

## Observations during the State-of-Emergency: Kathmandu, December 2001

Judith Pettigrew

Accustomed to sharing my flights to Kathmandu with large numbers of people dressed in trekking gear, I sat in Vienna Airport and wondered when my fellow passengers would arrive. It took me a while to realize that the trekkers had all stayed away, with the exception of two young couples. The plane that held over 250 people had a mere 40 on board. Approximately half were Nepalis: some returning from overseas trips, and others visiting. The remainder of the passengers were an assortment of foreigners: business people, development workers, foreign residents, the four trekkers, and me. Within minutes of boarding the plane the only two other passengers seated near me at the rear of the plane began a conversation about 'the Maoist situation'. "Bad, bad," I overheard the Kathmandu politician comment, to which the development worker asked, "What do you think will happen?" As the conversation continued it became harder to hear the whispers and I lost the thread of the discussion, but not before I heard the development worker comment, "We have had to close projects, staff have been threatened by the Maoists and offices ransacked." The politician added, "Perhaps things will be sorted out now that the army are involved, we don't know what will happen, nobody knows."

On arrival in Kathmandu the following morning I left the airport terminal to find that the parking area was totally deserted and the person designated to collect me nowhere in sight. I phoned and was told, "We can't get beyond the main gate, we tried but they have closed it for security reasons, can you walk down to meet us or get a taxi yourself?" Within moments of getting into the taxi the driver started talking, "Things are not good here, we don't know what will happen, there are very few tourists. We were 46% down last month (the peak season month of November) and they say it's going to get worse." He tried hard to get me to stay at his newly opened hotel. "It's new, we have all the facilities but no one is coming. I don't know what to do," he commented. I apologised profusely, explaining that I had a reservation elsewhere.

At first glance the hotel I stayed in looked much as before but it took only a few minutes to realize the extent of the changes. There were ten guests instead of the usual 100 plus and they insisted that they were doing well in comparison to other places. This was backed up by a friend who got the name of the hotel I was staying in mixed up and ended up looking for me in another similar sized place which had only two guests. In the lobby the pictures of King Birendra and Queen Aiswarya occupied their usual places with butter lamps burning in front of them - there were no pictures of the new king and queen. Before I went out for the first time I inquired about being on the street after dark. "It is quite alright to walk around up until about 9 p.m. as things in Kathmandu are quiet. There have only been two incidents—the bombs at the Coca Cola factory and the one at the carpet factory," stated the young man on the front desk. Others took a different view. A friend phoned from Pokhara and told me to stay in the hotel after dark. "How are things there?" I asked. "Dangerous," he replied, and continued:

The Maoists are underground now and so they are not worrying people as much as before but there are new dangers: lots of people have been arrested and no one knows where they are. The other night the police raided one of the Campus hostels and arrested a group of students. They haven't been seen since and nobody knows their whereabouts.

Amnesty International states that according to official sources more than 5000 people have been arrested since 26 November on suspicion of being members or sympathizers of the CPN (Maoist). It is suspected that many people are held in army camps without access to their relatives, lawyers, or a doctor and very few of those arrested have been brought to court (Amnesty International 2002b).

Due to limited time I was unable to visit Pokhara or the villages where I have done most of my fieldwork and so I asked my friend how things were in the surrounding villages. He answered:

Quiet in most places but not so good in others. The Maoists have left their training camp above \*\*\* village but now the villagers have a new worry. They are really frightened to go into the jungle as the army helicopters are coming over looking for the Maoists and the villagers fear that they will be mistaken for Maoists and shot at by the helicopters.

The human rights organisation INSEC (Sector Service Centre) (2001a) has reported the death and injury of villagers in Rolpa district by helicopter gunfire.

While the tourist haunts of Kathmandu are not particularly busy in early/mid December, what I witnessed was something totally different—there were hardly

any tourists at all. On the first morning I walked the full length of almost two streets before seeing another foreigner. My impression was that most of the tourists were low-budget travellers. The people who seemed to be missing were the better-off middle-aged and older ones who spend more money. The owner of a bookshop I frequent commented on the decline in tourism by saying, "We didn't know what we had, until we lost it." Shops were closing earlier than usual and people were anxious to get home as soon as possible. Weddings began earlier in the day so that people could be home by evening.

