

## What 'Really' Happened in Dullu

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Shyam lives in Dullu, which attracted media attention for the anti-Maoist mass protest as witnessed in 2004.<sup>183</sup> In 2006, two years after the events, he was asked to recount what had happened at that time. Ram, a villager from a neighbouring locality, who has relatives in Dullu, and knows the place well, interviewed him. Without naming anyone in particular, I had asked Ram to record a series of interviews with some people in Dullu. It was Ram's choice to interview Shyam, whom I happen to know.<sup>184</sup> Shyam is a Kshatriya by caste, in his mid-40s, though no further details about him will be disclosed as yet, in order to protect his privacy.

This indirect method has advantages, avoiding biases introduced by the presence of a foreign anthropologist, and disadvantages, such as producing a narrative which is not always very clear. Yet, Shyam's interview presents a rare example of a villager's narrative of what happened in his locality during the People's War. Indeed, most accounts published up to now have been thoroughly rewritten and summarized, and do not portray the way in which people express their experience. I have chosen to translate it almost entirely, in order to maintain the thread of his description and the way he links the events.

In the second part, I will confront Shyam's description with the Maoist depiction of events, which were published in the weekly *Janadesh*, and with extracts of another interview with Narendra, an old pro-Maoist Brahman inhabitant of a neighbouring hamlet.

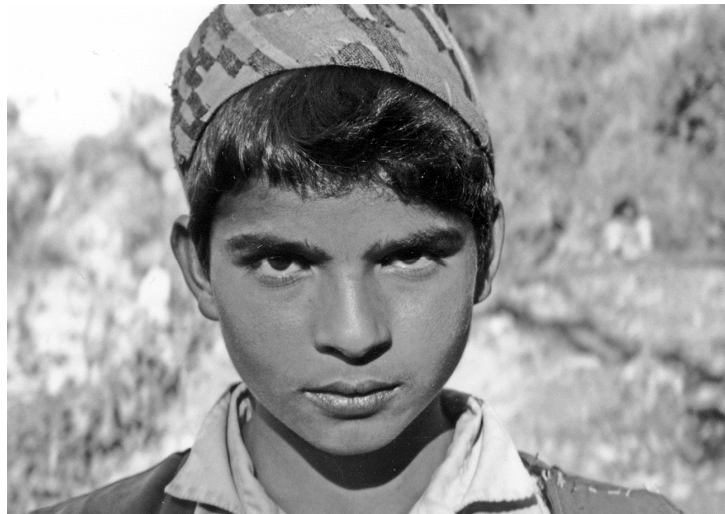
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<sup>183</sup> A very good analysis of the various reports on Dullu can be found in Saubhagya Shah, 2008. According to the journal *Kantipur* (25 November 2004; Translated as "Mothers' Army", *Nepali Times* 223, 26 Nov-02 Dec 2004): "What had actually happened was that the security forces had killed the 'people's committee' chief Raju Bajracharya when he tried to run away from them. The rebels had forced Bajracharya to join the committee. When the rebels came to cover Raju's body with a Maoist flag, the villagers beat them up. (...) In the last two weeks, the number of anti-Maoist demonstrators has snowballed and spread across 14 VDCs. (...) On 22 November, more than 20,000 people joined the protests in Dullu. "

<sup>184</sup> People's names are fictive.

### Dullu in 2000 and 2003

A collective reaction, such as the one witnessed in Dullu, was not reported elsewhere in the Nepalese hills during the revolutionary decade.<sup>185</sup> Despite its uniqueness, I became personally interested in the subject for having resided in Dullu for four weeks in 2000 and for two weeks in 2003 for my ethno-historical research. This fieldwork had already proved to me that Dullu was indeed a special place. It had formed a major political centre for almost a millennium, successively housing the capital of the Malla Empire (1100-1400) and the capital of the Kingdom of Dullu (1400-1960). It is also the centre of a religious ensemble known as the Panchakoshi, where several eternal gas flames burn in temples. These two features are essential, and the Dulals, as the inhabitants of Dullu are called, clearly express their feeling of belonging to a distinct territory, which they depict as rich and holy: they qualify Dullu as a priceless land (*amulya jagga*), and as a meritorious ground (*punya bhumi*). This qualification is shared by their neighbours, who, in addition, view the Dulals as special people, in particular for being fairer and more beautiful than others, but also for being endowed with *satya*, truth, virtue.



A Dulal boy, Dullu, April 2000, photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

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<sup>185</sup> For an overview of people's reaction towards the Maoists, including Dullu, see K. Bhattachan: 2005. The Nepalese villagers' passivity strongly contrasts with the situation in Peru, see O. Starn: 1998.

The Dulals' reaction was locally interpreted as one manifestation of this *satya*, and of the fact that "one should not tell lies in the Panchakoshi".

In 2000, when I first went to Dullu, most of the small police stations in the hilly region, which were the target of Maoist attacks, had been closed, and the policemen had been grouped together in various strategic or important places. Dullu was one of the few localities in Dailekh district to still have a police station at that time: about 50 policemen had been brought into the ancient royal palace of Dullu in the centre of the bazaar, for their own security. Prior to that, there had only been a small police station near Mathura Mai, outside the main settlement of Dullu. While the Dulals were clearly not sympathetic to the revolution in 2000, and for the most part supported the Nepali Congress, they were also angry at having the police in Dullu, and did not respect their imposed curfew.

They even demonstrated collectively against the police presence during my stay, asking for their immediate departure. At the time, they reacted to the behaviour of one particular policeman, who had seduced a local girl, promising to marry her. He had taken her to the district headquarters and had then disappeared, leaving her on her own. The day the story broke, the empty police station was set alight during the night. The next day, a protest march made up of one or two hundred people, mostly women, and led by the flag of the Nepali Congress Women's Wing, weaved its way through the bazaar and reached the royal esplanade where they shouted slogans such as "We don't need the police". That same evening, under cover of darkness, policemen suddenly fired from the palace, and claimed the next day that they had held off a Maoist attack. The villagers, for their part, were not sure whether Maoists had really come to support the local population, and had different stories to tell. Nevertheless, an old Thakuri neighbour, his face all lit up, came to chat about "the attack". He exclaimed:

