

Maoism, Violence and Religious Upheaval in a Village in Eastern Nepal¹⁷⁸

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Anyone returning after a long absence to Temma, a village like so many others in eastern Nepal, will immediately notice that the fighting in Khotang district from 2001 to 2005 and the Maoist takeover of local life have rocked an order that once seemed immutable. For centuries, the communities who inhabited this mountainous but fertile area had found their way by coexisting side by side, with group distinctions being preserved by a strong religious conservatism. The low-intensity unrest which appeared in the wake of the “democratic revolution” in the 1990s was followed after 2001 by a sudden outburst of violence when the Maoist guerrilla and the royal army clashed in the vicinity of Temma. Until the 2005 cease-fire, permanent insecurity and distrust fuelled by the infiltration of Maoists and government informants provoked intense anxiety in village society, with severe repercussions on the religious life of communities, moreover disturbed by the “People’s government’s” constant interference. The spreading of new forms of religiosity, especially among the Rais and the Magars, including the astonishing popularity of the cult of Goddess Baghawati, reflects a protest against violence on both sides and a long-term transformation of religious conceptions.

Background

A multi-community society:

Temma, in the heart of the Rai country, is a village of 4,000 inhabitants far off the beaten track where hamlets rise in tiers at an altitude of 1,000 to 2,000 metres. Premature overpopulation and intense land fragmentation have prompted a massive rural exodus since the end of the 1970s. Demographic pressure was eased somewhat by the enrolment of the Rais

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and the Magars in the British and Indian armies, by Brahman-Chetris moving to urban areas and their more recent emigration to the Middle East, opening Temma up to the world and providing expatriate families with decent living conditions.

As is often the case in Khotang, Temma is a multi-community society: the indigenous Chamling Rais represent approximately 40 per cent of the population, the Magars 25 per cent, the Chetris 20 per cent, the Brahmins 5 per cent and Dalits 10 per cent. Although the Indo-Nepalese, and no doubt the Magars, settled there at the latest in the early 19th century, only the Chamling Rais, for largely religious reasons, claim to be native to the region. They see the “latecomers” as guests, strangers to the land, the deities and the world of the ancestors.

Relations between communities are governed by rules laid down to prevent conflict: avoidance is the first one; the second one is a tacit compromise, which gives the Chamling Rais, allied with the Magars, exclusive local power from which the Indo Nepalese are excluded despite their demographic weight and land wealth.

All things considered, the communities live peacefully side by side. The Chamling Rais are the “masters of the country”. The land issue, a sensitive one in the middle of the 20th century, lost its edge in the 1980s when the Brahman-Chetris, torn by family quarrels, started to sell their land. The ethnic flames stoked by Kiranti nationalists barely made a ripple. However, manifestations of jealousy between neighbours as well as family squabbles, among members of a particular community rather than among different communities, are incessant, including in the Rai and Magar families, which have been destabilised by emigration and alcoholism. On the whole, the patriarchal family order, the patrons-clients order and the religious order in the communities were already showing cracks by the time the Maoists burst onto the scene in Khotang.

The establishment of the Maoist order

Maoism has no roots in Khotang, even though a handful of professional revolutionaries, essentially Brahmin-Chetris and Newars, prepared the ground for it in the late 1990s. In addition, the *Maobadi* had to reckon with competition from the *Khumbuwan Mukti Morcha* (Khumbuwan Liberation Movement) militia, who preached ethnic arguments against the Indo-Nepalese and whose bloody deeds contrasted with the Maoists’ “restrained violence”.

The army’s sudden engagement in Solukhumbu and Udayapur following the declaration of a state of emergency on 26th November 2001 prompted Maoist and Khumbuwan groups to take refuge in Khotang. The

Kiranti nationalists yielded to the Communist leadership, which proceeded with the forced merger of the Khumbuwan and Limbuwan movements into “*Kirant Rastriya Mukti Morcha*”, which it controlled.

The “People’s War in Khotang” was a low-intensity conflict, neither really civil nor really military. It claimed few victims (possibly 150 in all) since the protagonists targeted their attacks. However, the “battle of Dandagaun”, a violent clash between the royal army and the guerrilla a few kilometres from Temma, when 7 seven young Maoist female combatants were killed (after having been raped by soldiers, so local rumour reports) proved to be a durable trauma for the neighbourhood. The soldiers took advantage of the often-petty disputes that divided village society in attempts to identify and eliminate the Maoist cadres. The *Maobadi*, aware of their weakness, tried not to recklessly alienate the populations, but were ruthless when it came to informers, real or suspected. All in all, although the *Maobadi* managed to keep control of the region, many of their commanding officers, whose idealism and discipline were well respected, fell as “martyrs”. They were replaced by new recruits, Khumbuwan activists, villagers with scores to settle and Dalits hoping to have a say in the decisions, and about whom there were mixed feelings.

The villagers ultimately became the main victims of the Maoist order and the army’s repeated “blunders”, as each of the protagonists sought to terrorise their few overt opponents and intimidate the many undecided. The villagers’ exaggerated and oft-repeated tales of each side’s brutality spread far and wide, fuelling the people’s sense of moral anguish and constant insecurity, sometimes out of all proportion to the facts. In this regard, the violence was primarily psychological.

