

Women's Participation in the People's War in Jumla

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In the early years of the Maoist Insurgency that began on 13th February 1996, local and foreign journalists brought back striking images of a large number of young women in combat fatigues casually carrying rifles from their first guided tour of Maoist held areas in Western Nepal. These images surprised scholars and the public alike, so much so because until recently women had been forbidden from joining the Nepalese Army.¹ While great attention has been paid to the presence of large numbers of women in Maoist organisations, the conditions of their recruitment, their predicament, and the overall situation of women in Maoist held areas have been either ignored or barely mentioned.² This article attempts to analyse these Maoist women's motivation to join the Maoist Party and to remain within the organisation, the changes brought about by Maoists regarding the situation of women in Maoist held areas, particularly in the Sinja Valley in Jumla district, and the situation of Maoist women.

In 2006/2007, thousands of Maoist men cadres, according to my informants, left the Party and went to work in India. Some workers returning from Kargil (Northern India) whom I met in Jumla and Mugu during my fieldwork in 2007 told me that thousands of ex-Maoist men had found paid labour in the same areas where they themselves were working. However, the desertion of women cadre has never made any headlines. Is it because there were no women deserters? If so, what motivated women to remain in the Maoist Party while their male comrades deserted in thousands?

Maoist Recruitment

The presence of a large number of women combatants in the Maoist insurgency was first confirmed by photographs brought back by local and foreign journalists and pictures published on the Maoist website. But, the exact figure for women's involvement was not available; it was said that

¹ The Nepalese Army started recruiting women for combat as of 2003; however, women were allowed to join the Army for administrative and medical work, www.nepalarmy.mil.np

² Mukta S. Lama *et al.* (2006) reported some positive changes in women's lives brought about by the Maoists in Maoist held areas.

30 to 50 percent of the PLA is made up of women³ but due to a lack of independent sources of verification, it was difficult to confirm the claim made by the Maoists. Finally, 3,846 women and 15,756 men Maoist combatants are officially registered in the seven UN supervised cantonments and satellite cantonments in Nepal.⁴ Regardless of official and unofficial data, the presence of large numbers of women in the Maoist ranks is undeniable and makes us reflect on the motivation of those women to join the Maoist insurgency.

According to the Maoists, they denounced all forms of discrimination against women and are all for gender equality;⁵ as a result, a large number of women joined the revolution in order to change their situation. Some foreign journalists⁶ who have travelled extensively to Maoist training camps and Maoist held areas during the insurgency seemed to confirm this Maoist statement.

However, at grass-roots level, it appears that women have joined the Maoist insurgency for various reasons. Some of them indeed joined the revolution in sympathy with the Maoist ideology and programme, as stated by the Maoists; others joined the Maoist party after having experienced misbehaviour and harassment from the security forces⁷. The social reform campaign launched by Maoists against gambling, brewing and drinking alcohol, domestic violence, polygamy, child marriage, etc., and prompt action against people who defy the prohibition have also generated some support among women⁸.

3 Adhikari (2007) "Nepal: Women combatants in cantonments: where next?", www.telegraphnepal.com/news_det.php?news_id=1360

⁴ UNMIN Press Statement, www.unmin.org.np/downloads/pressreleases/2007-12-27-unmin.srsg.press.statement.eng.pdf

⁵ One of the forty-point demands submitted to the government just before launching the people's war specifically refers to women: "Patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped. Daughters should be allowed access to paternal property". Nepalese law prevented women from inheriting paternal property unless unmarried and older than 35. This law has been modified and came into effect in 2002 granting certain property rights to women; however, if a woman marries after inheriting, the paternal property is reverted to the successor in her maternal home. The woman will instead inherit her husband's property, Binda Pandey, *Women's Property Right Movement and Achievement of the 11th Amendment of Civil Code*, www.nepaldemocracy.org/gender/property_rights_movement.htm.

⁶ Jonas Bendiksen, The slide show on "Inside Nepal's Revolution", <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0511/feature3/multimedia.html>. Onesto, Li 2005.

⁷ M. Sharma and D. Prasain, 2004.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Yet in addition, and above all, the Maoists have mobilised their entire resources, such as coercion techniques and propaganda (through cultural programmes) to recruit young men and women.

