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Observing the Elections in Central Nepal¹

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Early one morning in September 2004, I overheard a whispered conversation between my neighbour, who I will call Thagu² ('eldest son' in Tamu Kwi, the Gurung language), and my village sister. Thagu 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? 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 Thagu described to me as 'the longest and worst day of my life'. The army did not arrive, the bags did not explode, and the young Maoist women who deposited them, returned in the evening to collect them. Later, Thagu commented, 'I have never been pleased to see the Maoists, I do not support their ideas, and do not like them frightening

- 1 The Social Science Baha discussion that this paper was originally presented at grew out of a conversation between Sara Shneiderman and me. I would like to thank Sara for helping to organise the event and the Social Science Baha for hosting it.
- 2 All personal names in this piece are pseudonyms except for names already in the public domain.

and threatening us, but that day I was happy when they re-appeared and removed their bags.’

On election day in April 2008, I arrived at the polling booth at 6.50 am just before it opened. I decided to introduce myself to the polling officers, who were strangers to the village and did not know me. As I walked across to meet them, I greeted the representatives from the different parties: three from the Maoists, three from the UML, three from the Nepali Congress, and a single representative each from the smaller parties. The majority were Tamu (Gurung), a small number were Bahun, and one was a Dalit representing the Maoists. Many were people I had known since I began my research in the village almost eighteen years ago in 1990. These people are first and foremost fellow villagers with multiple ties and interrelationships that pre-date the elections and will continue after them. They are people who are related to each other, who are friends, acquaintances, adversaries and colleagues. Some sit together on various village committees, some work together, but on that day they were positioned in very different camps. The previous evening they had met and agreed to cooperate so that polling would run smoothly. I spoke to the Congress workers first, and then to the Maoists—the lama’s son and a tailor stood alongside their third representative...my neighbour, Thagu.

By 7.30 am, it was obvious that Thagu was not the only villager who was impressed by the CPN (Maoist). Although some people spoke of the former insurgents in whispers, the Maoist group outside the polling booth was impressively large, and included Tamu ex-British soldiers, relatively well-off farmers, older Dalit men, middle-aged Bahun women, and Tamu and Chhetri youth. The Nepali Congress and UML groups were also large but less diverse. The Congress group, in particular, included large numbers of middle-income, middle-aged and elderly Tamus and was more homogenous than those of the other parties.

Kwei Nasa

The village, which I will refer to as Kwei Nasa (a Tamu Kwi pseudonym) is in Constituency No. 1 of Kaski District and was previously a

Congress stronghold (the immediate past incumbent was Taranath Ranabhat, speaker of the last House of Representatives). In 2008, Dev Gurung,³ who had spent a night in the village some weeks prior to the election, won the seat for the CPN (Maoist).

Kwei Nasa consists of several hundred households located along the upper slopes and top of a ridge in the mid-hills of central Nepal. It has a health post, rice mill, teashops that serve as general-purpose stores, and a kerosene distribution centre, but it has no electricity. Tamu people founded Kwei Nasa, and they continue to be in the majority, but about 20 per cent of the population is Dalit. The outlying hamlets are home to other ethnic groups (Tamang and Magar) as well as Bahuns and Chhetris. Many villagers have relatives in foreign armies (British and Indian) or working overseas, and remittances make a significant contribution to the local economy.

I lived in Kwei Nasa from late 1990 to early 1993 and have re-visited ever since on an annual basis. Starting in 2000 and particularly from 2002 onwards I returned to the village three to four times each year to chart the course of the insurgency in the area. I undertook research during all phases of the insurgency, including the two states of emergency, active phases of fighting, ceasefires and in the post-conflict period.

Chronology of the insurgency in Kwei Nasa

To contextualise the events of the 2008 election, the following section provides a brief chronology of events during the insurgency in Kwei Nasa.

Maoists became active in the village in the late 1990s. Initially, they made speeches, gave cultural performances and asked for financial donations and guns. Their presence increased when a training camp opened in the forest above a neighbouring village. While most Maoists were not local, there were Maoist activists in nearby predominantly Bahun hamlets which had families with long histories of left-wing activism. There

3 Gurung also successfully contested a seat in his home district of Manang. He has chosen to represent his home constituency and not Kaski 1. Re-polling in Kaski 1 is scheduled for early 2009.

were also Maoist sympathisers in Kwei Nasa, although the degree of sympathy was difficult to gauge, especially once the conflict escalated. The majority of villagers, however, were non-aligned.