Although they controlled the territory, the Maoists were never strong enough to make Khotang a showcase for the new order. Hiding out in the forests with their minds mainly on survival and military action, the *Maobadi* relied on notables they had appointed to handle the everyday running of the district. Although the Maoists were only seen occasionally in villages, and their “forays” were sudden and random, they instilled enough fear to establish certain ground rules hinting at the shape of future society, yet they did not endeavour to set in motion a revolutionary dynamic or to launch a “cultural revolution” in this region. However, they attached a great deal of importance to the establishment of a social and “moral order”, which was not without its repercussions on religious practices.

Religions on the Move

Before addressing the upheavals that have affected the inhabitants of Temma, it is worth giving a broad outline of religious life in the region through to the mid-1990s.

The Hinduism practised by the Brahman-Chetris was scrupulously orthodox with a ritualism devoid of spirituality, characteristics fairly typical of a community cut off from the Indian world. Right from childhood were imposed demands of “purity”, which restricted contact with the other groups and prohibited sexual relations outside of the person’s own caste. Panchayati State education, with its ideals regarding equality and principles of coeducation, shook this dour Hinduism. Although the older generation continued to view the world in traditional terms, young people had more doubts about the soundness of the castes’ biases; however, few of them turned their backs on the education that had been instilled in them. The Brahmin *Purohits*, the guardians of tradition, prompted more annoyance than respect, yet the Brahmin-Chetris and certain Magars continued to call on their services for family ceremonies.

The Chamling Rais harboured mute hostility towards this Hinduism that had relegated them to an inferior position in the caste system. The Rai religion consists essentially in their worship of the ancestor spirits dwelling in the home, a sacred place and sanctuary of lineage, their reciting of the *Muddhum*, a mythological tale of the origins of the Rai people, and huge festivals in honour of the local Temma deity, Sakela; otherwise, the deities’ pantheon and other religious beliefs are somewhat vague and seem to vary depending on the places and individuals. Despite an apparent new lease of life due to the resurgence of the Kiranti identity, the Rais’ religion also bore signs of fragility: centred around the land and ancestors, it found it hard to withstand the uprooting caused by massive rural exodus. The “vocation crisis” impacting on the number of new Shamans, whose healing talents were losing currency, was a sign of the detachment of the younger generations.

Although some Magars observed certain Hindu rites, partly for reasons of social prestige, the others cultivated a sort of religious indifference that contrasted with Hindu and Kiranti ritualism.

The Dalits’ religion is based on Hinduism and they worship the same deities but they have their own incumbents. Among various petty humiliations, their low position results in a ban on their entering the home of a Chamling Rai, Brahman, Chetri or Magar, regarded (but only for them) as a sacred space in its entirety, or on sharing their meals with

them¹⁷⁹. The Dalits nurture a certain resentment of religions that endorse these snubs, but the other groups show a total lack of interest in the feelings of the “untouchables”.

Up until 1995, Temma’s religious landscape was set in stone. Huddled in their traditionalism, the communities developed an instinctive distrust of non-conformist religious movements and spiritualities, especially when they bore a resemblance to Hindu mysticism and Tantrism, promptly equated with “witchcraft”. However, things then gradually started to change.

Firstly, both Hindu and Kiranti followers, both for spiritual and material reasons, started to become allergic to blood sacrifices, which were a key component of Temma’s religions. At the same time, in 1995, individuals started building small temples, or chapels, which replaced the traditional “sacred places”. Initially, these were ex-votos by expatriates, but in 2002, when fighting between the army and the *Maobadi* brought bloodshed to Temma, these propitiatory acts combined with plant offerings acted as “substitution sacrifices” bearing a message of peace and of condemnation of the blood shed from both parties.¹⁸⁰

Secondly, up until the 1990s, the two Hindu and Kiranti religions had remained largely impervious to one another: the Rai faith, because of its lineage-based and actual ethnic nature, was essentially exclusive; and the Hindu faith due to its purity requirements was incompatible with drinking alcohol and sacrificing pigs and cattle. However, the way had long been paved for reconciliation by the religious assimilation of the Rais recruited as Gurkhas in the British and especially Indian armies. Yet the

¹⁷⁹ In this respect, their situation is very specific: a Rai or a Magar can enter the house of a Brahman or Chetri during any ritual (except for funerals) and be invited for a meal provided he keeps his distance with the sacred areas; similarly, a Brahman, a Chetri or a Magar will readily be invited to a Rai house and to attend a religious ritual from a corner of the room, but he shall abstain from coming close to the sacred hearth and jars. Conversely, a Dalit is “living pollution” who is not supposed to know what happens inside a Rai, a Magar, or a Brahman-Chetri’s house and who is practically never in his life offered the opportunity of entering any home other than a fellow Dalit’s house.

¹⁸⁰ This substitution sacrifice takes the form of the offering of a cucumber, pumpkin, yam or lemon decorated with horns, legs, and tails (made of small pieces of wood or vegetal), reminiscent of what was originally an animal sacrifice. The offering is adorned, “beheaded”, and thrown in the “sacred place”, now a garden full of flowers. This substitution sacrifice appeared here and there in the 1990s in circumstances which call for clarification. It gained popularity ten years later and found explanations linked to a refusal of violence, with the spread of the Bhagawatis and Sai Baba cults, and the trauma resulting from the “People’s War” in Khotang .

religiousness of these atypical characters was too discreet for them to incur their community's wrath. Although the attraction felt by some Rais and Magars to an ascetic and spiritualistic form of Hinduism, which we will come back to later, was not unprecedented in eastern Nepal, it was new in Temma. The individuals in question, keeping their distance from the Brahmin *Purohits*, passed themselves off as "non-conformists" taking on the originality of practices deemed edifying, but unorthodox, by both the members of their community and the Brahman-Chetris.