In a remote area like Jumla where the literacy rate is very low,⁹ the ideological campaign alone would not have produced the expected result on the recruitment of youths in the Maoist ranks. Massive recruitment took place between 2003 and 2004. During this period the Maoists launched a programme called “One House One Maoist”, which was known in Jumla as “shoes¹⁰ abhiyan” (Shoes Campaign) and also known as “tuna kasa Jungal pasa” (Tie Shoelace Enter Jungle). According to this, every house had to provide the Maoists with one child. If a family refused to send their children to the Maoist Party, the latter would ask for a donation, usually far more than the family concerned could afford. Rich families usually paid the donation to avoid recruitment; those who could not pay let one child join the insurgency. In this part of the region, a son is more valuable; therefore, parents with few sons sent a daughter to join the insurgency and this partially explains the large number of women in the Party.

Among other recruitment methods, the Maoist have very effectively used door to door recruitment techniques, particularly in the Sinja valley (Jumla district). They first went from house to house to convince parents to let their children join the Maoist Party to create a “New Nepal”. When they were unable to convince the parents, they would simply order the young men and young unmarried women to gather in one of the houses in the evening without their parents. If the parents followed the children to the meeting, they would be told to leave the premises immediately. If they refused, they would be penalised for not obeying the Maoists; either by forced labour or they would be forced to feed and shelter more than their share of visiting Maoists.¹¹

⁹ The female literacy rate is 16 percent while male literacy stands at 45 percent according to Educational Mirror Jumla. However, Human Rights Year puts the literacy rate as low as 8.2 percent for women and 23 percent for men as quoted in Women’s Educational Status and Maternal and Child Health Care Practices in Jumla District West Nepal. Rawal, L.B. *et al.* 2004.

¹⁰ One of the schoolteachers from Sinja Valley explained to me that it was not “shoes abhiyan” but “sujha abhiyan”; people from the Valley misunderstood the word and called “shoes” instead of “sujha”. Ratna’s Nepali English dictionary translates “sujha” by vision, perception, thinking and understanding.

¹¹ The Maoists had established a rule in the Sinja Valley that every household in a village, in their turn, had to provide food and shelter for visiting Maoists. The number of Maoists a house should provide food and shelter for depended on the number of visiting Maoists in the neighbourhood.

During the gathering, the Maoists would try to convince the young people to join the Party. Girls were told that if they got married, they would be subject to their husband and parents-in-laws' authority and would have to work like slaves. They would not achieve anything in life by cutting grass for their husband and their parent-in-laws. On the other hand, if they joined the Maoist Party, they would be allowed to choose their own husband. They would be free and be able to dance and sing whenever they wished, they would be able to travel around the country and they would be given soap¹² to wash themselves. Women were also promised pocket money.¹³ But above all, they would be given a gun and would be able to eat anywhere free of charge.¹⁴ If potential recruits were students, they would be told that their bourgeois studies were useless and would come to nothing; they were just wasting their time. Conversely, the Maoist Party would bring change, therefore they should join the Maoist Organisation to bring change to the country.

The Maoist recruitment method, at least in the Sinja valley, was very similar to that of a technique used by Matwali Chetris of the Sinja Valley to provide a suitable bride for their sons. In this part of the region, a young man with a physical disability or from a family with limited financial means usually has difficulty in finding a bride. In such a case, the family and friends set out to search for a suitable bride. Once they have found one, yet think that her family would not accept a marriage proposal from the young man, the family and friends of the boy first let the girl know the interest he shows in her through a co-conspirator (this could be a friend, a family member or a neighbour). Then, the young man's family members or friends turn up one evening at the village where the potential

¹² Due to an electricity shortage and a lack of any other means of cooking, pinewood is largely used for cooking and for lighting in Jumla. Houses in the region have either no windows or very few to evacuate the smoke generated by burning pinewood. The people living inside therefore become very black due to the smoke. Due to poverty, many people cannot afford to buy soap; they use ashes to wash their clothes; therefore, a bar of soap is a luxury item in this region.

¹³ In Jumla, women do not have access to the economy although they work more than men; it is man's sphere. It was said that each Maoist gets a monthly allowance of 200 rupees to buy basic necessities, such as a tooth brush, tooth paste, soap etc., while clothes and shoes are provided by the Party.