With the arrival of the Maoists, these villagers feared the implications of the changed political situation. Some people worried that pre-existing conflicts would become superimposed onto Maoist agendas, and this period marked the beginning of conflict-related suspicion of intimates. People's imaginations were fed by stories of what had happened elsewhere, and what they feared might happen in Kwei Nasa.

The security situation changed markedly with the escalation of the insurgency in 2001 and the imposition of a state of emergency. The Maoists went underground and the Royal Nepalese Army was actively engaged in a counter-insurgency campaign. Non-aligned 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 which remained aloof.

In the violent aftermath of a soldier's killing in a nearby village, the army visited Kwei Nasa by helicopter, set up camp and conducted an indiscriminate and at times brutal search-and-cordon operation in the area. Non-aligned civilians from neighbouring villages were killed and some Kwei Nasa villagers were briefly interrogated. In addition to the relatively frequent visits of the army, there was a continuous Maoist presence in the village, partly because a locally popular senior leader was from an adjoining hamlet.

During this period, there were many Maoist actions. A teacher was publicly humiliated for criticising the insurgents and out-of-village workers were beaten because the Maoists thought they were criminals. The staff of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) were intimidated, then forced to stop their activities, and finally chased out of the village by the Maoists.⁴

Although there were threats and intimidations, people appreciated

4 This was because ACAP was under the umbrella of an organisation that had royal patronage.

aspects of the Maoists' approach. Unlike the soldiers, villagers could talk and reason with the Maoists and thereby exert some influence. Mass meetings were informative as policy was explained and while their actions might not be supported, people could understand the basis on which their decisions were made. It was a complex co-existence.

Between 2003 and 2006, the village was under *de facto* 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 an outsider.

In 2004, the area was under the control of a detached and punitive Tamu commander (political commissar) named Jitendra after the popular local commander, Moti Lal, a Bahun, had been killed. Moti Lal was seen as fair, non-punitive and people believed that he protected them and they worried about his death which eventually came. In late 2004, Jitendra banned meetings held by the ACAP-formed committees. The committees were disbanded and the members had to resign. This made the management of the day-care centre and other development activities such as conservation of the forest more complicated. Jitendra stated that things could be run 'in the traditional manner', leaving it up to locals to interpret this. No one was sure what exactly this meant but it seemed that while *ad hoc* 'committee' meetings could be held, the bureaucracy relating to the formal committees such as minute-taking, official scheduling of meetings in designated buildings, etc, was to cease.

In late 2005, Maoists arrived at the home of Chandra Bahadur, a 33-year-old social activist, Nepali Congress member 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. 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 local leaders. Deeply taken aback, Chandra Bahadur 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, his name was mentioned, and he had to report to the army to explain what had happened. Chandra Bahadur relocated to the city and did not return until the ceasefire of mid-2006.

Post-conflict

The conflict ended in 2006 and by the end of the year, most people had recovered from the effects of chronic fear and recreated their lives. Some people 'came out' as Maoists while others joined the party. The evaluation of the Maoists during the insurgency was overwhelmingly negative and some found it difficult to acknowledge their affiliation. Membership of the party remains a sensitive topic and even those who have openly joined discuss their participation somewhat circumspectly.⁵

Across the country and especially in the rural areas which bore the brunt of the insurgency, there are specific local processes, events, reasons and calculations which led people to vote the way they did. In the following section, I examine the role played by changes in Maoist-villager interrelationships and the process of 'forgetting fear'.

Maoist-villager interrelationships

The visit of the PLA

In mid-2006, between 200 and 300 members of the PLA (the Maoists' People's Liberation Army) spent a month in Kwei Nasa undergoing training. As they were no longer underground, many villagers had lengthy conversations with them without fear of repercussions. Later that year, a 31-year-old woman explained how her ideas about the Maoists had changed following this visit. She said,

5 Those who have joined the Maoist movement are viewed by many people with a mixture of bemusement, suspicion and exasperation. Some family members have vocally criticised decisions by their kin to join the party. When I interviewed a new CPN (Maoist) party member in July 2008, he assumed that I was going to tell him off!

In the past if I heard their name, I was frightened. I thought, ‘What type of people are they?...who carried guns, 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*.