With the arrival of Maoists in the village, they became groundbreakers.

Maoists and Religion

Do the Maoists have a religious policy? Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's studies of Deurali, a Maoist showcase village in one of their strongholds in western Nepal, would seem to suggest so. The temples have been closed, religious festivals banned and family-based religions driven underground. These manifestations of an antireligious and anticlerical policy are symptomatic of the order of things. Firstly, the principle of the forced unification and modernisation of the country underlying the *Maobadi* ideology, and the totalitarian and atheistic aspect of their vision of the world rule out any sympathy for traditional religious practices, whether Hindu or indigenous. Secondly, the abolition of the caste system, not only in terms of legislation but also of reality, that the Maoists advocate is corollary to the secularisation of the State and society¹⁸¹ and in the end, if not to dominant Hinduism, at least to the discriminatory behaviour it imposes.

Yet Deurali is a harbinger of the extreme situation in which the Maoists, in a position of strength, could fully implement their programme. In Khotang, where their safety depended on the more or less coerced consent of villagers, their religious policy has been harder to make out. Religion as such was not targeted. The Maoist religion, the "messianism of the new man" with its chants, rituals and cult of martyrs practised in their secret hideouts, managed to put up with the ongoing existence of domestic religions. Moreover, the first local Maoist leaders, often young, university-educated Brahmin-Chetris, largely indifferent to religion, but marked by their Brahminic education, had no instinctive hatred of Hindu or Kiranti religions. They probably nurtured the half-fatalistic, half-amused indifference with which young people view the old ideas to which their parents cling and which the new era will end up sweeping away, except on one, admittedly crucial point: the equality of treatment that the

¹⁸¹ Albeit an ambition largely shared in Nepal.

Dalits were supposed to be granted. The Khumbuwan militia were quite a different story. After pressing the Party to ban the teaching of Sanskrit in state schools, they inveighed against Hinduism, as they say, supposedly “embodied by the Brahmin traitors, the inveterate henchmen of a fratricidal king.”

The hard core of this “moral order” took the form of the prohibition of alcohol, massive buffalo slaughtering and, in general, a ban on extravagant spending on major community festivals and family celebrations, along with a ban on sexual relations out of wedlock. This satisfied a number of aims: “revolutionary austerity”, mobilisation of supplies for the People’s Army, egalitarianism imposed on a village society where differences in wealth were displayed mainly by ostentatious spending on weddings, hostility to community festivals that divided a society that the *Maobadi* intended to unify, and the pursuit of a symbolic break with the old order. Yet the Maoists could not ignore the religious implications of these measures, whose logical upshot was to relegate to the private sphere a religion now confined to family worship. So they marked their irritation at the sounding of the conches in certain Hindu rituals, a little like the French anticlericals tried to have bell ringing banned following the separation of the church and the State in 1905. In Khotang, however, the Maoists did not go so far as to proscribe the major festivals, *Dashain* for the Indo-Nepalese and *Sakela* for the Chamling Rais (which attracted tens of thousands of Rais to Temma every year for impressive drinking binges), although no one actually felt like celebrating from 2002 to 2005. So the celebrations took place in a joyless, restrained atmosphere (especially in terms of drink). However, following the signing of the peace agreement in 2006, the Maoists and the government accepted to lift all measures that might bridle jubilation. These festive ceremonies resumed as before in Temma, although tinged with a new cost-consciousness and, as regards *Sakela*, a relative sobriety in terms of the amount of alcohol imbibed.

Yet austerity did not directly undermine the domestic rituals, the Indo-Nepalese insistence on purity or the lineage cult of the Chamling Rais, and villagers generally supported it since, although no one dared admit it, these compulsory and ostentatious expenses were hard to bear.

Brahmanic Hinduism in the Line of Fire

As regards the astrologer-*Pundits* and Brahmin *Purohits*, the restrictions were enforced more strictly if not harassingly.

Although the Maoists put up with readings of the Vedas and Mantra recitations, they quickly became irritated with the interminable wedding rituals, the lighting of the sacred fire and the “*homadi*” sacrifices that

accompanied it for seven days. They curtly announced, as villagers could hear it on the local radio during the war years, “that they had had enough of these huge, expensive “*saptaha purana*” rituals that were an insult to human understanding, but whose hidden diabolical meaning did not escape them (sic).” “It was absurd to burn tons of food (sic) when it was in short supply and people were hungry. As of now, the *Purohits* would be banned from throwing mixed grains of rice and wheat and clarified butter in the fire, and those who disobeyed this order would be treated as social criminals (*samajik aparadhi*).”

In Okhre, a Maoist stronghold, an old Brahmin *Pundit* persisted in conducting the Vedic rituals in the traditional manner. The Maoists, the Khumbuwan militia in this particular case, summoned all the eminent Brahmins from the neighbouring region along with the people of the village. The *Pundit* was ordered to circle his house carrying a piglet, an impure animal if ever there was one, on his shoulders. He only complied after the other Brahmin convinced him to obey, otherwise the *Maobadi* would have put him to death. He had to go round the house seven times in public (*sapta griha pradakshina*, a sardonic parody of one of the sacred rituals of Brahmanic Hinduism) in front of the open-mouthed spectators, following which the pig was let loose in his home, slaughtered, eviscerated and cooked in his hearth whereupon the Maoists feasted on it in the company of the village untouchables.

