

## **“One should not Cut the Blossom in the Bud”: Voices of Nepalese Child Soldiers**

*Carine Jaquet*

To understand some of the social implications of the “People’s War”, launched by the Maoists in Nepal in February 1996, on current social changes in Nepalese society, it is worth having a look at the new generation, since they are the Nepalese citizens of tomorrow. If children and the young in general have all been affected to some extent by the conflict as victims or as fighters, some of them will have to carry social and psychological stigmas all their life. Among those are the children who took up arms to defend the Maoist ideology though they had hardly been to school and were sometimes no older than 10 years old.

This article points out the war stories of these child fighters in the People’s Liberation Army. Such witness accounts are only too rare after a conflict that included one third of under-age fighters. Only a few war stories have been written down by some combatants. These poignant narrations consist in a noticeable source of information even if their accuracy is often questionable. As a consequence, it is practically impossible to draw a true picture of these children’s experience in the PLA.

### **Child Soldiers in Nepal**

The United Nations assume that at the time of the ceasefire, in December 2006, almost 3,000<sup>213</sup> Maoists in the Army personnel staff in the cantonment were under 18 years old. Though it had been agreed in the CPA (Comprehensive Peace agreement) that ended the 10-year-long conflict, none of those children have been formally and officially released by the Maoists who later laid down their conditions (payment of allowances, assistance for the needy, progress on security sector reforms, etc.).<sup>214</sup> Today, it is less and less likely that this formal release will ever

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<sup>213</sup> This figure is the result of the verification process that was completed in December 2007.

<sup>214</sup> Report of the Task Force on Children and Armed conflict, Horizontal note on Children and Armed Conflict, reporting period: 1<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> May 2008.

happen. The CPA also clearly banned the recruitment of any individual under 18 years old for any military posting.<sup>215</sup>

According to informants from Human Rights focused non-government organizations (NGOs), many of those under 18 years old left the cantonment sites after verification of their age<sup>216</sup> and especially during the Constituent Assembly election<sup>217</sup> campaign in order to join the YCL<sup>218</sup> which was in a position to provide them with an incentive (food, 500 NRP and sometimes even a mobile phone for full-timers), activities (training courses, Party's campaign, development work, etc.) and social status. In some cases, after retreatingn these young people forcebly or willingly joined some Terai armed groups. Recuperating these military-trained young people has somehow been encouraged by a government that demonstrated its failure to provide any kind of support to this category of war victims<sup>219</sup>. Others just went back to their villages where they tried to generate an income or in some cases to go back to school (District Education Officers have been officially requested to facilitate their registering even late for examinations at national level). Lastly, some left for jobs overseas, seeking higher salaries and for fear of being recruited again.

It is often pointed out that children previously involved with the Maoists troops during the People's War are from groups referred to as socially and economically discriminated against (*i.e* ethnic minorities, low castes, *janajati*, etc.). Some individual factors also have to be taken into account as they were part of the children's motivation to leave their families and enroll. Indeed most of them had previously encountered family conflicts or dislocation.<sup>220</sup> These factors explain to a certain extent a kind of vulnerability facilitating their recruitment. Once they had been recruited, their poor relations with their respective families would hinder potential attempts at release by their relatives. In most cases, schools – especially in the hills of the western and far-western regions- have been

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<sup>215</sup> Art.7.6.1. (...) They (both sides) also fully agree not to include or use children who are 18 years old in the armed forces.

<sup>216</sup> Exercise conducted under UN monitoring in the winter of 2007 - 2008.

<sup>217</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008.

<sup>218</sup> Youth Comunist League, youth wing of the CPN-M (Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist), that reportedly used violence to threaten Nepalese people to cast their vote in favour of their party.

<sup>219</sup> The government did not foster any national plan to support the reintegration of child soldiers in their society of origin.

<sup>220</sup> Cf. Rachel Brett (2003)

ground for promoting the Maoist movement and the arena for student recruitments.<sup>221</sup>

Recruitment has been based on local dynamics, sometimes according to an intensive pattern: in many remote VDCs (for example in the western region in the districts of Baglung, Rolpa, Kapilvastu, Gorkha, etc.), Maoists launched the operation “one family, one child” and even “one family, two children” (reported in Gorkha when Maoist troops needed to renew their human resources).