My neighbour, Thagu, and his family hosted a group of cadres and he spent many hours in their company. Thagu is a thoughtful man who has worked as a labourer in Dubai, India and Malaysia, and previously he had been rather annoyed with the Maoists. When they arrived, demanding food and shelter, he sometimes said to them, ‘Why should I look after you? Am I your wife that I should feed you and cook for you? We hardly have enough for our own family.’⁶

During their month-long stay, however, he saw another side and became especially close to a young man who had been shot eight times in the head. The female cadres impressed him as they talked about the freedom they had gained among the Maoists in contrast to the constraints of their previous lives.

Most importantly, Thagu was impressed by the Maoists’ commitment to rural Nepal. He is exasperated with the lack of development in the village. Although the village is—since the opening of a road in the last few years to the base of the ridge on which lies Kwei Nasa—less than half a day away from Pokhara, it has no electricity and can only be reached on foot after a long steep climb. Thagu is also frustrated with the undevelopment of agriculture, the poor educational and health facilities and the general marginalisation of rural areas. He is not wealthy enough to relocate to the city, and even if he were, he does not want to join the never-ending Tamu urban exodus. He wants to live in his village, farm and raise his four children. The Maoists are the only people who have seriously engaged Thagu and, without their guns, he hopes that they

6 I am grateful to my colleague Alpa Shah for this quote which formed part of a conversation she had with Thagu in March 2008.

offer the possibility of a better life for him and his family.⁷

Kinship ties are an important consideration in an analysis of voting patterns in Nepal and the Congress party workers I spoke to in March 2008 assumed that these would continue to work to their advantage. Thagu, however, is an example of the breaking up of these ties as he comes from a 'Congress family'. Kinship may be crucial to understanding local voting patterns but equally important in the election of April 2008 was the dissolution of those long-standing ties.

It took Thagu some time to 'come out' as a Maoist. He confided in me in early March that he was a party member but at that time not many people knew of his affiliation. He is very aware that people in the village suffered during the insurgency and while much of this related to the fear of being caught between the 'fires' of the opposing armies, it also concerned the specific hardship caused by the constant presence and behaviour of the Maoists.

Following the signing of the peace agreement the mystique that surrounded the insurgents 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 Maoists as the 'other' began to find that they were surprisingly like themselves. In late 2006, 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.' What is different is that they can interact with Maoists largely without fear of violence. The social relations are balanced in a way that they were not during the insurgency.

During 2006 and 2007, Maoist actions continued and, at the request of the family, there was a re-investigation (by the Maoists) into the death

7 There are multiple motivations for joining the Maoists. Thagu states that he is ideologically motivated. Others also emphasised his ideological commitment and his hopes for the future. While not diminishing these motivating factors, his membership of the CPN (Maoist) may also be an attempt to further his political ambition. This requires additional investigation.

of a village man some years previously. This led to some arrests and the brief abduction of a suspect by the Maoists. It was during this period that I started seeing Maoist mobilisers working openly in the village. In December 2006, I interviewed a grey-suited young woman, a member of a prominent local Maoist family, who was enthusiastically attempting to engage village women in Maoist programmes. As we spoke, a group of villagers gathered, some eyed her suspiciously and protectively wrapped themselves in their shawls while others looked with interest at her publications and listened intently to her stories of grenades that did not explode and the hardships of sentry duty. The demystification of the Maoists was firmly underway and a new type of interrelationship was developing.

'Forgetting fear'

A degree of intimidation remained but people no longer feared the Maoists (or the security forces) and although they remembered the hardship of the conflict, they had made choices. 'Forgetting fear' was a coping strategy that allowed villagers to put the past behind them. After years of conflict, people desperately wanted peace and this meant actively engaging with those who had previously frightened them. People were willing to forget,⁸ and violence was just one component of the Maoist picture. It was *not* the single defining feature.

Conclusion

Why did previously non-aligned and often fearful villagers vote for (and in some cases join) the Maoists in Kwei Nasa?

First of all, many people did not vote for them. On Election Day, I sat in the middle of a crowd of villagers. Some of my companions whispered tensely when a Young Communist League (YCL)⁹ group appeared,

8 This is not the case for people who were deeply traumatised. People interviewed in other villages, and who were injured in crossfires and traumatised, re-experienced fear each day.

9 The YCL is the youth wing of the CPN (Maoist). The organisation was formed/revived in January 2007 just before the Maoists joined the interim parliament. They have a reputation for intimidation and many people are fearful of them.

and when they had left, they told me that because of past violence and the threat of violence they were not voting for the former insurgents.¹⁰

Nevertheless, many people in Kwei Nasa *did* vote for the Maoists. What factors prompted them to do so?