The maliciousness shown by certain Maoists when it came to some, but not all, traditional aspects of Brahmanic Hinduism was also manifest at the Temple of Baraha Pokhari in southern Khotang. This is a “holy place” more than a monumental shrine frequented by the Kiranti people and by the Indo-Nepalese where, after a long period of coexistence, the two types of religion have ended up intermingling without totally merging.

The family of incumbents who has watched over the shrine from generation to generation found itself, for the first time ever, in trouble with the *Maobadi* when they turned up without warning at first prayer in the early morning and were indignant at the obscurantist and counterrevolutionary attitude of those who insisted on barring the Dalits from entering the temple. The Maoists (Khumbuwan it would appear) told the son “to finish his prayer since the moment of sacrifice was nigh”. Then they seized the 14-year-old boy, tied him up and aped sham preparations for a sacrifice saying to him, “You’re going to become a God too, we’re going to cut your head off and spray the shrine altars and sacred stones with your blood.” His parents pleaded with the sacrificers that the child had done no harm, that he had not been warned and that he had not been given the three chances that Maoist justice gives anyone who wishes to make amends. Suddenly, out of the Maoist ranks, a female Chetri “commander” who seemed to be in charge adopted a harsh tone and

berated the family of incumbents, informing them that, “As of today, the temple was open to everyone, including the *Dalits*.” The group then disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

The incumbents remain traumatised by the intrusion of the *Maobadi*. Although the theatricality combined with a certain black sense of humour and the blasphemous parody of the Brahmanic rituals bear the mark of the Khumbuwan militia, the hypothesis whereby roles were shared between them and the Chetri Maoist commander, who stepped in “in the nick of time” to save the child, appears to have totally escaped the person reporting the incident to me. Yet one cannot rule out the possibility of a didactic will driving the *Maobadi* to sometimes tolerate cruel jokes that we have reason to believe are premeditated: the small number of people executed by the Maoists compared with those who have been publicly and horribly humiliated clearly points in this direction.

After this, the *Maobadi* gave the temple more slack in the running of its affairs. They blocked the reconstruction of a shrine using government funds (“Waste!”), but they let the incumbent make the necessary repairs, collect rent on the land surrounding the shrine and sell the sacrificed pigeons: “Neither will we prevent you from worshipping your gods and goddesses. All we ask is that you respect Party orders about the Dalits, that you don’t waste money and that you don’t blow your conch.”¹⁸² The rest is your business.”

The Maoists, so concerned about saving money when it came to major community festivals and Brahmanic rituals, do not seem to have sought to take to task the Kiranti Shamans whose spiritual practices include slaughtering animals. Maybe the Maoists felt that paying the therapist was part of the treatment, or maybe they were less concerned about sparing the livestock than saving the grain, their staple diet, which they tapped without any qualms. Maybe the Khumbuwan activists and then the young Rais, who joined the Maoist ranks en masse in 2003-2004, felt less antagonistic towards the *Bijuwa* Shamans, whose healing talents gave them a social utility, than towards the Brahmin *Pundits* and *Purohits* whose airs and graces and hardnosed, money-grabbing attitude fuel an anticlericalism that extends beyond the bounds of the Kiranti community.

¹⁸² Maoist officials have forbidden conch blowing in any Brahmanic rite, including when they were performed in temples. They have also banned the music traditionally performed by the Damais (caste of tailors-musicians) during marriage ceremonies. It is rather difficult to ascertain what hurts the Maoists more; the conch and music instruments, the noise, the religious rituals which go together, or the large festive gatherings (religious or family ones) they do not control, allowing the army’s informants to travel unnoticed in the area. The villagers I talked with are systematically inclined to underline the suspicious tendencies of the Maoists while underrating their religious and ideological aims and biases.

The All-Important “Dalit” Question

Abuse of religious sensibilities took on another form when on the part of the untouchables. It was deceitful and quite frankly seen as “underhand” by their victims, not only Brahman-Chetris, but also and above all, Chamling Rais.

The Maoists dictated to an unprepared village society that the Dalits be granted equal treatment. This measure raised no particular problem when it was limited to public life, especially to the participation of untouchables in the “People’s governments”. It did not call for any change in everyday behaviour, with the thresholds of the Brahman-Chetri, Chamling Rai and Magar homes, the shrines of domestic worship, and the sharing of meals remaining barred to the Dalits. They felt extremely resentful about this even though the replacement of the first Maoists, who fell in combat between 2001 and 2005, saw them entering the Party en masse.

Despite the outward appearance of advancement, it was still socially and psychologically impossible for many Dalits to make themselves heard in their own villages with their caste identity. So they took to the road with the Maoist groups to start a new life in villages far away where no one knew them. With a deceptive anonymity afforded them by a choice of pseudonym, but betrayed by their mix of audacity and timidity, these untouchables ended up imposing their company on those who did not want it. As a Kami (blacksmith) from my village, whom I met by chance in Diktel explained, “I want to eat with Brahmans because, by sharing their meal, I become a Brahman myself, or they become Dalits like me: it’s by sitting at the same table and being under the same roof that we are really equal, that we all become the same ...”