It is worth noting that the generalized use of the categorization of “child soldiers”, a concept overly used by international and non government organizations, should not hide the heterogeneity of the cases of the under 18 year olds who have been affiliated to the armed forces. Indeed, the experiences of the under 18s affiliated to the Maoist army and militias can be differentiated according to many criteria: age of recruitment, length of involvement, tasks assigned, exposure to violence, etc. The selected examples aim at showing this diversity and prompt us to think of the long-term impact of the excessive use of these children in this war. Furthermore, the use of the term “child soldiers” is delicate in the Nepalese context as, according to the Nepalese law, adulthood starts at the age of 16, whereas international law regards all under 18 year olds as children.

### **Methodology**

This article is based on research carried out in the Western region of Nepal<sup>222</sup> as it is the Maoist rebellion movement’s birthplace, and it has been acutely affected by the practice of child enrolment. The main sources used here are interviews with seven under-age children affiliated to the PLA during the time of conflict and documents taken from various sources (newspapers, UN and NGO reports, interviews of local stakeholders: NGO social workers, parents, teachers, etc.) that I came across, while I was working as a social worker assigned to a reintegration programme targeting children affiliated to armed groups.

The first challenge to collect detailed personal stories of child soldiers was to identify them. Then, it was necessary to create a favorable context to interview them, without increasing the social stigma they suffer from, and while ensuring them proper confidentiality. During the interviews, they had to be willing and able to offer their testimony and answer

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<sup>221</sup> This practice is not new as other political parties, such as the Congress, had previously understood the political ground provided by schools.

<sup>222</sup> With the solid support of my research and language assistants: Mrs. Sarika Jaiswal and Mr. Nishit Shrivastawa.

questions as to whether they were either still somehow affiliated to the Maoist party, its youth groups, armed groups or afraid of being recruited again. They often suffered from psychological problems which prevented them from narrating their experience.

Another challenge is directly linked to the interview exercise itself. Interviewing children is somehow necessarily biased by different factors. The children have often been indoctrinated, including with regard to the answers they should provide in the case of questions from outsiders. Moreover, when depicting their reality, these children still suffer from emotional and sometimes physical scars, thereby influencing what they say and how they say it. Finally, any unconscious coping strategies affecting their perception of events should not be underestimated.

The background for this fieldwork may also have an influence on the results as it started to be conducted about one month after the CA elections, once many of those children had willingly or forcibly been campaigning for the CPN-M, generally under the YCL flag.

Among the interviews given by children (all personal names are pseudonyms), who fought for the PLA, here are some fragments gleaned from the experience of the only girl I had been granted the chance to interview. Contrary to her peers who hardly gave details about their rebel life and showed signs of emotional affliction, she seemed to appreciate being asked and listened to about this experience. Her willingness to speak about this traumatic past, usually kept secret, may cause us to question the accuracy of the narration. She readily provided detailed images of the most stricken episodes of her military involvement that started very young and went on quite late into the conflict, until the last battles. It is worth noticing that unlike the others, she still today actively supports the Maoist party and is affiliated to some Terai-based armed groups.

**TRISHA:** *“I was very excited to think that in the future, I would be able to beat up a lot of people”*

When I met Trisha, a smiling and gracious 16 year-old girl walking proudly down the street, with her tight pink flower *kurta* and her elaborate make-up, I could hardly believe that she could be the fearsome fighter I had previously heard about. But, after a while, when she started to evoke her past mentioning so many details and with such a lively expression - alternating between excitement and revulsion- illuminating her face, all my doubts were dispersed. She was Trisha, one of the youngest PLA recruits (in the early stages of the conflict), the student fighter who had navigated between military and civilian life from her childhood, and the one who could threaten local political leaders without shaking.

Trisha is proud of her story. In contrast with most other young fighters, who find great difficulty talking about their experience, she had even kept a record of her war exploits in memoirs she wrote when she left the movement. *“My mother wept after reading my story. In my diary, I wrote that we used to eat uncooked rice in case of an emergency as well as many experiences that I had endured during my fighting life”*. In fact, she wrote much more and used her memoirs to express her personal troubles as any teenager would do. On the very first page of the notebook illustrated by a hand drawing of roses, she wrote: *“I can’t say where I should start because I can’t find any words to express myself. But in my unfortunate life, there is no one to walk with me and my life is surrounded by thorns and whirlpools.”*