¹⁴ Some young people attracted by power and of being a Maoist came with guns. Even a child Maoist could threaten old people and make them work under his/her command, as explained by the ex-in-charge of the student militia from the Sinja Valley. He lamented that people stopped listening to them since the Maoists had signed the peace process. Prior to that they could ask anything of villagers and the latter would execute orders without asking any questions. He loved the power that came with being a Maoist. He said he missed that period.

bride lives, without her parents' knowledge. As soon as they arrive, the young woman is invited to a secret place (it often takes place in a cowshed belonging to a co-conspirator). There, the family members or friends of the young man start trying to persuade the young woman to marry the young man. In the process, they promise to give her everything she desires if she marries the young man. Once the persuasion tactics start, the momentum is maintained until the young woman either says yes and comes with them the very same evening or she says no and the family and friends of the young man finally slip away under the cover of darkness. Her parents would never know what happened that night. If the young woman goes along with the scheme, yet her parents find her before the marriage can take place, they are allowed to take her back and marry her to another man. That is why the young man's family and friends try to organise the marriage as soon as possible. The young woman's family calls it "abduction" whereas the young man's family calls it "voluntary", since the young woman is not dragged away against her will.

In a similar way, the Maoists try to persuade the young men and women they have rallied together to leave over night. If the young men and women leave with them, the ceremony of giving *tika* (red vermillion) on the forehead of a new recruit called *sindur lagaune* (put on the red vermillion) takes place the same night. This ceremony makes the new recruit a full member ("whole timer" in Maoist jargon) of the Party. It is organised in haste for two reasons; the first reason is that the parents of new recruits will not have time to find and take them back before they become full members of the Maoists Party, and the second reason is that the young recruits will not have enough time to change their minds. Thus, it is very important that the *tika* ceremony be organised as soon as possible. Once the young men and women have taken *tika* from the Maoists, they become accountable to the Maoist Party, no longer to their own parents. The young recruits' parents call the recruitment technique "abduction" while the Maoists call it "voluntary recruitment". From that day on, newly-recruited children can come and go as they wish to their parents' house, without the latter being able to say anything against their children; if they do, the Maoists take immediate action against them. The following example explains the Maoist recruitment technique:

This young man I will call Ram is in his 20s and is from the Sinja valley; he was first recruited into the Maoist Party and later sent back home. He has a speech problem; he cannot articulate properly. In Jumla, a man with any physical shortcomings faces many hurdles in finding a bride; therefore, he was still unmarried after coming of the

marriageable age. One night a few young Maoist women came to visit him with the intention of recruiting him into the Party. They discussed his grievances of not finding a wife in the village. Then he was told that if he became a Maoist, he could find a wife very easily in the Party. If he could not find one, one of the young women who came to recruit him would marry him, though he did not know which one. The young man believed them and went underground the very same night. A few months later, he reappeared in the village, still single. Apparently he was told that he was not good enough for the Party and sent back home. He did not find a wife in the Maoist organisation as promised by the young women recruiters.

The parents of recruits told me that if the Maoists signed up a certain number of new recruits, they got promoted; that was why they forced children to join the Party; yet this was never confirmed by the Maoists.

Most of the women who were good at dancing and singing were recruited as members of cultural groups; others were enlisted in the People's Liberation Army, and the children whose parents were very adamant about sending their daughters away to work for Maoist were recruited as militias to work in the village and surrounding areas.

Disparity between Rhetoric and Reality

Since the beginning of the insurgency, the Maoists have championed the women's cause. From the very beginning they asserted that they were determined to put an end to all forms of discrimination against women and empower them in providing gender equality as explained by one of the forty-point demands¹⁵ presented to the Government before launching the People's War. The following pages first discuss the social changes brought about by the Maoists to the women's situation in the Sinja Valley (Jumla district), then discuss the women's situation within the Maoist organisation.

¹⁵ See note no. 4



A PLA woman with her village comrades during a period of leave, Jumla, 2007.
Photo: S. Shrestha-Schipper.

Social Change in Women's Situation at Village Level

The Maoists arrived in the village in the year 2000 and governed the region until they signed the peace process with the Government in 2006. Upon their arrival in the region, the Maoists took a series of measures to uproot so-called “bad practice” (*kharab/naramro chalana*). They banned child marriage, arranged marriages and *Jari*. During the 10-11 years of regular visits to Botan and the surrounding villages, I had encountered only one child marriage during the early years of my fieldwork; and underage marriages were in decline. However, arranged marriages and *jari* have been an integral part of their tradition. Ironically, since the arrival of Maoists in the region, underage marriages have drastically increased. Parents have a tendency to marry their daughters by the age of 13-14 years of age to prevent them from being recruited in the Maoist ranks, as the latter targeted young unmarried girls.

