town she commented, "As you can see it is perfectly safe here. Why didn't you bring the others with you? Pettigrew explained that they hadn't come as they felt worried about the situation in the village and she replied, "Why? There are no Maoists and no army". She then returned to telling stories about the Maoists.

Some time later, the conversation turned to Christmas, which was in 3 days' time. Laughing, Dhan Kumari who grew up overseas in a Gurkha military family said, "Let's have a party tomorrow. They have Coke in new plastic bottles at the shop and we could have some of them with the biscuits and sweets you brought". Pettigrew commented, "I'm really thirsty, let's go to the shop now and buy some of those new bottles of Coke". She stopped weaving for a moment and said forcefully, "No. You can't go there, that's where the Maoists sit, they are always at the shop. You are not to go there". Instead, she told Raju (a 7-year-old relative) to go and buy the drinks. He was to, "come back immediately and not to talk to anyone". Dhan

⁷ Dhan Kumari, who knows a few words of English, inserted the English words "red army" into this sentence.

Kumari returned to talking about how safe it was in the village and how there were no Maoists. When Raju returned she took the bottles out of his bag and as she began distributing them she quietly asked him, “Did you see anyone?” With an almost imperceptible nod of his head he signalled that he had.

Comments about not being frightened were a reflection of what people felt, but at other times they were part of a process of denial. Sometimes the risks were so great, the options for escape so small and people so fearful, that to go on they told themselves and others that they were not frightened. While familiarity with the Maoists had apparently decreased Dhan Kumari’s fear, or so she said, she was in fact terrified. Struggling to manage the situation, she convinced, or attempted to convince herself and others, that she was not frightened. Concealing fear was also a coping strategy, the public denial of fear helped it subside.

As the sun faded and a wintry chill came over the courtyard, our neighbour Aasha appeared. Walking purposively towards us she said, “There are 500 Maoists walking into the village”. One of the women looked up at the path above our hamlet and said, “Look, here come some of them”. We turned quickly to see the silhouettes of two men and a woman walk past the water tap carrying large packs with guns over their shoulders. The group in the courtyard scattered, some to return home and others to pass the news on to neighbours and kin. Earlier in the afternoon, we had mentioned that trekking permits were no longer being issued in certain areas, and recalling this information, Dhan Kumari said in a panicky voice, “Perhaps they will think that you [Pettigrew] are a spy. Go into the house quickly and hide in the bedroom. I am going to lock it and sit outside cutting vegetables. If they come I will try to get them to go to another house”. Adhikari muttered beneath his breath that, “all of this is unnecessary, they won’t bother us”, but complied nonetheless.

People experience fear differently and some are more fearful. These variations relate to personality, the impact of particular experiences and life situations, coping skills and available resources including degree of support. Most of Dhan Kumari’s closest relatives were dead and she felt very alone. She had chronic health problems, which had been diagnosed by doctors in the town as mainly anxiety-related. Dhan Kumari was more frightened than her neighbours and friends and as a result, evaluated situations as being more dangerous. Fear is embedded within relationships and because Dhan Kumari is somewhat ‘disconnected’ socially she was more fearful.

Some time later, Dhan Kumari unlocked the house and let us out. Then, she told Raju to “do sentry duty”, while she went to the kitchen to begin dinner. This meant that he was to sit at the edge of the courtyard and inform her if the Maoists arrived. Holding his catapult in his hand Raju perched casually on the courtyard wall while surreptitiously observing the goings on and ascertaining the risks. Dhan Kumari was nervous and irritable but doing small things like cooking, grinding spices and stirring the saucepan eventually calmed her down.

After the meal, we sat around the hearth and chatted about everyday matters, but the Maoists were not mentioned. Everyone was aware that *they* had ‘closed’ the village and that it was impossible to enter or leave until they ‘opened’ it the next day to allow people to work in the fields. Talking in low tones, we sat close to the fire

and to each other. Raju held a puppy in his arms, and Dil Maya hugged them both. The usual glass of *paa* (millet wine) turned into two and then three and four. Dhan Kumari observed: “We drink a lot these days”. Then, making the only reference to the events of the day, she added, “What else can we do?”