Trisha was only six years old when she discovered Maoism. After her parents had had to leave for India to provide medical care for her younger brother, she stayed with the youngest of her six paternal uncles, in Gulmi district. At home, Trisha witnessed the clandestine comings and goings of some people she had never met before, who were put up for one or two nights. These secret guests used to carry and hide weapons in the house. She heard some of their discussions. *“They talked about big things, saying that they would steal from the rich and distribute the money to the poor and I was also excited on hearing this”*. In spite of her very young age, Trisha felt the fighters’ enthusiasm and experienced a strong feeling of motivation growing inside her. She wanted to be part of the pending revolution. *“I felt I could contribute to this great deed”*. For three months, she attended some of those nocturnal discussions. Her uncle and aunt soon became convinced that in the long term she could prove to be a good element for the guerilla and introduced her to a commander who refused at first to consider involving such a young girl in his military activities. Later, he changed his mind, judging that she was physically strong enough. Now, a few years later, when looking back on those early days, she says that she was then *“convinced and ready to join the Janamukti Sena (People’s Liberation Army, PLA)”*.

She was about seven years old when she was recruited for the first time by the Maoist troops. She was then in class three. Following a cultural programme to promote Maoism at school, she had been abducted by the group. At that time, she did not really like school work, but enjoyed entertainment programmes. She was a pro-active girl and as such, she used to stand out among her friends during extracurricular activities. She thinks that this is the reason she attracted their attention. The Commander invited her in the following terms: *“Let’s go for a ride somewhere”*. After school time, she was forcibly taken to an unfamiliar place that turned out to be a remote forest-covered VDC, accessed by very few roads.

During a total of nine months, she lived in a huge cave in the rocks, hidden in an area she describes as a dense wooden one. She remembers how afraid she was staying there: *“The cave was very dark, even in the day time, we had to use torchlight when we were inside”*. The place was overpopulated with more than 250 people crowded into a very basic settlement. Living conditions were very precarious with only occasional food and drinking water shortages.

Trisha was assigned the position of sentry. She had to guard prisoners. She also had to keep watch over the weapons and food stores, buried in the ground. At that time, Trisha did not know how to use weapons but she used to attend the training courses given by the commanders. She also had to cope with the very strict discipline: *“When I was unable to carry out orders, they slapped me sometimes, 2 or 3 times. I tried to escape but the situation was not favourable<sup>223</sup>.”* When asked what prevented her from fleeing, Trisha vividly and ingeniously answered: *“It was so frightening, in the middle of such a dense forest and there were leeches all over the trees!”*

*“I can still remember what happened in the cave. The commandants used to bring in the criminals and punished them Muslim style: by cutting their throats and using other great torture methods (...) by cutting the bodies with kukhuris and spreading salt and chilies on the wounds (...) These things happened in front of my eyes, actually the commander forced me to watch it all in order to make me stronger”*. Since then, she has flashbacks. Sometimes, these troubled visions become an obsession, preventing her from focusing her mind on anything else.

She wept often. So exasperated by her whimpering, older fighters tried to get her to remain silent. They used either threats or speeches to reason with her. But most of the time, they just could not stop her from crying. She had been tortured many times for her tears.

When Trisha’s mother got to know that her daughter had been enrolled in the Maoist movement, she came back from India to Nepal. She learnt that other children from the school had been abducted for the same purpose and assumed they would never see their daughter again. She kept on looking for her and finally found her and brought her home. After that, Trisha’s parents decided to move to a district of Terai, to keep their daughter away from the Maoists troops. *“Then the real problems started. My father used to drink a lot and we (she and her mother) struggled a lot with him at that time. Then, he suddenly disappeared for some time”*.

Trisha went back to a “normal life”, living with her parents and attending school. Maoist fighters still occasionally visited their house, taking food and asking for shelter. At that point Trisha’s feelings about her experience were confused. She had not liked her life in the cave and had

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<sup>223</sup> Quotation taken from Trisha’s Memories’ notebook.

hated her commander for the pain he had caused her. But a few months later, she was willing to go back with the rebels, to take part in their battles. The Maoists refused to enroll her due to her tender age. According to Trisha, she insisted heavily and became obsessed with the idea of reintegrating the troops.