Abruptly imposed on village society, the Maoist policy has driven the Dalits to hide their identity more intently, or to assume the identity of high-caste individuals, than change it or to win recognition as such. Their penchant for seeking the company of high-caste members has exposed the Dalits to the risk of making a faux pas. In the village of Mattim, a young female Maoist who was a stranger to the area pretended she was a Brahmin from the Paudel clan, yet drew attention to herself by behaving rather strangely. She would walk uninvited into a Brahman’s home without so much as a by your leave, sit herself down without respecting the protocol for guests of a Brahman family (assuming they are Brahman themselves), fiddle with the home worship altar (*diya ghar*), a holy place if ever there was one, go up to the sacred hearth (*chulo*), off-handedly finger everything and, to crown it all, tuck into the family’s food. It did not take long for her unfortunate hosts to find out she was a Damai (tailor) from Solukhumbu. As one of my Chetri neighbours explained (perhaps with a

touch of malice...): “You cannot become a Brahman overnight. You become a Brahman after a long, hard education”, which the young *Maobadi* clearly lacked ... Her victims, while frantically scrubbing the crockery after each of her visits, divulged that several months earlier, a bunch of Maoists, mostly untouchables, had moved into their house: “They touched everything, they cooked the rice, everything is polluted, everything is impure. Now we don’t ask as many questions as we used to. The Maoists wanted it that way. The problem is that all this defilement has driven the gods out of the house (*Kul*). This could be the end of our line (*bansa nash*).” As one of the Chetris I spoke to also disclosed, “There is not one single house in Khatrigaun that the untouchables have not entered. So now everyone is pure and everyone is impure.”

These Chetris, who managed to keep some distance from the obsession with purity among caste members, skilfully observed that whereas the Dalits’ intrusions into the homes of the Brahman-Chetris had rankled with them, the Chamling Rais had felt downright violated, for two reasons: “First of all, the Rais deem that this is their home, that they are the masters of the land and their houses are not hostels for any person to enter as they please. Secondly, a Rai house does not belong so much to its occupants as to their ancestors, who are perpetually present, living and invisible at the same time; it is their temple, their sanctuary, and it is out of the question for an untouchable (*achhut*) to put a foot inside ...” Rai neighbours confirmed this view: “We, the Rais, do not believe that all men are equal. On the one hand, there are the divinities of the house, our ancestors and ourselves, and on the other hand, there are all the others. The others, even the Brahmins, are all “untouchables” in the eyes of the divinities of the house. Our house belongs to our divinities, who do not accept strangers entering our homes, as long as it remains ours.”

These are words of suffering, rather than exasperation, from Rais whose home has been violated.

A Chamling notable from Jyamire, for example, was taken aback to find his house invaded by strangers who had already emptied the jar of sacred liquor placed near the fireplace (where the ancestors dwell) and were grilling maize in the sacred hearth. They were all untouchables (*achhut*) merrily riding roughshod over forbidden places. After managing to get them to leave in return for a considerable revolutionary donation, the unfortunate owner started to experience trouble sleeping and to have nightmares. His health deteriorated at an alarming rate. He called on all the Shamans for them to invoke the divinities of the house (*gharko deu*). They sacrificed some thirty chickens, ten pigs and three buffalo in vain. All the Shamans explained to him that the divinities of the house were agitated and in turmoil because the untouchables had polluted the sacred places. They wanted sacrifices, ever more sacrifices. The Rai notable, who

did not want to leave the house struck by his ancestors' wrath, was desperate: "If the gods of the house (*gharko deu*) turn away from me (*bigriyobhane*), it's the end of my lineage (*maichinung*) since I am the last surviving brother of my family."

The recent popularity of devotion to the goddess Bhagawati and guru Sai Baba could be equated with attacks on the religious traditionalism of the Chamling Rais.

Visionaries and Mystics: The Boom in New Religions

The Bhagawatis

Saktisali Bhagawati ("the All Powerful") is one of the names of Shakti whose other manifestations include Lakshmi, Durga and Kali. Legend in Temma has it that Bhagawati was incarnated in the form of a poor Brahmin's daughter, the eldest of Seven Sisters, who became divine after enduring terrible trials and tribulations: she and her sisters are the personification of suffering humanity (and, more precisely, femininity).

The new religion was born in eastern Nepal a few decades ago, growing up around a Brahmin prophetess operating in a temple in Biratnagar. Although of Shaivite persuasion, this prophetess was possessed by the Spirit of the Forest (*Jangali deu*) worshipped by the Rais and Magars of Khotang and also had a special link with Saktisali Bhagawati who spoke through her mouth. One of her Rai disciples, living not far from Temma, practised in the chapel adjoining the house where she conducted her healing activities. This visionary preached an essentially moral message, which asserted that to find good health you had to repent of your faults and have a healthy diet where vegetables replaced meat and water replaced alcohol. Her sermons fell largely on deaf ears for 25 years: the Brahman-Chetris are mainly concerned with purity and do not concern themselves with being good; and as for the Rais and the Magars, it took a political cataclysm for them to consider drinking their liquor in moderation.