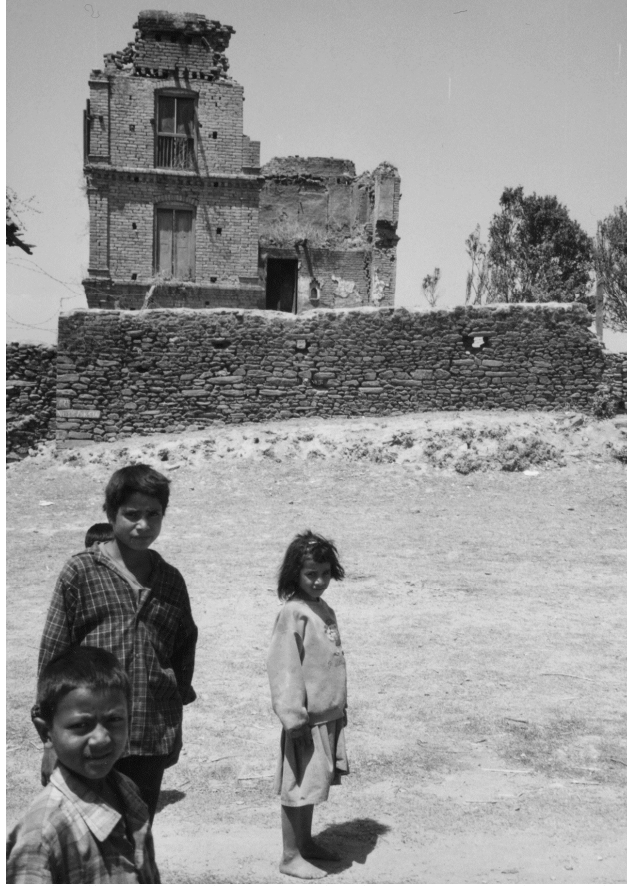
- "Did you see what it was like? Even my buffalo jumped!"

- "From fear (*darle*)?" I inquired.

- "No for joy (*khushile*)! For once, something is happening here!" he explained.

Like this Thakuri, many Dulals were excited at the idea of the Maoists at that time, as they saw in them a means of getting rid of the police presence, since the events had happened in the neighbourhood: "In Kalikot, they chased away all the policemen, the people are no problem there". The "Maoists" were seen as local youngsters who had failed their School Leaving Certificate, and were referred to in a light-hearted manner. Once on my way back from a remote shrine located at the bottom of the valley, one youth asked me for instance: "Did you come across the Maoists in the forest?" I said: "No. Well, I might have. How would I

recognise them?” His answer was simply: “They make good [i.e. shake hand instead of saluting with joined hands]”.



**The palace of Dullu, after its destruction by the Maoists, April 2003. Photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine.**

During my next stay three years later in spring 2003, the situation had changed considerably in Dullu: the same youth greeted me with the news that his uncle had had his throat cut by the Maoists some months before. He told me how the Dulals had continued to protest about the police presence after my departure and had ended up refusing to sell them any food, thereby forcing them to regain the district headquarters and leave

the place in summer 2000. The palace<sup>186</sup> was then destroyed by the Maoists in April 2002, after its last inhabitant –a very old lady called the king's younger sister- had been told to leave. This was unanimously criticized for the building was one of the prize buildings in the locality. People's opinion was: 'Why destroy it? They could have captured it, turned it into a school or a hospital.' I thus put this question to a Dailekh District Committee member who came to inquire about my presence. No villager ventured into the room with us, yet there were many watching and listening at the windows. The cadre's answer was that it was necessary to destroy symbols of feudalism and kingship. The villagers' unusual distance was a clear sign of their fear, and the way they congratulated me for having aired their opinion was a token of their helplessness. Many shops had closed, walls were covered with huge revolutionary tags and no one dared set out along the forest paths anymore.



**A Maoist meeting in Dullu in homage to martyr Sanjeev Thapa, April 2003, photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine.**

<sup>186</sup> The palace had been built during the period 1980-1985 VS (1923-28) by artisans from Kathmandu.

Dullu was now engaged in another resistance struggle, this time against the Maoists, where avoidance tactics were used. During the “elections”, which the Maoists organised throughout the district of Dailekh, Dullu and the neighbouring locality of Bada Lamji were the only two places where they could not take place, since no one accepted to stand as a Maoist candidate. Yet, Maoist activists were now lording it over everyone, and came to check my passport and visa. They announced a venue, a sort of commemorative meeting to be held in Dullu.<sup>187</sup> They marched from morning to evening through the bazaar and the neighbouring hamlets shouting this through a megaphone, yet no one went to attend the meeting the next day. The Maoists had also blown up the VDC office in which the Christian “United Mission to Nepal” was housed (!), as part of their programme to get rid of the “old government” and of “foreign imperialism”. However, in 2003, some people still took the risk of carrying out secret work for UMN and continued to be paid by it for the ongoing literacy programmes. The situation worsened after a People’s government was ‘elected’ in June 2004, and led to the mass meeting in November 2004. I will now let Shyam tell us what happened in his own words.

### **Fire blazed within the entire population**

*Ram:* You are from here, and we are very curious: when there was a rebellion here against the Maoists, we heard some wayward things. What is the real situation?

*Shyam:* The reality is that the population rebelled, after they<sup>188</sup> banned playing music. When they heard music somewhere, they would immediately turn up, encircle [the musicians] and ask them: ‘Why are you playing music?’ They acted like that.

*Ram:* They didn’t allow you to play music?

*Shyam:* No, we weren’t allowed to play any sort of music and then, within the entire population, a fire started, and that is how it came about in our village.

*Ram:* Which village?

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<sup>187</sup> This meeting, held on April 19 2003, was a homage to Sanjeev Thapa, who was the incharge of the area where Dullu is located and member of the Dailekh District committee.

<sup>188</sup> As most people, Shyam generally uses an indefinite pronoun to refer to the Maoists.

*Shyam*: Sera.<sup>189</sup> First, it started when they beat up 17 people.

*Ram*: Who beat them?

*Shyam*: The Maoists. They lay down two logs, then they lay the person on it and placed another log on top of them, and then they struck this log. That's so cruel.

*Ram*: Why?

*Shyam*: It just is! At night, you sleep upstairs, you're told that someone is calling you nearby, and you're led away. Then you're asked: 'Do you know this place or not?' You say yes. So they say: 'We need to go to this place', then they beat you like I said. So, in the end, the villagers rebelled. They told each other that they should ask them why they were beating people. 'We'll die this way, but better to die in the afternoon than at night'. With this in mind, four or five hundred people gathered around the rebellious person. They [the Maoists], there were 25 or 30 of them. They are clever and there are many of them.

*Ram*: Were they armed?

*Shyam*: Only two, not many.

*Ram*: And where were they from?

*Shyam*: From neighbouring villages.

*Ram*: Nearby villages?

*Shyam*: Yes, nearby, and they gathered around. There was the area incharge, who became DCM.<sup>190</sup> People of that sort.

*Ram*: Some came from outside?

*Shyam*: No, they were not from outside. The incharges were from here, they had obtained important positions. So we asked them: 'Why did you take away 17 people in the middle of the night and beat them? What had they done wrong? Tell us'. We asked the Maoists that. What did they say? They brought out their weapons and everyone fled. Then we held secret meetings.