At that time, her relationship with her parents and especially her mother was deteriorating. She used the crude language she had been taught by her friends in the cave to address her parents. They had many clashes and her parents were so upset that they sometimes called her a “monster”. She was subject to violent fits of anger. Her mother was afraid of these changes and tried to address the behavioral issues of her daughter. At one stage, she even called upon an exorcist, thinking that an evil spirit could be at the origin of such uncontrollable behaviour.<sup>224</sup> For Trisha, the call of the jungle was very strong. She recalls: “*At that time, these ideologies affected me very strangely*”.

During her year in class 5, Maoists again came to perform cultural programmes in her school. Trisha and some of her friends decided to follow them. She escaped from home at 4 o'clock in the morning and went to meet her Maoist friends in Arghakanchi. To get some pocket money, she had sold a gold chain previously stolen at home. To travel, she simply jumped on a truck. When she arrived, she had to walk from one place to another at night and to hide constantly from the Nepalese Army troops. “*At that time, we had rules and regulations and we were not allowed to stay in one place due for security reasons. And we used to sleep in the day time where the State security forces couldn't reach us. We used to have our dinner at 4 in the afternoon and then we had to walk through the night. We crossed many hills and many rivers. Lots of friends died when they slipped off the cliff in the night.*” She has also been trained in some martial arts. “*Though it was very difficult, I worked hard to improve my physical condition and then I walked with them (...) in the jungle, sometimes without eating anything, sometimes carrying 4 kg of rice*”. That year, she returned to her village for 3 months. She was able to study there and to sit the class 5 examination. She proudly recalls that she passed it.

Then, her Maoist “friends” telephoned Trisha from D., where they were stationed. She joined them again and took part in training courses “*... even more difficult than the previous ones*”. (...) *My troops were planning to attack the police station in D. but in the end, we decided to cancel the attack. Then, we left D.*” Though she had grown up in this environment, she still experienced some childish fears: “*even sometimes in places where there were a*

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<sup>224</sup> This practice is often reported in Central and Western Africa where child soldiers are accused of being witches and their problems are treated with exorcism.

*lot of leeches*” she says screwing up her face in a mixture of aversion and fear.

Trisha was then given military training in T. She learnt how to load, use and look after weapons, such as self-loading rifles, three-nought-three (303), SMGs (Sub-Machine Guns) and LMGs (Long Machine Guns). At that time, Trisha dreamt about becoming a hero through her war exploits. She was also assigned more physical tasks such as carrying weapons on rugged pathways. Any mistake was severely punished with the commanders by beating her with sticks.

*“ At that time<sup>225</sup>, I was very excited to think that in the future, I would be able to beat up a lot of people and later I realized that it was not good because sometimes, when I beat the people in the camps inflicting great pain and suffering, I thought that I could be the one suffering at the hands of someone else.”*

Besides, Trisha showed a strong will to learn and she could not help being attracted to school. This is the reason why she was often called “Shiksha” (Education) among the troops. Indeed, from class 5 to 8, she used to come back to her village just before the school examination and to stay about 2 months with her family. Her parents used to scold her and beg her to leave the movement but she was determined to remain involved. She remembers that she used to answer them back and to threaten them with death sentences. At one stage, she even took some weapons and beat them up. Nevertheless she was keen to carry on her studies. Trisha was very aware of her mother’s dream of making a doctor of her. She did want not to disappoint her even when relations were strained. So, for years, she did her best to convince the rebel leaders to let her go for a few weeks at a time each year to sit her exams. As she did not have enough time to study and could not stand the idea of failing her school examinations, she used to threaten the headteacher to make sure she would get a good mark.

This is how, after 3 months spent with her family in order to sit her class seven examination, she took to the road, direction Parbat district, to join commandant Akash’s troops. *“It was a very rainy day. I was in the forest; there was a lot of thunder. The group included 45 members but we didn’t find any shelter from the rain or hail. We spent that night out in the hail, water, rain and the thunder. That night, I realized that I should have been in a cozy home.”<sup>226</sup>*

Then Trisha went back to Gulmi District where she asked Akash to provide her with technical training to be able to make grenades by herself. He agreed and she was trained for 3 months in the art of bomb design. She explained: *“I was fascinated by weapons because ordinary people do not know how to handle them and we have to spend time in the midst of people and society*

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<sup>225</sup> She was then about 12 to 13 years old. It was just after her class 6 examination.

<sup>226</sup> Extracts from Trisha’s memoirs.



and if anything goes wrong there we can retaliate by using weapons. Actually I like to experience a bit of everything". Today she often recalls this period and says: "I can still smell the gelatine on my fingers".