Living with the Maoists 2003 – 2006

In August 2003, a 5-month-long ceasefire broke down when the Maoists withdrew from the negotiating table. The end of the ceasefire was greeted with resignation in Kwei Nasa. Most villagers we spoke to in the spring of 2003 had anticipated the return to conflict, fearing that neither side was really ready to talk. It was during this ceasefire that we first heard people talk about “forgetting fear”. With the Maoists and the security forces out of the village, people talked about having “forgotten their fears”. With the resumption of hostilities fear returned.

By mid-2003, the Maoist parallel administration was deeply influential. Used to administrations that exerted limited or minimal influence, the villagers found themselves under a shadowy regime characterised by what they experienced as random and unclear policies enforced by violence or the threat of violence. To complicate matters, the Maoist administration had only partial control, as the village remained officially under the remit of the Nepal government, whose security forces could appear at any moment to search for Maoists and scrutinise villagers for signs of collaboration. The soldiers, who in reality visited rarely, were simply terrifying, unlike the Maoists who were both “frightening” and “not frightening”. As “frightening” people, the Maoists threatened, intimidated, demanded food and shelter at gunpoint, extorted money, abducted and killed people. They subjected villagers to a regime of surveillance in which accusations for perceived misdemeanours were frequent.

As “not frightening” people, the Maoists showed themselves to be open to negotiation, they made efforts to ingratiate themselves to villagers, helped in the fields and around the house, washed their dishes, swept the floor, took on the government and advocated a new Nepal in which people would enjoy greater equality and opportunities. They explained their programmes to villagers and dispensed a type of quick justice that some admired. For the majority, who did not fall foul of them or were not targeted, the Maoists were simultaneously “people who could kill *and* people who won’t harm you (provided you did what they wanted)”. Zealous propagandists, cold-blooded killers and benevolent ‘guests’, they were feared, derided *and* admired.

Fear and authority

The Maoists forced the outreach workers from the urban-based development project to discontinue their work and the Village Development Committee secretary relocated to the town, as did a number of politically prominent villagers. The only

Nepal government representatives remaining in the village were the health workers and the teachers, and both groups came under scrutiny and pressure.⁸

The central figure in the local Maoist administration was the political commissar locally referred to as the “commander” (in other areas referred to as the ‘in-charge’). See Lecomte-Tilouine, this volume). Daily life in the village was heavily influenced by the commander’s interpretation and enforcement of Maoist policy. Two commanders were particularly noteworthy.

Moti Lal was a Bahun from a well-known local Maoist family. Despite the general lack of support in the village for the insurgents, Moti Lal, an organic intellectual (see Shneiderman, this volume) was extremely popular. He had a reputation for being fair, non-punitive and genuinely concerned about people’s welfare. His local affiliations were particularly important. One evening, an elderly neighbour, commented,

He went to school with my son and he used to be around the village a lot. You [Pettigrew] have probably met him before. He loves his own people and so he does not give *dukha* [Nepali] [trouble] to us. Recently the army destroyed his house, he is often out of the area, and so we fear commanders who do not know us and give us *dukha*.

In early 2004, Moti Lal was killed. Many people were deeply upset by his death and even those who were most fervently anti-Maoist expressed real regret. Villagers had to adjust to the new commander, Jitendra, a Tamu from another district.

Villagers were especially interested in Tamu Maoists. This was partly normal inquisitiveness as people wanted to know what familial or clan relationship they shared and from which district and village they originated. Their interest was also motivated by a perception that, as they were joined by kinship, language, culture and place, they could bring them under their sphere of influence.

Jitendra’s ethnicity mattered little, however, as although he emphasised outer markers of Tamu identity like clothing and language, he deemphasised the elements that mattered most to locals. He was immune to kinship pressures and allegiances, which non-aligned Tamu villagers often attempted to manipulate, unusually unsuccessfully, with visiting Tamu Maoists. For example, it took some time for people to discover his clan membership and he did not use clan based kinship terminology or interactional patterns. While Jitendra was a Tamu and an ‘insider’ to the Tamu majority, in fact, he was much less of a local insider than the Bahun Moti Lal. Kinship relations are used to decrease the social distance and fear of others, but in this case, they did not work. It was the type of authority that the commander used and the type of social relationship that he formed that was significant. Moti Lal had

⁸ Teachers and health workers were vulnerable to threats and intimidation from both sides. Because of historical links between teachers and left wing ideology, the security forces suspected them of being Maoist activists while the Maoists might consider them government spies. Caught between the demands of the Maoists to comply with their requests, and the demands of the security forces not to do so, they faced extreme pressures. Teachers and health workers were required to give a proportion of their salary to the Maoists. How much they gave varied but was often between 5% and 15%. These professionals were frequently reluctant to reveal how much they gave and sometimes denied or downplayed the amount demanded.

intimate knowledge of the village and made judgements based on detailed contextual information. This was important but what was more important was his consistent, non-punitive, sociable style of leadership which was much less frightening than that of distant, authoritarian, unfriendly and unpredictable Jitendra.