*Ram*: Just the people from your village or with others as well?

*Shyam*: Just the inhabitants of Sera. Only us, the others didn't know. It was secret. Only men gathered. Then, we asked one of the men who had been beaten: 'Who are those who beat you? We are going to punish them'. [He

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<sup>189</sup> A fictive name.

<sup>190</sup> District Committee Member.

answered]: 'If I tell you and if they're punished, then afterwards, they'll say: 'Tell us who punished those who had carried out the beatings'. I'll only tell you when they're in front of us and when we have the opportunity to punish them'. This could not be made public.

Another day, they led another operation. What did they do? They said that high-caste people should eat food cooked by low-caste people. They went to seek a Badeni and they made her cook rice and they made the Kami-Damai eat this rice.<sup>191</sup> Then the Kami-Damai cooked and 35 *dhami* appeared.<sup>192</sup> The Bista arrived, one by one from only our village.<sup>193</sup> They made the Bista eat the Kami-Damais' food and the Kami-Damai eat the Badis' food. They started this operation in the Panchayat house, where there is a room: this is where the food was prepared. They said, those who are *dhami* said: 'Give us water or even tea to drink (lit. to eat, *khana*) because we do not even eat the rice cooked by our wives, and we don't feel like eating anything since we've just eaten at home before coming here'. They made this request. Then, when they [the Maoists] were about to make them [the *dhami*] eat, these 35 people started to be possessed. They put stones in their mouths, chewed on them, then spat them out, while they were possessed. Even the Maoists were surprised. Then, while in a trance, they went back to their houses.

*Ram*: They didn't eat?

*Shyam*: No, they didn't eat, they entered into a trance before eating, then they swallowed earth and stones: they showed their power (*dham viddhi*). They were frightened by the *dhami* in trance so they gave up.

Then, it started at Nepa. What did they do in Nepa? They started to make people dig the road. Everyone from each house had to dig for five

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<sup>191</sup> A Badeni is a woman from the Badi caste, the lowest caste in the social hierarchy. In Dullu, they make and sell clay pipes, they play music and their women dance. The latter are said to also live on prostitution, and to judge from their make-up when the police were stationed there and their normal appearance after they left, they had probably lost their main customers. The Damais are situated above the Badis: in Dullu they are tailors and musicians, like elsewhere. The Kamis, whose name is often translated by blacksmith, are locally subdivided into eight sub-castes, according to their special crafts. These include blacksmiths, but also potters, carpenters, etc. They form the highest-ranked impure caste.

<sup>192</sup> A *dhami* is a medium who is possessed by a god or spirit. He follows more purity rules than ordinary people, so as not to offend the deity for whom he is a receptacle. In this case however, only high-caste *dhamis* reacted to the pollution.

<sup>193</sup> Contrary to the low castes, the Kshatriyas are not usually referred to by their caste name, but by their clan, such as Bista. This explains why this group is locally called *thari*, or clan.



days. Then they cut the long lock of hair of the *dhami* of the Masta of Pali.<sup>194</sup>



The *Dhami* of the Dullu royal lineage, April 2000.  
Photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

When they cut this lock of hair, the people from five *gabisa* were there, digging the road. (...) The *dhami* was from the Mahat *jati*.<sup>195</sup> They cut his lock of hair in a cruel manner: grabbing hold of a sickle, they told him that they would also cut him, [saying]: 'If it's a man, it will hurt him; to him [the god], it won't do anything', and they struck him forcefully. Afterwards, they (came) to the place where we were digging the road, and said: 'Here it is, we've cut the *dhami*'s lock of hair'. [People said]: 'Why did they cut the *dhami*'s lock of hair? Why did they take away the *dhami*'s

<sup>194</sup> In this region, a *dhami* never cuts his lock of hair, which he keeps tied up on his head, except at the time of possession, when he unties it. The Masta are the main gods worshipped in Western Nepal. They form a group of Twelve brothers, and are distinguished by an epithet, such as Dudhe (Milky), or Dahre (Fangy). They are also identified by the name of their place of residence: here the hamlet of Pali.

<sup>195</sup> Mahat is another Kshatriya clan. As is often the case in this region, Shyam uses the term *jati* for clan, whereas in standard Nepali *jati* designates a larger social unit, such as the caste or the ethnic group.

statues? It's because there's gold and silver inside his lock of hair, that's why they cut it.' That's why we wondered why they needed this lock of hair, why they took it. 'It's for their benefit that they took it. They also took away the statues, out of cupidity (*lobhle*)'. After this event, the people who were digging the road started talking [to the Maoists]: 'Why did you cut Masta *dhami*'s lock of hair? What benefit did you get from it? What did the *dhami* do to harm the Party?' so people asked. And then we learned that those who had cut the hair were in such and such a place. So some people went there, kicked them, tied their hands behind their back and took away these Maoists, these cutters of locks of hair. There were three of them. They took them away and asked them where they had put the lock of hair and the statues. 'We've hidden them', they said -they were from this *dhami*'s village. Then they beat them up, and as their hands were tied, they fell. The area incharge was Darshan: as he was a Bahun, he was also educated. What did he say? 'Those who came to dig the road should not speak. If they speak, I'll cut them into three pieces, he said, seizing a sickle, and I'll make them drink their blood'. Saying that he hit someone, and he was hit too.

*Ram*: He was hit?

*Shyam*: Yes, M. B. Kami hit him, M. B. cut him, he cut him in return. Then others started: 'We don't know who was fighting: it became so bad' and then they all fled. Afterwards [the incharge] tried to take action against the instigators and he forbade playing music and worshipping the gods. But it was the time to worship the gods, and there was a Kami *dhami*. He came with a crowd to the top of the hill accompanied by all the instruments they were playing loudly. The Maoists tried to stop them, but they had come with all the other villagers. There was such a crowd! And they [the Maoists], there were only 25 or 30 of them. Then it was a question of demonstrating one's power (*shakti dhekhaune*<sup>196</sup>). This *dhami* pointed to a one-year-old buffalo and told the Maoists: 'I'll pick it up with my teeth, come and see my power', and he lifted up the buffalo with his teeth, for at least five minutes, and on seeing this, they were surprised. He also drank the buffalo's blood. This *dhami* is our Bhairav, of Nepa.

The army then came from Dailekh. On hearing this, a *vajasa*<sup>197</sup>, Raju Shrestha from Dullu, entered a few houses, and then ran away, very fast.

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<sup>196</sup> Lit. To show power. The verb *dekhaunu* is pronounced and written with an aspirated d in Western Nepal.