I met two expatriate colleagues who were very upset about the treatment of a Nepali friend at the hands of the police. They explained:

'Ram' is a young single man in his twenties from a rural background who works in the tourist industry. His family lives in the village and other than a few friends he is alone in Kathmandu. He is not interested in politics and has never been politically active. One evening shortly after the emergency had been declared he was walking home from work. As he crossed the bridge into Kopundol en route to his home in Patan, the police at a check-point stopped him. They asked him where he was going and he replied that he was returning home after work. They then asked him where he was from and when he replied that he was from \*\*\* district [one of the districts most affected by the 'People's War']. They commented that "everyone from there is a Maoist" and insisted that he come with them to the police station. He was kept in the station overnight and was badly beaten. The next day at the insistence of his friends he went to the hospital where he was treated for severe bruising and a fractured arm. He never held a strong political opinion before but now he is very, very angry with the government. This event has politicized him and has made him into a prime candidate for joining the Maoists.

The following day, I became friendly with two taxi drivers, 'Kumar' and 'Raju', who thereafter came to my hotel each morning to check on the prospect of getting employment that day. On a couple of occasions I changed my plans at the last minute and told one or other of them to come back at a later time if they were not busy. Each time the reply was the same: "There is no chance that I will be busy, I'll be back." As we drove along Kantipath behind a truckload of heavily armed soldiers 'Kumar' worried about how to pay his children's school fees:

How will I educate my two sons? Before being a taxi driver was a good job but now it is terrible. There are so few tourists. Tourism began slowing down after the hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane followed by the

Maoist problem but it didn't really get bad until this year. This has been a terrible year: there was the palace massacre, the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, the war in Afghanistan, the Maoists, and now the emergency. Hardly anyone is coming. They are frightened. Can you blame them? I'm frightened. Who knows what will happen next?

Sitting in traffic jams--made worse by the road repairs being undertaken for the forthcoming SAARC summit--'Raju' told me how much he misses "the old king". I commented that there were very few photos of the new king around. "You won't see many of them. They are only up in official offices. He is not popular." The next day walking through Lazimpat I got my first glimpse of the king and queen returning from a function held by the Raj Parishad in their honour. The following day I saw the king driving in a large black Mercedes down the road from Maharajganj.

That evening I spoke to a friend from Pokhara. He was very upset, as Maoists have killed a friend of his who was active in the Congress Party:

How could they do that? What did they know about him? All they knew was that he was in the Congress Party and they killed him because of that. They didn't care that he was a good man, a good father, a good son, and a good friend. They came for him in the night, took him out of his house and killed him with a khukuri. What sort of people would do that? I used to think that the Maoists had the right idea but now I think that they are just a bunch of vicious killers. At first I wasn't sure about the emergency but now I support it. The government has to sort out this problem but when they get things under control they will have to provide some proper benefits to the people as the lack of these is why we are in such a mess.

I met health professionals who were concerned about the Ministry of Health directive that states that health workers cannot treat people involved in terrorist activities without informing the local administration or security organisations. If they do, action will be taken against them, as for example on December 15, when Dr Jitendra Mahaseth was arrested and held until January 5 2002 on the grounds that he had treated Maoists. Some medics I spoke to felt that the policy meant that they are not permitted to treat anyone affected by the war. One doctor told me that he thought that he was probably working illegally when he treated people with war related health problems. He had taken to writing prescriptions on small slips of paper rather than on headed notepaper. I commented, "But this directive is against the Hippocratic oath." He replied, "Yes, of course it is, but that is what has happened." I was told that the Physicians for Social Responsibility, Nepal (PSRN) had drafted a response to the directive the previous week that was subsequently sent to Prime

Minister Deuba and also to national and international medical organizations. No Nepali newspaper, however, dared publish it.