The Maoists have banned “arranged marriages” and promoted “love marriages”. However, they have proscribed traditional courtship called *chotti basne* -traditionally young men and women meet in a cowshed and spend the night singing; during this time they get to know each other. The Maoists consider traditional courtship as a “bad tradition”

(*naramro/kharab calan*), therefore, it must be abolished. If young people defy prohibition and are caught in a cowshed, immediate action would be taken against them by the Maoists. A Maoist DCM (District Committee Member) from the Sinja Valley explained to me that love could not be expressed by singing in a cowshed at night; it could only be expressed through letters. If a young man and woman liked each other, they should exchange letters to express their feelings. According to this person, reading “love letters” was more beautiful than “singing” in a cowshed. The irony is that more than half of the population of Jumla cannot read and write.¹⁶ When the “love marriage” has been arranged, the couple has to submit separate written applications to the Maoist administration to ask for permission to marry. The person concerned must mention that s/he is in love with her/him (name) and wishes to marry her/him. The age of the bride and groom must be mentioned in the letter; the Maoists have fixed the marriageable age at 18 for a woman and at 20 for a man in a village.¹⁷ However, the age of the bride and groom, particularly the age of the bride, is often raised to meet the marriageable age fixed by the Maoists. Local Maoists would not question the age of the couple because they know how things work at village level, while Maoists from outside would not know the exact age of the couple. Written applications had to be submitted six months in advance, but this was reduced to a few days after parents protested.

The Maoists have banned the traditional custom called *jari*, calling it a “degraded wife selling tradition”. *Jari* designates “adultery marriage” as well as the “payment” made by the woman’s second husband to her first husband, which is calculated on the basis of the expenses that the first husband incurred at his wedding and the number of *jari* for the woman. The first *jari* is more expensive, from second *jari* the price decreases. *Jari* is a *de facto* divorce involving no court hearing and commonly practised in the region without any stigmatisation towards women. At the time of divorce, the woman has to return all the ornaments she received from her first husband. Since the arrival of the Maoists in the region, *jari* is tolerated only if the husband is much older than the wife. The couple is not allowed to remarry without divorcing from the first marriage and the divorce would not be granted without a “valid reason”. The Maoist philosophy at village level is that men and women marry only once in their life and love is eternal. Their philosophy makes it more difficult for a woman to ask for a divorce. If she does so, she would be considered a “bad

¹⁶ See note no. 3.

¹⁷ The legal marriageable age in Nepal is 18 for women and 21 for men without their parents’ consent and 16 for women and 18 for men with their parents’ consent.

woman”/”woman with no moral value”. If a woman elopes with another man (go away in *jari*) before divorcing her first husband, she is considered a “bad woman”, and the Maoists take action against the woman and her second husband. They are first separated and are sentenced to forced labour. If the couple wants to avoid the Maoists’ punishment, they must leave the village overnight. The following case will highlight the problem that the women in the Sinja Valley have been facing since the *jari* has been banned. This incident took place during my stay in the Sinja valley in 2007.

A young man studied up to class 10 and brought a wife from a neighbouring village. He belonged to a Maoist supporter lineage. Within six months of their marriage, the wife eloped, i.e. she went away in *jari*, with a man from a neighbouring village. When I heard the commotion in the village, I went to inquire why his wife had left him for another man. The people gathered, who were Maoists and their supporters, told me she was a “bad woman” (*bigreko aimai*), and they wanted to find the eloped couple. I asked them again why they were so determined to find a “bad woman” and her second husband; they should be happy that she had gone off with someone else. Then I added very quickly, “such a fine young man should not have any problem in finding another woman.” They explained me that they wanted the couple to be brought back to the village to be punished¹⁸ before the villagers as a lesson to other potential runaway women. Apparently, the young woman’s first husband was night-blind and the woman did not know until she had married him. That was why she eloped with another man. The case was first reported to the Maoists; since they were not able to locate the whereabouts of the eloped couple, the case was later reported to the newly opened police station in Hat Sinja (a neighbouring village). The family and friends of the young man wanted the couple to be brought back whenever they would be found. Rumour was that the couple had left for India overnight due to fear of the Maoists. Prior to the arrival of Maoists in the region, this case would have been a simple *jari* and would have been settled by the elders of both parties concerned with *jari* payment.