<sup>197</sup> *Vajasa* is an abbreviation of *vard jana sarkar* (Ward People's Government): the person was the principal (*pramukh*) of a ward, i.e. a subdivision of the Village People's Government.

The situation then became very nasty. The soldiers were shouting: 'Don't run away, don't run, we'll kill you'.

*Ram:* Why did he run away?

*Shyam:* From fear of the army. This Shrestha was *vajasa* for the Maoists, he ran away and they shot him in the back, and killed him. The army said: 'We've put a bomb there, so no one must go there.' And they went away. There was a corpse: they had lied. They had buried this corpse and gone away, so there was no bomb. But no one could go and take the corpse. The Maoists didn't go either. Then all the population went, [saying], 'if one must die, we'll die'; they unearthed the corpse and took it away, saying, 'we shall dispose of it in Nabhisthan'.<sup>198</sup> They took the corpse to his home, saying, 'we must also play music', and they played music.

*Ram:* It hadn't started decomposing?

*Shyam:* No, all this happened within the same day. They had just covered him, with a handful of earth. Then we took the body [to Nabhisthan cremation place], we lifted him up, and as soon as a Maoist declared: 'He must be covered with the flag of his party and music shall not be played', he was beaten up. And the one who beat him said, 'Why would he need one? He died running away'. Then, we took the corpse away and burnt it on a pile at Nabhisthan, and we came back. The next day, the demonstration started.

'These Maoists who fabricate Maoists do not know how to protect them, they only kill sons', we started [to say] and the protest started. Everyone from all the villages was angry, and we said: 'We should also be allowed to play Bhoosi in the village'. Starting on the day of Tikadasi,<sup>199</sup> all the villages from the top to the bottom (of the valley) played Bhoosi.<sup>200</sup> Each village in turn played Bhoosi and then a demonstration started in thirteen *gabisa*, starting on the new moon. What happened? In these thirteen *gabisa*, music was played here, there and everywhere. There were slogans, there were processions: 'We don't need Maoists, don't let them kill people. We want peace in the country'. Then all the journalists came, and then it went to the very top: Pyar Jang Thapa, the first general, came; ministers came: it drew a big crowd. And the government gave 30 million

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<sup>198</sup> This holy place, 'The place of the navel' is located at the bottom of the Dullu hill. It contains two eternal gas flames venerated as *Jvala Mai*, Flame Mother. The corpses of all the inhabitants of Dullu bazaar are cremated there, and their pyres are lit with the holy flame. On the ritual organization of the *panchakoshi* and the Dullu kingdom, see Lecomte-Tilouine, forthcoming a.

<sup>199</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> day of the festival of Dasain.

<sup>200</sup> The Bhoosi or Bhoosi songs are licentious songs especially sung during Tihar.

rupees for the development of Dullu. The police came, the army came and all the offices were occupied. Now it works like that.

*Ram:* What about the temples?

*Shyam:* They had closed the five holy places.<sup>201</sup> The abbot of Dungeshwar<sup>202</sup> went and took the lock off the door so they beat him. So the population came and opened the temple and everyone, together with the abbot, started to perform their worship, *puja*. We said: 'there are 250 of them, we should not go'.

*Ram:* 250 what?

*Shyam:* Maoists. At that time it was the red army that came, saying that there was a revolt; so the procession stopped. 'Shall we go back or what?' we ask ourselves, but some one said: 'We're not going back, we're not going to fight anybody. We have no weapons, no knives, no sticks even. Does anyone have one? No. We shall all go. If the Maoists ask questions, we'll answer them. If they don't do anything, we'll do the rituals and open the temple door, then we'll go.' We said, 'If it's to be so, we shall go' and then they came to us and the one [who convinced us to go] told them: 'You should not kill anyone; if you need to kill some one, kill me. I am the one who started this procession. I bring these people only to make rituals because rituals at this temple have been forbidden. If it's a mistake, if we must die, only I must die, no one else, because I brought them. If we haven't made a mistake, you should let us go safely. We came with empty hands to fight you. Look in our pockets, we don't even have any knives. You, you have weapons, those who fight you have weapons, we are the people', he said, and they answered, 'All right then, go'.

*Shyam:* We were more than 250, and there were also people from Chadung. Altogether there were four or five hundred of us. We circumambulated the temple, we offered flower necklaces and we broke the lock and opened the door, and they did not close it again. Only 30 or 32 Maoists came. But when they heard drums played from the top, they fled: at the time, when they heard drumming, they became mad. Here we made peace on our own.

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<sup>201</sup> *Panch asthan*, the five holy places, refers to the five main temples of the Panchakoshi religious area located in Dullu. Its epicentre was the palace of Dullu and the Throne of Dharmaraj located next to it. When the palace was destroyed, people considerably enlarged the throne, and placed the gods of the palace in a small house which they constructed at the side of the throne.

<sup>202</sup> Dungeshwar is the southernmost temple of the Panchakoshi. Its abbot, *mahant*, is a Sannyasi, while the fire temples are kept by Nath Yogis.



**The temple of Dungeshwar in 2003, opened by 'the people'.  
photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine.**

*Ram:* What about the woman who was beaten and the people who went to Dailekh then on to Kathmandu?

*Shyam:* She was Khadka's daughter and Bhandari's spouse. She was caught, they abducted her.

*Ram:* Why?

*Shyam:* They accused her: 'You made the protest' and they took her away, for four or five days. They took her to Parajul. As to beating her, yes they beat her, then released her.

*Ram:* Some say their behaviour is immoral.

*Shyam:* Maybe that is so. As they took her away, we have our doubts. But the woman didn't say anything. She also said nothing because of her honour. She recounted other acts of violence. Maybe this woman will speak later.

*Ram:* What did she say?

*Shyam:* [She said]: 'They caught me and they beat me and they led me to the place named Parajul'. There, there was another woman. It seems that this Maoist woman said: 'We shall cut her legs and arms.' Then, she told

her: 'You too are a woman, me too I am a woman, do you understand? In saying 'let's cut her legs and arms', you have no honour. I'm a woman, don't make such a fuss, don't speak. If you have to kill me, kill me. What can I do? You are not using woman's words. I prefer men to speak to me. What you said are not woman's words, but demoness' ones (*rakshesheni*). You're not going to eat my flesh, are you? Do woman's things, it's up to men to kill me, to cut me up. The government is not going to come here, the King is not coming, no one is coming. I'm at your mercy, you can eat my flesh. You can cut me into pieces and throw them away.' She said all of this to them and they kept her for a day or two, then released her. She says: 'They hit me on the head and it hurts me. At times, my brain does not work'. They beat her hard.

The one called Deviram, they killed him. How did they kill him? When Kritiniddhi Bista and Tulsi Giri's government fell, they made an alliance with the seven parties and they stopped staying in the villages: it is then that they killed him.