In spite of her doubts and the difficult living conditions, she stayed and walked to Arghakanchi district. An event took place there that left a strong impression on Trisha. She was then assigned menial tasks such as cooking or cleaning. It was one night on the border between Palpa and Arghakhanchi districts. "We were about to have noodles when our enemies (the Nepalese Army) launched an air raid and we ran away. Though we ran away, the army was waiting for us the next day, at around 4 o' clock in the afternoon. The battle started and in that battle we really wanted to come out victorious. In that battle, some friends were seriously injured and some even reached martyr status."<sup>227</sup>

As the Maoist troops had settled in a forest, located in a sunken valley, the Nepalese Army sections gathered at the top of the cliff and launched a surprise attack against the Maoist troops. The latter ran and hid in the woods for hours as they were not in a particularly strategic position to fight. "If we had attacked from below, it was certain that there would have been a maximum number of casualties on our side. It's a fact that if you attack from below upwards you loose."<sup>228</sup> Then, Trisha and her friends climbed the hills to reach higher land with a good view of the government troops down below. Once the army alert was over, Maoist troops made a counterattack. She recalls: "They waited for us for hours" and adds proudly that she had been injured by shrapnel from an 81 mm bomb that hurt her behind her knee-joint. "As I was very brave, I fought for four hours". As many of Trisha's friends died during this battle, other fighters had to carry away their bodies afterwards. They provided basic care to Trisha who was left for hours with her bleeding leg. She wrapped her red scarf "made by the blood of the martyrs" tightly around the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Afterwards, we had to leave that place as it was no longer safe. After this battle, I visited my home. My mother scolded me when she got to know that I took part in the battle. In answer, I threatened her. Now, when I recall the past and my attitude at the time, I feel very strange."

At that time, the Basanta Memory Brigade needed reinforcements in readiness for the attack on Kapilvastu. As a consequence, Trisha was sent there. As she was not far from her village, she was able to go home for a while to sit her class 7 examination. Unfortunately she got poor results in mathematics. It seems that this failure upset her and was associated with sadness and doubts about her involvement in the PLA. In her memoirs, Trisha says of this period "Life is full of pain and we can't recover it at once but

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<sup>227</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>228</sup> *Idem.*

*if you do not give up and wait for the right time, this favorable time will come. It was the same with me.*” She then started to study in class 8 when she was forcibly recruited again. She writes in her diary: *“At the time, I started feeling that I should not work with my friends (Maoists), but they forced me to work with them and I had to work under pressure.”*

After D., Trisha went to J., in Rolpa, *“the red land of Maoists”*. She once more attended technical training courses there: how to repair weapons on the battlefield. From then, she started to work in technical groups. With some excitement, she remembers: *“We used code language for example to designate a grenade; we used the term apple”*.

There were 250 fighters in the battalion, including about 60 under 18 year olds. *“There were different technical groups. One of them was assigned to repair the weapons. They also had to perform their duties during the battle. There was also a medical group to provide medical assistance to the injured during the battle.”* During their speeches aimed at motivating the troops, commandants used to say to Trisha and her friends that the Army and police were enemies to be killed without any thought or hesitation. *“The commanders tried to provide us with the position most suitable for us. I was promoted to VC (Vice Commander). They knew that if they promoted dedicated fighters to higher posts the latter would be encouraged and work hard”*.

She temporarily left the troops once more and showed up at her class 7 examination. *“But at that time, everyone in my village was aware that I was affiliated with the Maoists. Actually they (the villagers) had started suspecting me of these activities due to my continuous absence from home. The police had also been informed about me. My family was then tortured by the police: they used to come to my house and ask my parents for my whereabouts. Once my mother said me: “Because of you, we are going to be killed by the security forces!”*. Affected by this situation in with she directly put her parents at risk, Trisha considered returning home. She said that she wanted to study in class 8, and her commander requested that she join the troops after spending 2 months with her family. She did so and states: *“Anyhow I passed class eight in spite of my rebel life (...). I studied very hard for this exam and the results were very good”*.