¹⁸ They did not know what punishment they should inflict on the couple if they were to be found; some suggested shaving the couple’s head and parading them around the village. The Maoists used to give this sort of punishment while they were in power. They are no longer in power, but their hegemony is still felt in the village.

The couple would not have had to leave the village in a hurry. The villagers were very sympathetic towards the woman; for them, the sickness of her first husband was a valid reason for the woman to go in *jari*, but they were not able to defend the woman openly for fear of the Maoists. Even the Maoists admitted in private that the young woman had made the right decision by leaving her first husband and going in *jari* with a nice young man, otherwise life would have been very hard for her if she had stayed with her night-blind husband. Nevertheless, in public she continued to be seen as the culprit.

Gender equality had been one of the Maoists' main agendas since their arrival in the region. In the name of gender equality, the Maoists first suggested that villagers divide parental property equally between sons and daughters. However, their suggestion was never taken into consideration by villagers; therefore, the Maoists put the emphasis on dowry. Prior to the arrival of the Maoists in Botan, the dowry played an insignificant role in marriage; the bride would be the centre of attention; thus, she would receive a dowry of little value from her parents and her kin. Now prestige has shifted to the dowry. Regardless of their economic situation, villagers try to give more dowries like their high-caste neighbours. Now villagers look at the dowry that a bride brings with her rather than the bride herself.

In Jumla, there is a well-defined division of labour between men and women; the latter usually carry out most of the agricultural work and household work, while the former deal with the economic and politics. Men spend their leisure time playing cards and talking politics. Since the arrival of Maoists in the region, playing cards is banned, and the men, including local Maoists, now spend their leisure time discussing politics and gossiping, leaving most of the agricultural and household work to women. Since my arrival in the region, I had not observed any gender equality as pointed out to me by the Maoists. I thus asked a Maoist DCM (District Committee Member) from the Sinja Valley, belonging to Thakuri lineage, why he would not set an example by helping his wife to carry manure (while I was visiting him, his wife with the help of other women was busy carrying manure from their home to their field. Carrying manure is a woman's work in Jumla region), so that other men would follow suit. As justification for his behaviour, he said that his wife did not want him to help her and added very quickly that people's mentality had not changed; people were ignorant, and they needed to be taught. Besides, he had a lot of political activities to take care of, so he had no time. If needed, he would help her. Throughout my stay in the village, I only saw

him engaged in political activities leaving all the household and agriculture work, including carrying manure, to his wife.



Women carrying *porso*, animal manure mixed with pine needles. Jumla, 2007.
Photo: S. Shrestha-Schipper.

Social Conditions among Maoist Women

Despite the Maoist slogan on gender equality, if one looks at the central committee of political structure and the military wing of the Maoist Party, there is a drastic fall in the participation of women. However, the following pages do not set out to analyse the participation of women at central level; they examine the social conditions of these Maoist women at grassroots level.

The following observation is based on interviews carried out with men and women who are or have been PLA members, who have worked as full-time party cadres and militias, and with family members of these Maoist cadres who were either forced to join the Maoist party or who joined of their own free will.

The Maoists have always maintained that people have freely joined the party and they would be allowed to leave if they wished to do so. In reality, deserting the Party is a crime and not only the deserter but also his/her whole family is liable to punishment. If a Maoist Party member leaves the organisation, the person's family members would be asked to

replace the deserter. In the case of a refusal, the family has to pay a hefty fine. Despite the threat of punishment, some men left not only the Party but also the village (if the person stays in the village after leaving the Party, he will be taken back to the Party either to reintegrate it or to be punished). Some deserters came back to the village after the Maoists had signed the peace agreement with the Government; nevertheless, these returnees are being courted by the Maoist cadres to bring them back to the Party.



Young Maoist women at a Maoist meeting in Jumla Bazar, 2007. Photo: S. Shrestha-Schipper.

The situation with Maoist women is different. In the area studied, most Maoist women were recruited at the tender age of 12-13 or even younger. Many of them did not even know what Maoism was when they were recruited as Maoist cadres. By the time they become adults, they are already married and even have one or two children. Although the Maoists denounce underage marriages and impose a marriageable age at village level, they apparently do not scrutinise underage marriages within the Party. The couple often lies about their age on the marriage application form, and the commanders who are supposed to check the reliability of the information provided do not verify it. It is said that commanders are

rather pleased that Maoist cadres choose partners within the Party. The cadres, particularly women, are not only encouraged to find a partner but also pressurised into taking a husband within the Party even at a young age. High-caste PLA women are encouraged to take a low-caste husband to break caste/social barriers. The PLA sometimes abduct young women belonging to high castes with the intention of marrying them with low-caste PLA men.