The fear of not knowing who people were

As the conflict continued, insecurity increased. Strangers moved in and out of the village on a daily basis. Some were Maoists, some were soldiers masquerading as Maoists, others were spies masquerading as villagers, and others still were thieves masquerading as Maoists. The usual talk of ghosts and witches was overshadowed by talk (and reality) of armed groups moving along the village paths at night. The Maoists were said to sometimes crawl while the soldiers always walked. Doors were banged at night and people were unsure if the perpetrators were human or supernatural, locals or strangers.

There was a perceived and real increase in lawlessness. People feared criminals who masqueraded as Maoists. It was sometimes difficult to distinguish them. One day, as Pettigrew walked through the village, a woman, who lives with her elderly sister called her over. She leaned close and said,

Last month I nearly died of fear. One evening a handsome young man who spoke nicely and looked like a Tamu came to our house. He said “Last time I came I was with the Maoists. I have now left the movement and am going home to my village”. I am not sure if we met him previously as so many of them have visited our house. I gave him tea and snacks and he left...in the evening he re-appeared as we were getting ready for bed. He had an alarm clock, which he held up to his mouth and pretended to be talking on a mobile phone. He told me that I should sleep inside the house instead of sleeping in my bedroom off the veranda. He said that four heavily armed Maoists were in the nearby shop and were coming to the house. They were very dangerous and could steal everything. I was a bit worried but I thought that he was exaggerating and said that I was going to sleep in my usual place. I left for bed.

After that he entered the house and told my sister not to make any noise and to give him her necklace. She had already taken it off and hidden it, as she was suspicious of him. He pretended to talk on the phone again; she was unsure what he was doing as he talked about calling the heavily armed Maoists to the house. He pulled out a gun, which may, or may not, have been real. After a long while, my sister managed to leave the room and shouted for help from the neighbours. They came and he ran away.... When we told the Maoists what had happened they said, “That’s alright, when we went to your house last month she (my sister) wouldn’t give us food so that’s fine”. They didn’t support us at all and even though the thief had not travelled far they didn’t chase him and punish him. There is no security now and there are so many groups of people wandering around—the Maoists, thieves who pretend to be

Maoists, soldiers who pretend to be Maoists. How can we work out who they are? It's so frightening.

Through a mixture of naiveté, social uncertainty and an attempt to depend on non-existent kinship ties these elderly women allowed a thief into their house. However, they managed to redeem themselves and demonstrated that they had learnt how to live in unstable times. They fell for the ruse, but not entirely, as they concealed their jewellery and alerted their neighbours.

Coping with fear

When questioned about fear, villagers responded that they were frightened “of being killed”, “of being injured during fighting”, “of children been abducted or forcibly recruited by the Maoists”, “of Maoists, thieves and the security forces”. The fears they listed were extreme: people were primarily frightened of “death”, “injury” or “abduction”. Behind this focus on the body was a more deeply felt and concealed concern with the ‘death’, ‘injury’ and ‘abduction’ of the social fabric, of ‘wounds’ and ‘injuries’ which transformed social relations and cultural practices.

Villagers always said that they survived with the support of others, and while this was true, the conflict created social fragmentation. People feared strangers but they also feared each other. They were less sure of each other. Outwardly, the idea of a mutually supportive society endured, and in many ways, people were quick to support and assist others. However, people knew that the Maoist surveillance-society was perpetuated by local collusion. People supported each other *and* betrayed each other. This generated suspicion, mistrust and insecurity. There was increasing uncertainty about who could be party to ‘inner talk’ and the allegiances and motivations of even the most trusted confidantes came under suspicion. These lines were not firmly drawn in the past of course, as allegiances and affiliations were always fluid, but the degree of uncertainty was less extreme and the stakes lower.