At that time, Trisha hesitated giving up the movement to be able to focus on her studies. *“My teachers told me: “You should continue your studies. Class nine is very crucial because it prepares you for class 10 and SLC<sup>229</sup>”. I was convinced by their arguments and told my superiors that I would resign. But they didn’t allow me to, saying: “You are now one of our experts in fighting. You can’t resign. While we are planning to hit P. and S., you can’t stay at home and study. You have to support us and the party (...). The commander scolded me: “You continued your studies after telling us such lies. Now, you can’t cheat any more.*

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<sup>229</sup> School Leaving Certificate, official recognition of completing educational cycle.

*The education system is useless here. You should not study in this corrupt system. Look at us, we only studied up to class 4 and we got this far*” Trisha was obviously not an easy fighter to cope with. Having acquired a certain strength of mind from her early childhood, she reports with a smile (and no doubt fantasising somewhat) that she said to the commander: *“Everyone is different and they have different ideas. So, I have a different opinion than you and I feel like studying and you can’t stop me. I never refuse to obey any of your orders. I accomplished each and everything task you assigned me and you should now help me by granting me some time for my studies”*.

However, Trisha was not to get back to the school bench, but was sent to another location. According to her, it was not due to her arguments with the commander but rather to the strategic situation: the police and army were closely monitoring movements in the area.

Putting her knowledge to practice, she was assigned the duty of supplying weapons during the P. battle.<sup>230</sup> She felt more sure of herself as she received prior information about the plan, whereas most of the time, fighters were given no clue whatsoever to prevent information from leaking out and soldiers from taking leave. *“During this battle, I didn’t encounter any difficulty because I knew 3 days in advance that we were going to hit the city”*.

*“I was in R., in Gulmi district at that time and we headed towards P. from there. We had thoroughly prepared ourselves and we had drawn maps to define from which point to attack so that we would emerge victorious.(...) We did indeed win that battle. I was responsible for supplying weapons to the fighters during the battle. Luckily, I had not been injured. After the battle though, I wanted to return home because I was due to sit my 9 class exam, but they (the commanders) didn’t allow me to do so”*.

Then, in view of the next attack on B., Trisha was sent as a spy to this city. With some other young girls, she wore fancy clothes and was made-up to look attractive. She was assigned to obtain information from the sentries and guards near the police and army camp thanks to informal conversations. She recalls how she played with these young boys and could easily find out: how many soldiers there were in the compound, what their daily routine was, etc. She was even able to pick up snippets of information about their action plans in retaliation to Maoist attacks.

*“We also planned to hit B. We booked one lodge near the state army camp and we attacked from the roof top of that lodge. After we succeeded, the battle of Rambhapur<sup>231</sup> started”*.

*“On the day of the attack, I only survived thanks to sheer luck. Many of my friends lost their lives. We had bunkers in which to hide, so we buried 8 or 9 of*

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<sup>230</sup> On 31<sup>st</sup> January 2006.

<sup>231</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> February 2006.

them there in a single bunker (...)<sup>232</sup> We proclaimed them martyrs and a few days later we planned to attack S. The S. battle was a very difficult one for me. At that time, lots of my friends had been beaten to death by the Nepal Army. Some of them had been buried in a pit.”

“It was at this time that the people in my village started saying that I roamed around at night. And with the S. fight taking place at night, the police, especially a CID called Mohit, who was a local and has known me since I was a young girl in grade 5, started gathering information about me. He had joined the army and I had joined the Maoists, so he told everyone that I was a Maoist. He had also informed his barracks of this. So during the S. attack, they carried out an intensive search for me”.

“So, we somehow came out victorious and I returned home. I knew that this was very risky because my parents were being threatened (by the police), saying that they would be imprisoned if they didn’t hand me over to the police”.

That was only the beginning of her troubles with the police. “After our victory following the B. attack, I had kept three grenades at home. My family members complained that the grenades could explode at any moment. I passed this on to my seniors and they told me to bring the grenades to a place called M. in the West. It was then, on my way to M., that I was arrested at a police checkpoint, near the National Army’s based camp”.

“After being arrested, I told the police that someone had maybe mistakenly put those grenades in my bag. I had to tell that lie to save my life. They accused me of being a Maoist but I replied that I was a student and that they could phone and make inquiries among the children and teachers of my school. My teachers knew the truth about my status but it was risky for them to tell government forces that I was a Maoist. A Deputy Police Superintendent phoned the school and asked whether a student of my name studied there. My teachers agreed to say that I was their student but didn’t confirm the accusation of me being a Maoist (...). Then I was kept under investigation during which interrogations alternated with harsh beatings”.