Love marriage is the norm in the PLA and the Maoist Party as at village level; but courtship is strictly forbidden. If an unmarried couple is discovered together, it is considered to be a form of misconduct and both of them are reprimanded. The couple is only allowed to exchange letters through the commander. However, some couples manage to exchange letters without the latter's knowledge. Therefore, the couple usually gets married very quickly to avoid such problems. Most Maoist women are married within the Party. If a woman marries outside the party, she will be chastised for taking a husband outside the organisation. I met two such women who defied the Maoist ban on leaving the Party and marrying outside the organisation, but not without consequences:

Two women from the Sinja Valley worked as Maoists for a few years: one worked as a member of a cultural group, and the other was a party worker at village level. Both women left the Party and married non-Maoist men from a neighbouring village. When they returned to their natal home, both women were abducted by local Maoists and taken to the base area of Jumla to be presented before the Maoist court. The Maoist tribunal gave them a choice of either reintegrating the Maoist Party or of being sentenced to forced labour. Both women accepted the sentence rather than becoming Maoist again. After purging their sentence, they were still confined by local Maoists to their natal home despite repeated requests made to the Maoist authorities by themselves, their parents, parents-in-laws and their husbands. They were allowed to join their respective husbands only after the Maoists signed the peace agreement with the Government.

Despite the many hurdles, if women decide to quit the Maoist Party and stay away from them to start a new life, the stigma and exclusion of being Maoist persist. They do not usually find non-Maoist husbands. I was told that non-Maoist men would not marry ex-Maoist women, because these women were considered to have no moral values. The following incident

occurred to a young woman from the Sinja Valley whom I had known as a child.

Beauty (her real name) –she was a beautiful child– was, according to her parents, abducted by the local Maoist cadres and forced to become a Maoist against her will. After some time, she surrendered to the State and lived in the Tarai; she never came back to her village to avoid arrest by the Maoists¹⁹. There she met a young man with whom she got married, but she did not tell her husband that she was an ex-Maoist. When the young man found out that his wife was an ex-Maoist, he left her. In desperation, she took her own life.

This is not an isolated case, there are indeed many such stories. Many ex-Maoists who had been forced to become Maoists lost their husbands-to-be. After they left the Maoist Party, their fiancés refused to marry them because of the Maoist label these women carry on their heads.

Exclusion is an integral part of being Maoist women. However, Maoist men do not meet the same fate as their female comrades. During my fieldwork, I met Maoist men and women who were on home-leave. Maoist men did not have any problem in reintegrating their village social circle. They were welcomed back as if they had just come back from a trip to India, and saw no obstacle to carrying out their social duties. Women, on the other hand, faced exclusion. PLA women are not able to resume their previous life, such as tending fields, fetching water, looking after animals etc. and are not able to find a new role within the community. As a result, they tend to stay at home with immediate family members or with their own comrades rather than with young women of their own age. A female PLA member who was on home-leave in the Sinja Valley had never interacted with other young women of the village. It looked as if she was not able to find her place within the social environment where she had grown up. When I asked the other young women from the village why they did not talk to their friend (they had been friends before the young lady joined the PLA), they told me that their Maoist friend had become very different and that she did not like to mix with them. I did not know whether this was true but young village women usually avoided contact with the Maoist woman even though they lived in the same village and

¹⁹ For the Maoists, whoever surrenders to the State, automatically becomes a traitor. If they capture the person, the latter faces severe punishment; this could be capital punishment. The Maoists killed some of these “traitors” who surrendered to the State, and after purging their prison term, resided in Jumla Bazar (district headquarter) during the attack on Jumla in 2002.

belonged to the same lineage. I was not able to establish contact with her despite having known her as a child. I saw her only with her comrades. Two days after her departure from the village, news came that she had eloped with another PLA member and left for India. The young man has a wife who is also a PLA member and a child in one of the UN-monitored cantonments. When I enquired about the couple while visiting the camp (where the couple was based) in 2007, I was told that the young woman was known for not having a good moral character. If they had found the couple before they left for India, they would have been punished for their deed.