Although Nepali human rights activists and a supreme court judge have noted that requiring health professionals to seek permission to treat the injured is not constitutional, the only medical organization to comment (aside from PSRN) has been the American Medical Association (2001) which sent a letter to the Prime Minister Deuba in which they pointed out that “... a physician must always give the required care impartially and without consideration of sex, race, nationality, religion, political affiliation or any other similar criterion.” Furthermore, they added that the fulfillment of medical duties should in no circumstance be considered an offence.

On a sunny Saturday morning I visited a friend in a suburb of Kathmandu. As we chatted over tea we were totally unaware that a matter of streets away American Embassy Security employee Ramesh Manandhar was dying—assassinated in the early afternoon outside the Lincoln School. Manandhar, aged 28, had just finished the inspection of the security arrangements at the school when he was shot dead by two unidentified men who, according to eyewitnesses, claimed that they were Maoists and warned people not to follow them (Informal Sector Service Sector 2001b).

On my last day in Kathmandu I met an NGO staff member who told me that she had received a phone call during the first week of the emergency from people she had become friendly with during a fieldtrip to Jajarkot:

They phoned me to tell me that they remember me. They wanted to say goodbye as they felt that they are going to die. They are not political, they are just local people, but with the Maoists shooting on one side and the army on the other they said that they don't know how they are going to survive. I have not heard from them since then. It is very difficult to get news from the most affected areas at present. We are very worried about what is going on in those places. People get caught in the middle between the Maoists and the security forces. If someone is injured or in need of medical treatment it is hard for him or her to get help now, as they cannot easily travel. In many places night buses are not running and even if they are people can't travel or they are too frightened to travel or to ask for help. Somebody did manage to come yesterday: he had been tortured the previous day.

Amnesty International has appealed to both the Government and the Maoists, raising a number of concerns around extra-judicial killings and other human rights violations. Amnesty fears that among those killed by the state are scores of civilians and Maoists who were deliberately killed as an alternative to being taken prisoner.

Amnesty has also strongly condemned human rights violations by the Maoists who have been responsible for torture, widespread intimidation, and execution-style killings. Many of those killed were supporters or members of the Nepali Congress Party, although members of other political parties have also been killed. Recently there has been a series of killings of teachers by Maoists (Amnesty International 2002a).

The airport on the day of my departure was as quiet as it was when I arrived. There were slightly more passengers leaving than arriving but it was, after all, just before Christmas. The security arrangements in the departure lounge had been increased, and the last thing I did on Nepali soil was to be frisked at the foot of the stairs to the plane.

After the plane climbed out of the Kathmandu valley, I watched as we traversed the familiar mountain ranges and as I did so, I reflected on the words of a non-governmental worker I had met the previous day:

This is not going to be a short war. Some people think that it will be over soon but I do not think so. I have been in the worst-affected areas and I have met many Maoists. Lots of them have very deeply held beliefs. They come from the most impoverished and underdeveloped parts of the country, they have no facilities, nothing, the people in those districts are forgotten people. They have little to lose and so they turn to fighting.

One day I spoke to some child soldiers and told them that they should be in school and not fighting a war. One boy who was aged about 12 looked at me and said, "How can you say that older sister? Do you not understand what is happening in our country? This is the time for us to fight; this is the time for us to die for our country." Some of those who feel most strongly about the cause joined the Maoists after the state killed members of their family. One day I met a woman who became a Maoist as the police killed her husband. This woman and people like her will never give up; they will fight to the end.

When I visited those areas I discovered that life is cheap and that people on both sides kill easily. Because of this I know that many Nepalis will die before this war is over and many more will live in terror.

As the mountains and valleys of Nepal faded from sight and as we started the long flight back to Europe the images of my visit and the words of the people I had spoken to in Kathmandu flooded into my thoughts. As I considered the diversity of perspectives, I remembered what my fellow passenger had said as we arrived in

Nepal just a week ago:

“... we don't know what will happen, nobody knows.”

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