*Ram*: Why?

*Shyam*: The one named Deviram Khadka was one of them, a Maoist, and then he surrendered. Then, he set up his own business. He was straight and completely honest. He had been forced to enrol and then he quit. He was having a house built: the workmen had finished the walls and had left. He was covering the walls when they killed him with three pistol shots. They killed him like that, so cruelly, and they broke a Thapa's leg.

*Ram*: And where is he now?

*Shyam*: A doctor treated him, he is in Dailekh.

*Ram*: He hasn't come back?

*Shyam*: No.

*Ram*: Isn't he allowed to?

*Shyam*: No, there is no problem, peace now reigns. Now, if we want to give money, they take it. But if we don't give when they ask, they don't do anything.

*Ram*: What about the rituals?

*Shyam*: Weddings (*barat*) are just like before. As for funerary rituals, we had resumed those earlier, with the protest movement. [Before that], if they met people performing funerary rituals, they used to take away all the money that had been collected.

*Ram*: Why? What did they say?

*Shyam*: 'Why forbid it?' One day I asked the principal of the district. This man let me speak freely (*bolna free diyo*). They have this rule of letting people who can make suggestions speak freely, as if they wanted to know what we have to say. (...) He said: 'Speak frankly'. 'All right, what should I say? I'm not such a competent person, I'm not learned, I'm an ordinary person', I replied. 'Still, you can speak. Come on, you should start: are you a believer (*nastik*) or an atheist (*astik*)?' I answered, 'I'm a believer, what about you? What are you?' He said: 'I'm an atheist. You worship the sun as a god, the moon, the water that flows, the earth; it is strange to worship stones as gods.' I answered: 'We must worship them a lot'. He asked me: 'How can you worship Krishna, that pig that sleeps with all women? How can you worship Shiva, that addicted yogi?' I answered: 'I will explain one thing after another. The earth, to feed us, makes grain, trees and all the vegetation grow: it's a power (*shakti*).' He asked: 'What kind of power?' I said: 'Put seeds somewhere, cucumber seeds, pumpkin seeds, they will germinate: this is a form of power without which we would not survive. We worship this power. (...) Why worship Shiva? Shiva is the most powerful. When everything was submerged, he drank the poison and kept it in his throat. How could we not worship him for such a service (*seva*)?' (...)

Then he asked: 'Do you worship Prachanda or not?' I said: 'No, we don't worship Prachanda.' He asked again: 'Why not?' and I answered: 'Prachanda has not acquired power (*shakti prapta gareko chaina*). As for us, we worship power. If you obtain power and if you rule, we will worship you.' He asked: 'What is devotion (*bhakti*)?', I answered: 'Devotion is what you do'. He said: 'What devotion did I do?', I answered: 'You left your mother, you left your spouse, your children, the land acquired by your father and grandfather. Didn't you practise austerities in this way? For whom did you practise these austerities? For Prachanda. If Prachanda is pleased with it, he makes you a member of the regional politburo. He satisfies your desire'. Then he left.

*Ram*: You spoke well.

### **The army, informants and leaders of other political parties raised women**

It is not my aim to evaluate what is true or not true in *Shyam*'s narrative, but rather to investigate the episodes he selected and the various weapons of the weak which he describes. *Shyam* is not a leader or activist in any political party, he is not particularly wealthy, and he belongs to the Ksetri group, which, he says, has always been dominated by the local Thakuris. For these reasons, *Shyam* cannot be considered as one of the local feudals who organised the protest movement in Dullu, according to the Maoists.

Their depiction, as published by Chintanraj Atreya in the weekly *Janadesh*, reads: “First, the army, informants and leaders of other political parties raised women, children and disinterested peasants of Dullu and the neighbouring *gajasa*, and forced them to make protests with slogans against the Maoist activists and the People’s War. Then, they did not allow the Maoists to stay in the villages and forced all the people to go to the district headquarters, to become refugees. The royal army even forcibly led Babibta V. K. who had given birth to a child eight days before.” Atreya thus ascertains that the people’s reaction in Dullu was fully manipulated. Other elements related to the Maoists’ behaviour probably comes to his mind. Indeed he then considers the possibility that the Maoist party might have been locally infiltrated or that local activists may have not “fully understand the central policy”. He recalls this for the readers’ benefit: “The rule of the party is not to oppose the people, and its work is not to finish (*sidhyaune*) those who are opposed to it”. Yet, it is to ‘weed’ out some of them, as Atreya formulates it: “All individuals making up society are not people (*janta*); there are also animals (*jantu*). (...) These are the poisonous weeds of society, and when we are weeding, it happens sometimes that we also dig up a plant hidden among them. It is possible that it happened in Dailekh.”

Atreya firmly condemns the fact that the army forced people to participate in the protest and to the march to the headquarters. On the other hand, he ends his text by noting that the (Maoist) ‘Command in charge’ announced to the people who had left for the headquarters that they could freely come back to their homes, and comments: ‘What can be done that is more flexible, just and pro-people?’

This was apparently not sufficient for the Party, since two weeks later, the same journal *Janadesh* published a long repentance text signed by the “CPN (M), Dailekh district Committee”. Its members had composed it at a three-day meeting during which they examined “the mistakes of the party members, of the people’s governments, and of the People’s Army in the district”. They confessed: “Among our mistakes and weaknesses in our action to develop the work of the Party, there are: diffusing the slogan ‘Give one whole timer from each house’, pressurising the class of teachers and intellectuals to become whole timers, insisting that religion, culture, traditions, festivals and food, etc. be not contrary to the Marxist rules, (...), the death of the journalist Dekendra Raj Thapa during examination, the conflict with the NCP (Masal) in Dullu (...)”.

Among the quoted ‘mistakes’, Shyam was only sensitive to the religious and cultural question, which he depicted at length, whereas he did not make any allusion to the others. On this subject, the repentance text states the Party’s commitment to individual freedom, but reaffirms



that Communists are atheists and believe that “religion is the opium of the people”. The Party presents its excuses in a quite pragmatic way, specifying that one should avoid action in the religious and cultural field because “it weakens the People’s War”. The text finally lists all the acts of violence which Maoist activists were victim of in Dailekh, transforming the repentance into an accusation.

Narendra, an old Brahman from a hamlet near Dullu who was also interviewed by Ram, offers a picture in line with the two texts published in *Janadesh*:

*Narendra*: The Maoists were running a programme at Gairi Pipal, Dhami gaun, and the army arrived to carry out a search. When they reached Dullu, two men were walking along the path. One was a schoolteacher, the other was Raju Vajracharya, and both of them said: ‘We are just walking’. But they suspected them. If one had a bag, he was suspected at that time. The army said: ‘stop!’ The teacher stopped, but Raju Vajracarya took fright maybe, because he was a *vajasa* principal, so he jumped and fled. They fired and hit him.