Clearly, the month-long 2006 visit by the PLA was important. It allowed villagers to develop a new type of relationship with the Maoists. Many people liked what they saw. Thagu, for example, was inspired by the Maoist's commitment to rural areas and their promise of a new inclusive Nepal. Without their guns (and in conjunction with the 'forgetting of fear') the Maoists were an appealing option.

This is a predominantly Tamu area and the constituency was won by Dev Gurung, a Tamu and a prominent Maoist, a 'local boy made good' (not entirely 'local' as he is from nearby Manang district but 'local' enough). Many people told me that Dev Gurung has benefitted from mentoring, training and opportunities in the CPN (Maoist). The advancement of a Tamu to the highest echelons of the Maoist party, and his fielding as a candidate illustrated the party's commitment to the *jana jāti*, (the broad grouping of Nepal's ethnic groups that includes the Tamu). This was an important motivating factor and especially for youth who acutely experience the lack of opportunities.

The Maoist agenda also appealed to Dalits from Kwei Nasa. Dau Bahadur, the Maoist polling booth representative, like Thagu, had worked overseas as a migrant labourer. In July 2008, he told me that this experience had provided him with alternative models of social interrelationships. When the conflict ended, he readily joined the Maoists, using the movement as a platform to advance Dalit rights. As a locally prominent party member, he has moved the agenda of Kwei Nasa's Dalits into the political centre stage for the first time. In July 2008, he was raising funds to build

10 Although some people felt intimidated when the YCL briefly appeared, voting in Kwei Nasa took place in an atmosphere that was, as far as I could ascertain, free of intimidation. There was a brief but heated argument between representatives of the Nepali Congress and the CPN (Maoist) mid-afternoon when the former accused the latter of encouraging proxy voting, but otherwise the poll was conducted peacefully.

the first public toilet for use by Dalits in the village and planning an upcoming visit to the party headquarters in Kathmandu. In November 2008, he was elected to the committee of a newly formed village-wide social development project.

The Maoists were the only party to seriously mobilise villagers. From the ceasefire onwards, they attempted to actively engage villagers. They had the advantage in that they were already ‘in the field’ but no other party made a serious attempt to rival them. Kwei Nasa had previously been a Congress stronghold and party activists assumed that it would be again. In a serious miscalculation, they anticipated that history, pre-existing loyalties and kinship ties would reconfigure as usual. Candidates made belated and half-hearted visits but it was too late and too little. Local party members also misjudged the changed atmosphere. Nepali Congress activist Chandra Bahadur stated confidently in March 2008 that ‘Congress will win in this village, this is a Congress village’. Many people did vote Congress, but not enough.

Much of the post-election analysis suggests that people were willing to give the Maoists a chance. They were exasperated with the ineptitude of the other political parties and felt abandoned by them. They were willing to try the untested. The Maoists might be untested in the formal national political arena but they were *not* entirely *untested*. The insurgency was rural-based and people have co-existed with them for years. They observed the Maoists fight a war, run a parallel government, develop an effective surveillance network, move huge numbers of people across the country, attempt reforms and so on. They have watched them do many of these things very successfully. When compared with the repeated failures of the other political parties it is hardly surprising that they are prepared to give the Maoists a chance.

The contribution of anthropology

What is so specific or special about an anthropological perspective? How might it contribute to a particular understanding of an election?

Our greatest contribution, I suggest, lies in our detailed, long-term

fieldwork; the teasing out and understanding of a specific context and of how things play out over time in one location (while at the same time situating these local processes in wider regional, national and international contexts). Such work provides in-depth knowledge of personal histories, the ongoing complexity of interrelationships, the forming and re-forming of networks and affiliations, and the subtle shifts in kinship-based patterns of behaviour.

Our enduring engagement with localities co-exists with a perspective that challenges the taken-for-granted, and struggles to understand the contested, nuanced and contradictory complexity of everyday life. This standpoint provides the possibility for insights that are entirely different to those of a short-term election observer, a human rights worker who visits to document an atrocity, or a researcher who arrives to administer a survey. In-depth local knowledge and long-term observation are essential to explaining *why* what has happened has happened. Short-term methodologies and fleeting visits will not access these processes. In these conceptualisations, there is the danger that Thagu becomes merely 'a Maoist'. The detailed process, sequence of events, interrelationships, shifting affiliations and specific personal journey which led a thoughtful 35-year-old Tamu farmer to become a member of the CPN (Maoist) will be bypassed, and with it much of the complexity of how the Maoist movement has worked in rural Nepal.