In 1993, a young Rai girl from a hamlet in the Temma highlands started suffering from nightmares, terrible migraines and stomach pains. The Shamans' sacrifices were powerless to help her. The healer put the young girl on a strict diet in the Bhagawati chapel, but the treatment focused mainly on her father, a dealer in rich clothes, of dubious morals, who had accompanied her. The prophetess (apparently well informed ...) told him what the problem was: this violent and alcoholic man swindled his customers and cooked his books and then swore on his daughter's life that he was honest. The gods had taken him at his word and struck down his child, who was now possessed by the Goddess who suffered physically and spoke through her mouth. The young girl stayed one year in the house of

the healer, who instilled in her the rules of ritual purity, based on those that apply to the Brahmans but are unknown to the Rais, and a series of extremely complicated prayers. She returned home cured to a house from which alcohol, pork and blood sacrifices were now banished. Her father had had a chapel built in a garden filled with flowers. She set herself up there and started prophesising as she had been taught to do, muttering and shaking in a trance, attracting curious onlookers.

This new cult gained followers, but also stirred violent opposition. Experts on the subject, the village's two most prominent Shamans and the two most distinguished Brahman *Purohits* condemned these impostors who preyed on human gullibility and the poor villagers' abysmal ignorance. They were especially incensed about the unfair competition from the new Goddess and her preaching about the abolition of blood sacrifices, which was ruining their lucrative business, and they conspired to expel the witch. The matter was solved when the "goddess" fell in love with a young Rai who believed he was the reincarnation of Vishnu and was preparing the population for "an age of truth" (*satya yuga*) because "the end of the dark age (*Kali yuga*) was nigh". The villagers took it badly. The visionary's family sent the Goddess to the Terai, out of harm's way, and the avatar of Vishnu beat a hasty retreat.

That might have been the end of the story, but new Bhagawatis sprang up in Temma from 1993 to 2003. I have noted just six whose stories would be worth telling because they teach us so much about aspects which could be perceived as village's social pathologies. With the arrival of the Maoists, the number of goddesses spun out of control from one to three new Bhagawatis per year. In 2004, three Rai girls from mountain-top hamlets were possessed by the Goddess. One of these prophetesses, divinely inspired by a local Khotang deity, Jalapa Devi, all-powerful but usually more discreet, explained to me that the Goddess had taken control of her spirit after the battle of Dandagaun: she had witnessed the capture, rape and summary execution of young female Maoist fighters. "They haunt me, they come to me crying, I see them every day." Another of these prophetesses who lives in the district's administrative capital is often consulted by the governor, police commissioner, army officers and civil servants posted in Diktel. The most highly respected prophetess remains an old woman from a tiny fringe Chetri community in a remote mountain hamlet "Phalate" who was very popular with the *Maobadi* who would seek her blessing before going into battle. She is also the only one who is disinterested in material matters.

Since 2005, I have recorded at least 13 new Magar Bhagawatis whose ranks have been swelled by a "blacksmith" Bhagawati and four "tailors". One of them, a 40-year-old Damai believes herself to be cleaner and purer than all the other female high-caste members, from whom she now

refuses food. For her, the touchables have become untouchables. In fact, the only Chetri Bhagawati of the rich rice-growing village of Khatrigaun is not taken seriously by her neighbours, who see her as a fraud or hysteric.

Devotion to Bhagawati is female in nature with an eschatological quality marked by the onset of Kali Yuga. As one of these possessed women explained to me, "Today, man has become bad, everyone is killing each other, violence is extreme, many young girls are killed, many are raped by villains. All these girls who have suffered a violent death have risen to the heavens, which are filled with the souls of these new goddesses. A time of rebirth is coming when this violence committed by selfish men will end." The proliferation of Goddesses therefore marks the end of a world and the beginning of a new cycle. However, if the messianism of the movement cannot be hidden, this dimension, which is not personified in any religious leader, remains essentially peaceful and non-political. It acts as an oblique protest against violent behaviour whoever committed it, the Maoist, the army, more generally the males. In this respect, this messianism cannot be interpreted as counter-revolutionary since, for a majority of villagers, the soldiers were the first to bring armed violence to Khotang. It also has another side to it, which is divinatory and therapeutic. These prophetesses have taken a place left vacant by the astrologer-*pundits* at a time when fear has never run so high: tense fear in the 1990s, when Nepalese society was disrupted on so many different fronts, followed by acute fear when the fighting hit Khotang. Yet the Bhagawatis have also taken the place of the Rai and Magar Shamans, known to be as money-grabbing as the Brahman *Purohit* and whose healing talents were highly disputed. The new Goddesses have, in any case, calmed the psychosomatic disorders that appear to have affected more particularly the Rai and Magar women of Khotang.

The Sai Baba devotees

Alongside the cult of Bhagawati and the Seven Sisters, a following has grown up around the person of the guru Sai Baba, a miracle worker from Southern India whose sect has millions of followers on the sub-continent.

The Sai Baba cult was started by a Rai, a former Indian army non-commissioned officer turned devotee of Shiva and an aficionado of the mystic trance. In March 1999, he fell into a cataleptic state that lasted 36 hours. Vishnu and Shiva spoke to him and sent him back to earth with their instructions: "Sewak (servant)! you shall spread our message of peace: respect the souls, end the violence, we want no more sacrifices. You must help the men who are killing each other. Free them from their wickedness!" The holy man turned the grounds of his two beautiful houses into a heavenly garden from which alcohol, sacrifices and meat

were banished. In Sai Baba's sanctuary, where the guru's picture stands on prominent display surrounded by icons of the Indian pantheon, the former NCO relieves the ill by "absorbing their pain" with his gentleness and serene certitude.

I was told that missionaries sent by Sai Baba visited Temma in 2000, but the villagers, who are very fond of wondrous tales, did not remember much about these converts who did not work any miracles.