*Ram*: Who fired?

*Narendra*: The Royal Army. Then they put him in a hole and covered him. They said: ‘We’ve placed a bomb, in case someone wants to take this fucking Maoist out. If so, let these Maoists sons of a bitch (*randiko chora*) go, but none of you shall go’.

On that day, no one went there. He stayed there. But the next day, his mother-in-law said: ‘My son-in-law died at 22-25 years old. If I die, what would happen? I’ll take out my son-in-law and perform a ceremony for him according to our culture’. So the mother-in-law went: with her feet tied, she dug a little of the earth covering him from above. Then she tied him with a rope, she pulled and she took him out. The villagers covered the body with a cloth, and said: ‘We’re going to organise a traditional funeral for him’, and those who were carrying bags for the Maoists (*maobadika jhola bokneharu*) arrived. They covered the body with a flag and said: ‘we should perform his funerary rituals in our own manner’. This is how the revolt started in Dullu. [The mother-in-law said:] ‘First you forcibly made a Maoist of my son (*chora*), then you should have opposed the army. We pulled him out so we’ll carry out the ceremony the way we want’. And there was a quarrel (*jhada*), which became a fight (*jhagada*), and some Maoists were beaten. To start with, it involved only 10 to 20 people. Then our Dhruva Shah, who is colonel, came by helicopter. After his arrival, it became a revolt against the Maoists. It’s the army that killed him, but it had control over his wife, mother, brother and father. And

once the family had been raised, neighbours had been taken care of, then those dominated by the Maoists, it formed a big group. Then they attracted the those from surrounding villages. It was a huge group, and they started to say: 'Those who don't come to support the demonstration are Maoists'. And so doing, the 13 *gabisa* made a committee to protest against the Maoists. Dullu rebelled, but they did not do a good job: they received 30 million rupees and fritted them away. They did nothing for the people.

*Ram*: Some say that the Maoists hit those who came back to their houses with sickles?

*Narendra*: No, all this is lies. I was also at the demonstration, and we were told to answer that if someone questioned us. And what could we do? The army came to take us to Dullu and told us that all those who didn't demonstrate were Maoists. People went, abandoning even their cows, buffaloes, and goats. In each *gabisa*, they set up a committee with a headman, and there was also a women's committee and those who were running them were bad ones (*badmasi*), who had feudal ideas (*samanta bicar*). They haven't done a good job: they squandered 30 million in only 15 months.

*Ram*: What did they do with it?

*Narendra*: It was for Dullu's development, but they kept it. There was no road between Sristhan and Nabhisthan: they made one, that's what they did with the 30 million. They've done nothing else.

*Ram*: People say that they beat up the priest from Nabhisthan. Why?

*Narendra*: It is not the leadership who did it. What I'm trying to say is that there are also bad people. Those bad people beat up not only him but also three other people. They placed a stone beneath them and struck them with an axe from above, breaking their leg bone. Now, they are disabled, but they are OK. The priest walks with a stick, in fact it is not that bad (*khas tyasto ta chaina*). We haven't seen them do that to ordinary people, only to those who were clever (*batho tatho*). Dullu benefited greatly from it, you see, it benefited enormously from it.

It is clear that Narendra feels resentment about the donation which went to Dullu and not to the surrounding localities. In many respects his depiction corroborates the *Janadesh* ones, as he presents the whole affair as mere governmental manipulation, upholding important facts to sustain

this interpretation. Unlike Shyam, who never makes distinction between the people, Narendra isolates the feudals, whom he presents as acting hand in hand with the government and the army. He is severe regarding their behaviour, while he finds excuses for the Maoists, whose ideology, he claims, does not advocate violence. Among the Maoists, he distinguishes the important and responsible actors, who are logically not involved in violence: in the quarrel about the flag on the corpse, or in the amputation of the old priest. In the first incident, Narendra refers to the Maoists' bag carriers<sup>203</sup> (*Maobadika jhola bokneharu*), in the second one, to bad people (*badmasi*) who became Maoists. Even though he had singled them out from 'the real Maoists', Narendra also feels the need to minimize their violence –it was not that bad- and to justify it, by emphasising that the victims were not 'ordinary people', without specifying what they were exactly punished for. This accumulation of justifications reveals Narendra's political affiliation, which he expresses clearly at the end of his interview:

*Ram:* Were there any cases of rape?

*Narendra:* No, not by the Maoists. They don't do that. They don't behave badly; that's more likely to be the army during their searches. Maybe bad people became Maoists, but the Maoist thought is different: from an outside point of view, we call them all Maoists. (...) Today, Prachanda is alone in the world. With Mao Tse Tung's thought, he has made a kind of new model, called the Prachanda Path. In today's world, it's a new model.

*Ram:* What do you mean by new? Is it distinct (*alag*) from Mao Tse Tung's thought?

*Narendra:* What is it? It's an ideology (*sidhanta*) which fits in with the climate, geography and religion of Nepal. It's not that of Russia or China, or of anywhere else.

*Ram:* But Mao Tse Tung is the *guru*. How can one not respect the *guru's* thought but another one?

*Narendra:* It's not like that. The *guru* may also be wrong. Prachanda understood the Russian revolution, the Chinese one, Marx and Lenin, and who made mistakes. What were Mao's errors? Where did Marx go wrong? Where did Lenin go wrong? How did the fall of communism come about?

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<sup>203</sup> In the Dullu area, it means inferior people. Attention is drawn to one's superior status by making someone else carry one's belongings. In particular, Ksetris traditionally carry Thakuris' belongings at weddings.

He also studied the communists in Peru, and where the enemies attacked, and what their mistakes were, as well as his own weaknesses. He understood all that.'

In many aspects, Narendra's narrative uses ideas that can be found in any Maoist publication, and it is interesting to see that ordinary villagers share them. On the other hand, Shyam's perception of the events is not influenced by any ready-made political ideas circulating in printed media. We shall therefore focus on them now.