The Maoists claim to fight for gender equality and are determined to end all forms of exploitation of women and sex discrimination. They also argue that women join the Maoist organisation in large numbers because of their programme. To justify their claim, the Maoists display pictures of women in combat fatigues with guns; this, indeed, justifies gender equality in work between men and women. Indeed, women PLA cadres seem to enjoy some forms of gender equality while running day-to-day camps, such as, cleaning, cooking etc. The dress code is the same for PLA men and women -both wear shirts and trousers; however, female Maoist political activists wear *kurta suruvalal*²⁰ despite encouragement from their superiors to wear a shirt and trousers to become a “Modern person”. However, research shows that not all women join the Maoist ranks and continue to stay with the organisation just because of gender equality and the fight against sex discrimination that the Maoists promote.

Most young women are recruited at a young age through coercion and persuasion, and many of them are married and have children with Party cadres before they reach adulthood. They only have experience of home and the Maoists. For lack of knowledge of the outside world, it is very difficult for these women to step beyond the safe perimeter into the unknown. Even though Maoist women leave the Party, they will still be brought back to Party since they cannot cross the border like their male comrades. In response to Rita Manchanda’s question, “why are girls who are a high-risk group not leaving their villages”, a brigadier-general of the then Royal Nepal Army said, “The boys can go across the border to find jobs in India or Malaysia. Where can the girls go? If they come to Kathmandu or go to India, they run the risk of being trafficked or getting entrapped in the sexually exploitative jobs here.”²¹ Some Maoist women acknowledge that even if they did want to run away from the Party, they could not do so, because they do not have sufficient knowledge of the outside world and this restricts their mobility: “Men can go across the

²⁰ A long knee-length top and a sort of pyjama trousers, favoured by young women.

²¹ R. Manchanda, 2004.

border, but where can we go?" Then, they explained, "Once a Maoist, always a Maoist", they did not enjoy the liberty of running away. On the one hand, women cannot leave the Maoist organisation because their life is built around Maoists, and on the other hand, they face the stigma and exclusion for being members of the Maoist Party. In most cases, Maoist women have seen and experienced nothing other than their village life, so when they return home, they are not able to use their new found skills or to find a new role in the community. In some cases, for lack of an ability to readjust, Maoist women exclude themselves from the community, while sometimes the latter rejects them for being members of the Maoist Party.²²

Conclusion

One of the Maoist agendas was to put an end to child marriage. However, since their arrival in the Sinja Valley, underage marriage, which was in decline, has drastically increased in the region. Since the Maoists have only recruited unmarried young girls, parents have a tendency to marry their daughters as young as possible to avoid Maoist recruitment.

The Maoists perceived *jari* custom as a discriminatory tradition against women; therefore, they have prohibited the *jari* system calling it "wife selling, degraded custom" to end discrimination against women. In fact, the *jari* tradition provides women with some form of independence and full status vis-a-vis their husband and their parents-in-laws, not as subordinates as defined in Hindu culture. Regardless of the number of *jaris* for a woman, her status vis-a-vis her husband does not change. She maintains her position in society and does not suffer from stigmatisation, as there is no stigma attached to *jari*. This tradition provides a woman with a way of escaping her abusive husband and her parents-in-law. Since the Maoists have prohibited *jari*, a woman is systematically stigmatised as a "bad woman" if she left in *jari*. By opposing the *jari* tradition that is granted to women by the tradition in the Sinja Valley, the Maoists are merely reinforcing exploitation of women and sex discrimination, the very agenda they said they were fighting to eliminate from society.

Despite the Maoist rhetoric on gender equality, nothing has changed in villages, at least in the Sinja Valley; women are still the major agricultural work force. While the women juggle between work in the fields and at home, the men, including the Maoists, spend their time gossiping instead of helping these women. For the sake of gender equality, the Maoists have put pressure on Matwali Chetris to give dowries like their high-caste

²² For a more personal story of the exclusion of child soldiers see www.nepalnews.com/archive/2008/others/feature/sep/news_feature03.php

neighbours. Before the arrival of Maoists in the Sinja Valley, dowries played an insignificant role among Matwali Chetris. Forcing them to give dowries only increases pressure on impoverished communities.

The Maoist rhetoric on the emancipation of women by ending all forms of exploitation of women and sex discrimination and guaranteeing them gender equality remains rhetoric, at least in the Sinja Valley.



PLA women knitting in a PLA cantonment, 6th division, Dasarathpur, Surkhet, 2007.
Photo: S. Shrestha-Schipper.

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