In 2002, as fighting was escalating in Khotang, Sai Baba took hold of the spirit of a 17-year-old schoolgirl, who started to preach peace and non-violence. In 2005, this young Rai who communicated with her guru by telepathy set up a centre in Diktel where devotees (Newars and civil servants in the main) pray, chant and dance. It is said that she has already healed 42 different illnesses afflicting 250 followers. The fact that she does it for free is decidedly not the least of these miracles ... Word also has it that, every night, after she has placed a meal at the feet of her icon, Sai Baba materialises and lies with the young prophetess. An awesome experience since the visionary has been tormented by the phallus of Shiva writhing in her belly for six months in an attempt, so they say, to come out through her mouth ... In between convulsions, the young mystic prays and meditates.

These gripping spiritual experiences were bound to attract followers. In 2004, a 15-year-old schoolgirl from the town of central Temma, daughter of a former British army Gurkha, a notorious alcoholic who believed in neither Baba nor Bhagawati, fell into a trance. She announced that Sai Baba wanted an end to the violence, the drunkenness and the gambling (*Juwa*) that was sullyng Temma. The new prophetess' father gave up his vices and in turn built a small sanctuary in a floral garden where the people of the village come every morning to make offerings, pray and sing hymns through the night, in "unforgettable bliss," I was told.

All the residents of the central hamlet of Temma, astounded at this sudden boom in Baba, Bhagawati and all manner of mystics, were convinced that Temma had become a place inhabited by the gods, a "*Devasthal*". Devotees do not know whether they are coming or going. One of them told me, "We pray to Baba in the morning and pay homage to Bhagawati who lives a hundred yards from us in the afternoon. The next day, we do it the other way round." Since the two new forms of cult are by no means incompatible, far from it. A delicately balanced harmony has grown between the Bhagawati and the Baba, who live on good terms without competing with each other. Pictures of Sai Baba (and even Jesus Christ, lost among the Hindu deities ...) often adorn a Bhagawati's chapel and icons of the Goddess decorate the Baba sanctuaries. Only the mystic's path, and the identity of the spirit that has possessed them, can identify

the divinity they are attached to. To the faithful, they are totally interchangeable and, in fact, their cults have many points in common. This is actually a sort of syncretism between a remodelled Hinduism turning its back on caste distinction and the purely formal rules of purity that have paralysed Brahmanism, and the traditional Rai religion after being purged yet retaining its key elements. The sacred hearth, the main pillar and the large holy jar remain the home of the ancestors who are just as revered as ever. However, the holy “*Mochhama*” jar is no longer filled with alcohol, but with pure water and flowers, the hearth is plastered with terracotta and cow dung, and blood sacrifices are a thing of the past.

The Maoists appear to have treated these new cults with benign indifference. Their cadres, often detached from any faith, merely observed that the Bhagawati and Baba followers were, like themselves, fighting alcoholism, rejecting expensive sacrifices and advocating simple and austere living. What is more, unlike the Brahman-Chetris and the traditionalist Rais, by welcoming the Dalits into their chapels, they were doing away with the caste hierarchies and their inherent ritual purity and replacing them with personal devotion and internal purity. Lastly, local prominent figures who had rallied to the Maoists were often followers of the Bhagawati and Baba. The Temma secondary school headmaster, a former member of the Communist Party of Nepal-UML and educated as a Marxist, became a follower of the new cults and no doubt served as a “bridge” between the new masters and followers who turned out to be willing assistants to the new *Maobadi* order. Certain Maoists’ initial amused curiosity about these strange cults sometimes even turned into affinity among the young recruits who went to see the prophetesses before embarking on battles from which they were not sure they would return.

Conversions to Christianity

Another new phenomenon is converts to Christianity, here again solely among the Chamling Rais. In 2001, a family severely shaken by the deaths of their young children and exasperated by the impotence of the Shamans who had ruined them with useless sacrifices turned their backs on the ancestral religion on the advice of a relation living in a far-off village who had converted to Christianity. To the shocked amazement of their neighbours, they threw the stones of the sacred hearth in the stream, shattered the holy “*Mochhama*” jar and repainted the house’s main pillar where the ancestors dwelled, “those demons who wanted to wipe out our line.”

The family’s repudiation caused a scandal, ultimately leading to physical and mental abuse. First of all, the family were ostracised by all

the Rais of the “*daju bhai*” clan and then by the other Chamling Rais. They were banished from “*waitung*”, the community of clans, and reduced to the rank of untouchables: no one would accept water or cooked food from them and no Rai from the same clan would even consider visiting them.

These poor folk might not have survived had it not been for the solicitude of their Magar neighbours, who were not really bothered about the fate of the dumped ancestors. In 2003, the Maoists took an interest in this family who they felt had something of a “revolutionary” attitude. Their attempt at reconciliation with the other Rais was a failure. The clan brethren could not tolerate the disgraceful way in which the ancestors had been treated and were irate about the Christian family’s lack of regard for Kiranti traditions and their obvious delight in their constant provocation.

Then five other Rai families converted to Christianity for similar reasons: children who had fallen ill and were cured by reading the Bible, and exasperation at the impotence of the Shamans who were more interested in their wallets. Although these Rai converts were not subject to the same hostility, they nonetheless form an isolated community at odds with their surrounding environment.