Talking about fear in jest

Fear was talked about in different ways and sometimes with hilarity. Older women in particular spoke about it in jest. Instead of downplaying their fears, they presented themselves as people entirely overwhelmed by fear. One day, 67-year-old Prem Kumari, a single woman who lives alone, came to visit. A few weeks previously she had returned home to find six Maoists encamped in her courtyard. They asked for food and shelter. She served them tea and while they were drinking she locked her house and said that she would be back in a few minutes. Instead, she ran along the village paths and went to her sister-in-law's house to hide. She didn't return to her house for a week, “In case they were still there!” she added. As Prem Kumari told her story she laughed, delighted to think that she had been so cunning. Pettigrew

asked why she had behaved like this. “Fear” she replied loudly and instead of speaking about it in a whisper, she stated that she was totally overwhelmed by fear. Throwing back her head in laughter she said, “Of course, I was terrified. We only have fear, we are terrified! That’s all we have...fear! I am frightened all the time!” Fear was managed by exaggeration. This had a parallel to the ‘smoothing’ of the heartmind as in both conceptualisations the emotion was trivialised. Through the parodying of fear, villagers challenged the notion that fear was the dominant—and only—emotional experience in their lives. The parody, in contrast, suggests that there is actually more to life. Ultimately, the parody decentres the supremacy of fear.

Masculinity, fear and fearlessness

There was a tension between fear and masculinity. Although all people downplay and conceal fear, men especially deny that they are fearful as part of their performance of manliness. Fear may be acknowledged, minimised or denied depending on the context, on who the audience is and what is personally at stake. While women also use this strategy men use it more frequently.

In late 2005, Maoists arrived at the home of Chandra Bahadur, a 33-year-old social activist and local leader. The Maoists told him that he had to attend a meeting of the Tamu Mukti Morcha (Tamu Liberation Front) in Khoda, a village a day’s walk away. Chandra Bahadur was accompanied to the village by Maoists who were not openly armed but had grenades in their back packs. When he arrived at Khoda, he discovered that local leaders from all across the area had been assembled. In front of thousands of people, Chandra Bahadur was garlanded as a member of the Tamu Mukti Morcha central committee along with 11 other unsuspecting people.

Chandra Bahadur was very taken aback and subsequently asked if he could resign. He stated that he would help informally, but did not want to be an official member of the front. The event at Khoda was broadcast on radio, as was his name, and he had to report to the army to explain what had happened. Chandra Bahadur became very frightened and relocated to the city. He occasionally visited the village. During one of his visits, Pettigrew and a colleague, who is trained in conflict negotiation, spoke to him secretly. Our colleague tried to assist Chandra Bahadur in developing strategies to negotiate with the Maoists, He was so fearful, however, that he felt unable to approach them to begin negotiations. His usual *voix de vive* was gone and he only left his house accompanied by a ‘bodyguard’. Fortunately, the peace process started 6 months later and Chandra Bahadur returned to the village. In subsequent conversations about fear, Chandra Bahadur stated that he was “not frightened of the Maoists”, and we have overheard him tell others that he was not fearful. By denying his fear, Chandra Bahadur presents himself as a macho man who masters his emotions. Thus, he is differentiated from “the frightened women”. However, this tactic denies his terror of late 2005 which was clearly evident (and which he acknowledged) at the time.

Fear as a privilege

Some people expressed fearlessness. Sanu, an impoverished Dalit woman, who was dressed in rags and looked much older than her stated age told us that she had “no fear”. “I have so much sorrow, how can I have fear? There is no place for fear in such a life. I don’t care if I live or die, so why should I be frightened?” she said. Here, fear is seen as an emotion that those less encumbered with sorrow have the privilege to experience. Thapa and Hauff (2005), who worked among internally displaced people in western Nepal, found that post-traumatic stress disorder (an experience centred on fear) was actually more common among Bahun/Chhetris than among Dalits. Sanu’s comments illustrate that fear and anxiety implies a threat to the positive experiences or positive status of one’s life. Experiencing fear is seen as a privilege implying that there is actually something to fear losing, whereas an extremely marginalised person like Sanu has nothing to lose and so nothing to fear.

2006 – 2008 nothing much happened?