### **The weapons of the weak**

Shyam opens his narrative by referring to music, and this element forms a leitmotiv throughout his description. He views its ban by the local Maoists as the root of the people's revolt, and later presents different forms of resistance expressed through music in Dullu. He then evokes gratuitous but selected violence, which gives rise to the first collective attempt at retaliation -though it involved only males: this failed with the victims refusing to collaborate. Shyam then shifts to another episode, during which the Maoists organise a gigantic ceremony to reverse the social order, by forcing people to eat other castes' food, starting with the bottom of the hierarchy then climbing it progressively. Here the Maoist method of introducing social equality consists in polluting everybody equally, but step by step. Indeed, a Kami who eats Badi food theoretically takes on the latter's status, and we may thus wonder why they did not simply force everyone to eat the Badeni's food altogether. Making it a gradual ceremony kept the structure of society intact, and probably rendered it altogether more forceful and more frightful for the highest-ranked people, the last to eat. As a matter of fact, it stopped suddenly when crossing the "water limit", which separates the impure and pure castes, thanks to divine intervention. The superior godly powers defied the new power holders on this occasion, and intervened to preserve the caste hierarchy, and the purity of their own occasional human bodies, the *dhamis*. The next event, which marks an escalation in people's resistance through retaliation, is again related to them. A *dhami* was attacked by three Maoists who organised his mock-sacrifice. They profaned him by cutting his sacred lock of hair, which should never be cut, and by confiscating his statues. The Maoists' aim was obviously to show that there is no godly power -or superior power-, as they announced triumphally to the crowd that they had cut the *dhami*'s lock of hair, as a sign of victory. However, the rift separating them from the villagers was apparent in the latter's interpretation, which took a completely different direction. They did not imagine any other motivation for this act than

cupidity, given that devotees offer silver and gold rings to the *dhami* to thank the god he embodies. He then ties these around his lock of hair. This signified physical violence towards the perpetrators and even against the area incharge who tried to restore the situation. In the next episode, a *dhami* then displays his supernatural powers and the villagers' solidarity with him, which announces his victory. Shyam now comes to the main event which was reportedly the source of the Dullu mass protest. His description is brief but emphasizes the villagers' refusal to have Maoist elements at funerals, and their will to have a fully traditional one, including music, as is customary in this region of Nepal. The nature of the mass movement of protest, which forms afterwards, appears as a continuation of this initial incident, as Shyam describes it as being fully musical, with thousands of villagers taking turns to maintain permanent licentious dancing and singing. In Shyam's depiction, this leads directly to bringing in journalists, generals and ministers, and finally a huge donation to Dullu. He does not mention the march to the headquarters, or the presence of the army.

Afterwards, the narrative is guided by Ram, who inquires about religion and about one last case of physical violence he had heard about. In this last part, the weapon of the weak is not divine powers or musical bravado, but speech. In three different contexts, Shyam shows that one can win with words.

The main elements emerging from Shyam's depiction are thus possession, music, and sparring matches, which have been neglected in the vast literature on the People's War, yet which deserve attention.

The power-holders' competition with the *dhamis* is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. We might even say that it is fully in keeping with a long history, which starts with the history of Western Nepal. Thus oral tradition reports that Nagi Malla, the first king of Doti (14<sup>th</sup> century), fought with the *dhami* of god Bhageshwar; that the King of Barakot lost his kingdom in the same circumstances, when he tried to hurt the *dhami* of Dahre Masta; and that the whole royal family of Achham met a deadly fate when the king refused to share his power with the *dhami*, telling him: 'there is only one throne, it's either mine or yours'<sup>204</sup>, and then planted tridents in the ground to wound him. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, two other cases are documented in Bhajang and Jajarkot<sup>205</sup>, i.e. two areas which had kept their status as kingdom within the Kingdom of Nepal, and where

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<sup>204</sup> Like kings, *dhamis* sit on thrones, and are addressed in royal terms. They are recognised sovereignty over a territory and render justice. All these elements explain why they compete with the successive power holders.

<sup>205</sup> On Jajarkot, see Maskarinec 1998.

there was considerable local power. The episode of Bhajang is the only one presenting the king as victorious against the *dhamis*.<sup>206</sup>

The events depicted by Shyam were already prefigured in stories that I had heard in Dullu in April 2003. A *dhami* of Dahre Masta of Rawatkot (a place located on the hill facing Dullu) told me at the time that some Maoists forced him to cut the neck of a goat with his teeth in front of them, in order to check if he was not fooling people. Indeed, a *dhami* possessed by this god cuts the animals with his teeth, which are supposed to grow when Dahre Masta (the Masta with fangs), takes possession of him. But he does this inside a closed temple, and then throws the bodies of the decapitated animals through a small opening in the wall, so that no one can see how the victims are put to death. The *dhami* complied, and told me: “it’s easy for me, when I’m possessed, I see a goat no bigger than a chicken!” In Dungeshwar, one of the five main Panchakoshi temples in Dullu, people told me that a total of three Maoists had profaned the temple, and that they all met their death soon after, as divine punishment. During the Tij festival in 2002, two boys entered the temple with their shoes, trampled on the flower necklaces, and ate the food offerings the women had brought. They were killed by the army soon after. Some time later, people say that a Maoist girl entered the temple while she had her menses. She then fell seriously ill, and ‘a *dhami*<sup>207</sup> made her tremble. She then told it all, while she was pulling her own ears as a punishment’. She was killed by the army in Dadimari shortly afterwards.

Already in these narratives, the gods openly demonstrate their superior powers through their human embodiments. They represent the limit that the Maoists could not transcend with impunity.

A Maoist militia whom I met in Surkhet said on the subject: “First, we need to have a social revolution (*samajik kranti*). In our country, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if some one is ill, they call the *dhami* to cure them. It’s so surprising: can *dhamis* cure sick people? We are truly astonished that people still believe that. We told people in many villages that they shouldn’t believe the *dhami jhankris*. However, in some places they are still influent, so the government should pass a law against this. In our villages there are many people in whose minds old traditions still go strong. They have not changed their ideas (*soc bicar*). It’s difficult to do away with astonishing conservative matters in our villages.”<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> See Lecomte-Tilouine, forthcoming b, for a more in-depth discussion on the subject.

<sup>207</sup> The *dhamis* are also consulted to cure people. Their method sometimes consists in inducing a transe in the sick person.

<sup>208</sup> The militia then described how they tried to end the practice of *chaupadi pratha*, i.e. banning women during menses, saying that they failed “100 per cent”. The



Ritual dance between the Dharni of Bhairam and the temple's Damai, during which the former tries to expell the Damai from the temple courtyard. Dullu, Cait Astami, April 2000.  
Photo: J. Smadja.

As a matter of fact, Shyam attaches great importance to sacrilegious violence while he overlooks more universally reprovved forms of violence, such as against children, even though a child was killed by Maoists in Dailekh, and was recognised as something 'which should not be done' in *Janadesh*. Interestingly, in his depiction, high-caste and low-caste *dhamis* are involved in different types of resistance. The former manifest disobedience when their social (and ritual) status is endangered, while the latter react to the ban on music, which indeed, is one of their group's prerogatives. This episode leads to a burlesque situation in which the local Maoist ruler, an educated Bahun, is publicly beaten by a Dalit (a low-caste man). This was traditionally a very severely punished crime; however, the people's War had been launched, among other things, to end all sorts of

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practice is stronger in Western Nepal than elsewhere, since women are even forbidden to touch plants, which would dry up, or milking cows and buffaloes, which would stop giving milk.

discrimination against the Dalits, and therefore the cadre just got a dose of his own medicine.