Conclusion

Temma’s religious landscape is now one of singular complexity. It comprises the Brahman-Chetris who, like the reed of the French fabulist La Fontaine, bend in the storm but do not break; the traditionalist Chamling Rais disrupted by the attacks on their religious sensibilities; the “non-conformist” Rais (often followed by their Magar neighbours) who have rallied to a syncretism that combines all the possible facets of spiritualistic Hinduism (ascetic, mystical and visionary) with a purged Rai religion; marginalized and somewhat zealot Christians; and Dalits who err between recognition of their dignity in classic Brahmanism and membership of remodelled Hindu cults. The Maoists, bystanders to these changes that are quite beyond them, alternate between the fundamental irreligion of their cadres, violent hostility towards the Brahmans from their Khumbuwan faction, amused benevolence towards the new cults, and their young recruits’ curiosity about their prophetic and visionary aspects.

Interpretation is tricky and calls for a great deal of caution, yet several points are worth highlighting.

Firstly, the religious upheavals, which concern mainly the Rai and Magar communities, predate the arrival of the Maoists who merely precipitated the movement. They started to appear around 1995 during the unrest prompted by the introduction of the multiparty system, but

they really gathered full momentum from 2003 to 2005 when Khotang was buffeted by the fighting.

These upheavals are part of a protracted movement, which concerns all the communities to varying extents. It includes opposition to blood sacrifices, aspirations to purged and personal forms of religious practice, and especially the questioning of the Shamans' competence. As they face competition from medicine, the Shamans are losing credibility and are now criticised for their repeated failures. The accounts of conversion often start with the "miraculous recovery" of a patient who the Shamans had been powerless to treat. Bhagawati, Sai Baba and even the Christ of the Biswashi are primarily healing powers and miracle workers.

Then there is the peculiar element in that all the new religious practices preach abstinence from alcohol and non-violence. Granted, these doctrines are in keeping with the teachings of these sects. Yet the fact that they have been taken up mainly by Rai and Magar women, seemingly more exposed to domestic violence, is significant of the social pathologies that affected these two communities. The principle of non-violence gained currency when the fighting between the army and the Maoists started to claim victims in Khotang. Here again, the women, exposed to rape, played a key role in the indirect castigation of the men's violence. The new religious practices, which confer a central role on female "mystics", sibyls and prophetesses, go hand in hand with the advancement of women in a patriarchal and sometimes misogynistic society. This should be viewed in relation to the advancement of the young Maoist women who took part in the fighting and some of whom died "martyrs".

The new religious practices reveal that Hinduism has made a mark on the Rais, as has been observed in other regions of eastern Nepal. However, nothing hinted at the extent of it in Temma before 1995 and, consequently, the fragility of the indigenous religion. Rooted exclusively in the land, the everyday tête-à-tête between the "household divinities" that inhabit each home and their descendents does not allow for uprooting and expatriation. Neither is its limited spiritual and moral content likely to satisfy all the aspirations of a population that is now fairly educated and in which the individual is tending to assert himself. Yet this Hinduism is not that of the arrogant, hard-hearted Brahmans to whom the Rais remain allergic. It is a heterodox Hinduism that rejects caste distinctions and places the emphasis more on sentimental humanism than ritual purity, a syncretism of Hindu imagery and the ancestors' creed, which continues to occupy a central place once it has been purged of its most incommensurable "primitive" elements. The formidable lineage divinities, deprived of alcohol and their victims' blood, appear to have been brought to heel. People continue to venerate them,

although, now under the protection of Bhagawati and Sai Baba, they have put these intrusive and testy ancestors gently but firmly back in their place.

However, the Christians' rough treatment of their ancestors, thrown on the rubbish heap, alienated them from the other Chamling Rais. The new Christians have no less fear than others of the malevolent power of the household divinities, but in a revolutionary gesture appreciated precisely as such by the Maoists, they launched into a spectacular act of "disobedience". They broke all family and lineage ties and threw out the potentially dangerous ancestral spirits that they had taken so much trouble to keep in their "special places": the house's central pillar, the sacred jar and the three hearth stones. Such irresponsible behaviour could not be excused. It was punished by ostracism from the community.

Yet not all the Rais have been won over by the new cults, which have found followers mainly in the mountain hamlets where Maoism also has many sympathisers. There is no obvious explanation for this. Yet whatever the case may be, whereas the Rais of the highlands have stolen a march on the Maoists' expectations by reforming their domestic religions and seem more capable of adjusting to the new times, the conservative Rais of the rice-growing villages in the valley risk clashing with the new masters should there be a crackdown on the issues concerning the treatment of Dalits, drinking alcohol and sacrifices.

Strangely enough, the traditional Brahmanic Hinduism practised in Temma appears to have been less affected, despite the humiliation of certain *Purohits* by the Maoists and the Khumbuwan militia. Like the Brahman-Chetri religion, especially their obsession with purity based more on social conformism than spirituality, the affronts were ultimately borne with resignation, as long as they were also shared by the neighbours. The high-caste members, deeply materialistic, not really given to intellectual speculation, primarily worried about what the neighbours thought, apparently with no other religious needs than those their traditional practices could already satisfy, and possibly hardened by their long and sometimes rough coexistence with the Chamling Rais weathered the storm well. Himalayan Brahmanism, this dour, but ultimately robust branch of Hinduism that, in India at least, has shown its ability to evolve, has proved to be less vulnerable than indigenous religions to the shock of modernity and violence.