Fear of death, injury and abduction were fears of events that were relatively unlikely to occur. No one in Kwei Nasa was killed during the conflict (although people in nearby villages were), Maoists beat some villagers for minor misdemeanours, others were abducted briefly and then released, some were publicly humiliated and others were forced to leave. Children in nearby villages were abducted for Maoist education programmes, but not in Kwei Nasa as parents were forewarned by local Party members. No village children were recruited by the insurgents. When viewed from this perspective, Kwei Nasa was a good place to live during the insurgency. However, between 1999 (and especially post-2001) and 2006 most villagers of Kwei Nasa experienced periods (albeit sporadic and of differing intensity) of deep fear. How did fear work in Kwei Nasa and what transformations did it bring?

We returned to the village in December 2006 following the signing of the peace accord between the Maoists and the government in November 2006. The first indication of change came as we drove through the outskirts of the town. The check-post was gone, along with the soldiers who manned it, there was no barbed wire in sight, and the roof of the house above the check-post where a soldier with a machine gun had stood behind sand bags was once again a flat-roofed house with a chicken coop.

On arrival, in Kwei Nasa, the bamboo Maoist martyrs gate was gone. Dhan Kumari had extended her evening radio listening hours and discovered new and enjoyable programmes that she was avidly following. She often went to bed just before midnight, much later than before the conflict. The Maoists moved around openly, a *jan sarkar* (Maoist village people’s government committee) had been formed, and the committee meetings held openly.

Dances were frequently organised and extended long into the night in contrast to the abbreviated versions of previous years. People visited family, friends and neighbours and returned home late. Young people often stayed out all night. Chandra Bahadur commented,

During the conflict we couldn't move around freely. The Maoists told people, and especially the young people, to stay at home at night and not walk along the paths as they said that they could not guarantee their safety. They told us that we might be mistaken for soldiers and killed. Now people are walking around the village all night. They are visiting family and friends. They are dancing and singing and often the young people stay up all night. They are making up for what they missed.

Villagers were free to socialise with each other and through community-wide social events they were also beginning to re-socialise with strangers.

With a peace agreement signed, the mystique that surrounded the Maoists was shattered. For the first time in years, it was possible to talk openly with them without the danger of repercussions. People who were used to thinking of the Maoist as 'other' began to find that they were surprisingly like themselves. A woman in her early thirties commented, "Before I was frightened of both the Maoists and the army.... If we did not provide food and accommodation they could become angry.... Now there is no fear because now we know that the Maoists are also people like us". The key factor between fear and lack of fear was the social relations. However, it was more complicated than that because while they previously ate with and talked to Maoists they were seen as 'outsiders'. What was different was that they could interact with Maoists without fear of violence. The social relations were balanced in a way that they were not during the insurgency.

Although some villagers were positively re-evaluating the Maoists, others remained wary. A 45-year-old mother of two stated,

There is less fear because of the peace agreement.... Previously when I went to the forest I was frightened that the children would be taken while I was away. I was frightened of sending the children to school. I was frightened of being killed by the army. Now we can move around freely but I am suspicious...and I am still frightened of being killed by the Maoists. The Maoists and the government might not agree in the future...

A shopkeeper hoped that the future would bring peace as well as greater equality between rich and poor, an end to corruption and opportunities for her family. However, she was also worried, adding, "Sometimes I think that the future will not be good and the situation will become worse than it was before".

Chandra Bahadur was very relieved that the Maoists had joined the political mainstream. He explained,

There is a huge difference between the past and now. Before it was difficult while having a meeting and organising sports events. If we took permission from one side, the other side didn't agree.... The school used to have to close. The students were frightened when a helicopter came. We were frightened when a helicopter or the Maoists came. We even had to stop reading the newspaper when either side came.

I am hopeful that the political situation is getting better. People have become active and they have hope.... We can have discussions. We need freedom....

The leaders could make some mistakes and if that happens the corrupt and feudal people can reappear. The conflict can return. We have to work together.... If we share with others what we have experienced during the conflict we can recover.

What did Chandra Bahadur mean when he talked about recovery? What was there to recover from? Armed Maoists or soldiers no longer forcibly entered people's homes, villagers did not have to pass through check-posts or be searched, they questioned strangers on the paths and they unrestrainedly danced, sang, visited and stayed out all night. However, Chandra Bahadur was not talking about reclaiming space. He was acknowledging the social transformations brought about by the conflict. The nights might be filled with dancing and the bamboo martyrs' gates dismantled, but the changed social relationships—the increased suspicion around social interactions—would not rebound as easily.