Music is another striking aspect in Shyam's narrative. Prior to the People's War, a ban on music had never been reported in the history of Nepal; on the contrary, it was compulsory at times, with musicians forced to play on certain ritual occasions. In fact, if bourgeois or decadent music was forbidden by many totalitarian regimes, to my knowledge, a ban on local traditional music only applied in some Fundamental Islamic contexts, such as Iran and Afghanistan. In Nepalese Maoist publications, the need to destroy "the declining and indecent culture" is often mentioned, but when referring to music, it usually means Western or Westernised 'pop music'. However, it is clear that the Maoists also perceived traditional songs negatively in Western Nepal. Thus the Maoist video "Eight Glorious years" shows a revolutionary cultural team singing a local song, *deuda*, with a new, revolutionary text. The subtitles read: "In the hilly region of Jumla and Humla of western Nepal, lyrics and ballads referring to pang [sic], passivity, hopelessness, frustration and superstitions were much popular among the shepherds. The revolutionary artists have transformed them to new art forms and developed them to express hope, courage and confidence".

The Cultural Revolution endangered the precious oral repertoire of Western Nepal, leading for instance to the cessation of epics recitation in neighbouring Achham district. Only one among the seven bards (*hudke*) whom I interviewed in 2007 had composed a "pro-people's epic" (*janavadi bharat*), while most of them did not perform at all for long periods. Late Damai told me that he could not perform during the 10 years of the People's War because the Maoists forbade him to use the apostrophe 'O King!' with which he punctuates his recitation. He explained: "how could I perform without saying 'O King!'" Instead the bards were told to use 'He comrade!'.<sup>209</sup>

Shyam is not clear on when exactly playing music was forbidden in Dullu: he first states that it was the initial reason why people revolted, then dates its ban to the attack of the *dhami*. He probably refers to different types of music, since already in 2003, I heard people in Dullu complaining that they could no longer sing alternative songs, which were associated with seduction and the practice of *jari*<sup>210</sup>, and which were condemned by the Maoists.

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<sup>209</sup> This recalls the 'Maoist missionary zeal' in Peru: Commander Percy ordered Peruvian peasants to replace 'Ay, Jesus' by 'Ay, Gonzalo', which angered them (Starn 1998: 230).

<sup>210</sup> *Jari*: to elope with a married woman.





**A Hudke Damai bard performing in Dullu, April 2000,  
photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine.**

At any rate, the villagers' act of bravado against the new legislators in Dullu consisted in playing big drums from a hilltop, an image that recalls scenes from local epics when the enemy arrives, magnificent, dressed in golden clothes with a band of musicians upon an open crest. These episodic acts of bravado culminated in an uninterrupted musical relay organised by the whole population of thirteen localities. Shyam presents it as a mere expression of freedom in the face of oppression, but Narendra depicts it in a very different light: "What did people do? During the day, they worked. In the evening, they ate a snack at 5 p.m., because if they each stayed in their houses, Maoists could come at night. For fear of this, at the end of each day they gathered in one place and played *madal* drum,

*damaha* drum, and plate (*thal*) all night long. Villages gathered in one place, this is what people did.”

The repertoire villagers chose for what Narendra presents as being a musical wake, rather than as a protest movement, is nevertheless revealing. The Bhoosi songs are carnivalesque songs, sometimes very lewd when sung by men. This choice had much to offend the Maoists’ sensitive ears, and corresponds particularly well to an act of bravado, even if it was also used to maintain a watch for protective purposes. Carnivalesque songs and dances inverse usual codes and conventions, especially in a context of puritan hegemony, such as the ideology behind the People’s War. It is thus probably not by chance that I saw women reacting in the same way in 2005, in another district of Western Nepal. These women had not been allowed to dance and sing for Tij, because the local area incharge considered that the whole ritual celebrating polygamous holy men had to be forbidden. They were particularly frustrated since Tij is the only occasion for them to dance in the year, and while we were talking about that, they suddenly started to dance a licentious dance, called *ratauli*<sup>211</sup>, in their courtyard, in the middle of the day. They thus not only expressed their freedom, but showed contempt for the puritan rules imposed on them, claiming: ‘We were not allowed to dance for Tij, now we are going to dance Rautali in the middle of the day’.

Among the weapons of the weak depicted by Shyam, words also play a fundamental role.

His description of the abduction of a woman by the Maoists focuses essentially on what she said during her custody, and aims to show that one can indeed win with words. Alone, about to be amputated, the woman refuses to be the victim of another woman and asks the men present to be her torturers instead, inciting them to the worst forms of violence. She obviously brought the séance to a close by verbal self-defence, when refusing the Maoist methods of having women brutalise women<sup>212</sup>, all the while accepting her fate, and describing it in the most horrific manner. She asks to be treated according to a traditional order, in which such violence has no place other than among the cannibal *rakshash* demons.

Shyam then segues into another sparring match, between an individual who plays the role of mouthpiece for a crowd of devotees he

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<sup>211</sup> Ratauli songs and dances are performed by women only, at night, during a son’s wedding. It refers to sexuality, with the groom depicted as a bear, and mimicked by a woman dressed in pants with a fake penis, who dances in a suggestive manner and assaults other women, pretending to copulate with them. I was not able to translate these songs which are full of double-meanings, because my friends laughed too much when asked for explanations.

<sup>212</sup> A rule reported to me in many other instances.

had convinced to go and open a temple, and a Maoist, who represents 'the Red Army'. Once again, it is by taking the initiative in moving ahead, offering himself in sacrifice, that the villager neutralises his adversary and obtains what he forest out to achieve.

Finally Shyam reports his own sparring match, with the principal of the district himself, who enjoined him to speak. Accused of being superstitious by this high-ranking cadre, Shyam turns the situation around by showing his interlocutor that he is religious too, and that he behaves towards Prachanda, as he would do with gods, in quite a humoristic way. Whether boasting or not, Shyam makes no bones about his satisfaction in making the new legislators 'swallow their defeat' (*har khane*) in this duel.

Shyam's narrative is a parallel, "funny People's War" versus revolutionary methods and authoritative rules. In the way he describes how the retaliation was led in Dullu, we are presented with recalcitrant and uneducated villagers using witticism, provocative music and spirit possession as weapons, along with "snubbing" tactics, in order to put up resistance against inflexible rulers determined to forcibly implement a social and cultural revolution.



The priest from Sirasthan showing the sacred flame, Dullu, April 2003, photo: M. Lecomte-Tilouine.

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