A certain amount of suspicion and mistrust remained, but as the examples earlier show, many individuals were able to recover previous patterns of movement and return to expected activities such as field and forest work or sending their children to school. Despite the fear expressed during the conflict, the people of Kwei Nasa recreated expected life patterns. This contrasts with assumptions that conflict produces chronic fear impairing individuals from resuming so-called normal lives after political violence.

Forgetting fear

We were struck by comments we first heard during the ceasefire of 2003 when people talked about having “forgotten fear”. Although this is the literal translation, it should also be described as ‘not remembering’ or more specifically, no longer having intrusive memories. Since the end of the insurgency people have talked a lot more about forgetting fear. While people sometimes talked about past fears, fear was not a currently experienced emotion in the sense that it was during the insurgency. “Forgetting fear” was also a coping strategy that allowed villagers to put the past behind them.⁹ Previously frightened people could see beyond the guns and their own fear and were willing to forget. The story of our neighbour Lek Bahadur illustrates how one individual forgot his fear and how experiences of intense fear were not mutually exclusive with explicit support of and engagement with the Maoists.

Early one morning in September 2004, Pettigrew overheard a whispered conversation between her neighbour, Lek Bahadur, and Dhan Kumari. Lek Bahadur whispered,

They arrived when it was raining and sheltered in our house for about an hour. They have gone now but they say that they will be back in the evening with their friends. They have left their packs on the veranda. What should I do?

⁹ This is not the case for people who were deeply traumatised. People interviewed in other villages who were injured in crossfire and were traumatised re-experienced fear in their heartmind each day.

I want to move them in case the army arrives, because if they find them we will be killed, but I am terrified that they contain bombs which might explode if they are moved.

So began what Lek Bahadur later described to Pettigrew as “the longest and worst day of my life”. The army did not arrive, the bags did not explode and the young Maoist women returned in the evening to collect them. Later Lek Bahadur commented, “I have never been pleased to see the Maoists, I do not support their ideas, and do not like them frightening and threatening us, but that day I was happy when they re-appeared”.

In mid 2006, a large contingent of the PLA underwent a month of training in Kwei Nasa. People were not fearful as the Maoists were no longer underground and many villagers had lengthy conversations with them. In late 2006, a 31-year-old woman explained how her ideas about the Maoists had changed following this visit. She said,

In the past if I heard their name, I was frightened. I thought ‘What type of people are they?...who carried guns and killed people and terrorised the village. They brought a particular type of fear. Now there is no fear. We can move around.... I can talk openly with the Maoists. I have discovered that the Maoists are *people just like us*.

Lek Bahadur spent many hours in their company and was impressed by their commitment to rural Nepal. The Maoists were the only party who engaged Lek Bahadur politically, and without their guns, he hoped that they offered the possibility of a better life for him and his family. In early 2008, he joined the Maoist Party and during the elections of April 2008, he was one of the Maoist representatives stationed at the polling booth. He planned to stand as a Maoist candidate in future local elections.

“Forgetting fear” both acknowledged an emotional state and reflected a choice. People no longer re-experienced their memories of frightening events. But people like Lek Bahadur had also made a choice. After years of conflict, people desperately wanted peace and by choosing to forget they actively engaged with the peace process.

Conclusion

Spanning the years from 1999 to 2008, our paper illustrated how the different phases of the insurgency and individual circumstances resulted in people’s relationship with fear changing over time. Fear was never a ‘blanket’ emotion and it was not universal or permanent. The subjective experience of fear was negotiated through social relationships and specific life circumstances which meant that people experienced, expressed and concealed fear differently. Villagers had strongly developed coping strategies which they drew upon to support themselves and decrease their fear. Some people, however, suffered such a degree of structural violence that experiencing fear was seen as a privilege which implied that there was

actually something to fear losing. Others denied their fear as part of their performance of manliness while others coped by ridiculing fear. Although a certain amount of suspicion and mistrust remained, most people recovered from the impact of chronic fear and fully returned to their field and forest work and their previous social activities. Despite the fears of the conflict, the people of Kwei Nasa have been able to recreate their life patterns.

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