“They would have definitely killed me if they had been certain that I was a Maoist but I kept denying it. We had received special training so that once we had stated something (in the event of arrest), we could not alter it because that would subject us to twice as much beating and torture by the police. So whatever we said, we had to stick to it, even if they killed us in the end. Hence, I kept on saying that I was a student and also insisted that someone had maybe put those grenades in my bag without my consent and knowledge. But they didn’t trust me at all and kept me there for three months (...). They tortured me so much that I began to think that I wouldn’t leave the Maoists movement at any cost from then onwards. In fact, torture was something that was to encourage me not to abandon the movement at any cost. I mean, they tied me up, poured water on me and beat the soles of my feet

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<sup>232</sup> This detail is doubtful as it seems unlikely that the Maoist did burry dead bodies inside their bunkers.

with a stout bamboo stick. That beating had repercussions on my whole body and it affected my brain.”

During her detention, Trisha’s “friends” regularly called her parents to find out if she had been released. “Of course, they could not tell my family that I was in jail. Sometimes when my mother scolded them and asked about my present location, my friends would say that I was with them but a little further away (that’s why she couldn’t speak to me directly).”

At that time, Trisha’s cousin, who had been recruited three years before was assigned as officer to this police station. He was angry with Trisha for being involved in Maoist activities and he scolded her: “I told you several times not to get involved with the Maoists. You didn’t listen to me and now you see what happens. But I will rescue you.” After a first attempt at escaping, “He couldn’t stand witnessing me being tortured, he used to cry. In jail, we were provided with only one meal a day but I was used to staying like that even for six or seven days. So my only worry was about when I was to get out of there”.

“I was spending my days in jail, suffering from extreme torture and finally one day, after about 2 and 1/2 months, it was my cousin who was posted as a night sentry there. At that time, I had been transferred from the camp to a separate place nearby. It was a dark room. It had a small torch in it. When I was there, my brother<sup>233</sup> told me that he would set me free (...), yet he had difficulty doing so as he had been promoted as sentry and there were other guards as well at the gate. And you know, the camp was well defended with an electrified barbed wire fence around part of it. So it was difficult either way: The front gate was guarded and the back was protected with an electrified wire. My brother told me that I had to run from there or else I would be killed anyhow if I stayed. He had some shears for cutting the barbed wire. So he cut the wire in one place and let me out through the hole he’d made. So I was free but where could I go in the dark in B.? Besides, there would be police around the place. I had nowhere to go. So I spent the whole night in a small lane. Early the next morning, I met my friends and told them how I had managed to escape. My body was covered in red and blue blotches from the severe beatings. (Showing part of her body) It was here that they beat me until it bled. It was so painful. They used some cutter made of glass and then burnt me with a torch on the wound. Then there was that angry Deputy Police Superintendent may be his name was ‘Amrit’.... He hit me here”.

After this episode, Trisha spent about 2 months in the hospital: “It was a big hospital. I stayed there with my friends. I was prescribed medicine and needed a lot of rest. There were cuts on various parts of my body including my head. So I took the medicine to heal my brain as well. After that, while I was still under medication, my cousin called my parents’ home. That’s how my family got to know that I had been in jail. At this my mother and family started to cry. He shouldn’t have done that. On the other hand, he had been dismissed, after being

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<sup>233</sup> She is referring to her cousin here as in the following lines.

*accused of releasing me from jail. He is now in a foreign land. He still scolds me at times when he calls, saying, 'Have you still not yet left the Maoists?' He even called just a few days ago".*

Even after this painful experience, Trisha made the firm decision to remain actively involved in the rebellion. *"While I was recovering, I told my seniors that there was no way I would abandon the Maoists' cause, although I had previously planned to do so. Then, I experienced a strong feeling of revenge; I wanted to kill all those who had beaten me in jail".*

It seems that it had become more and more difficult for the commanders to control Trisha. She speaks about her later arguments with her commanders, including one with whom she did not see eye-to-eye. She explained: *"He considered himself superior and tried to dominate me."* They had a violent argument about a mobile phone he confiscated from her. *"Later, when there was a meeting with higher and senior commanders, I put forth my grievances. I told them that I was experienced in war matters and that I had been to battle many times. I also told them that truth always prevailed and their falsehood and evil like theirs always lost. In addition, I told them that we had also killed and taken action against so many people while fully aware of what we were doing, but that they were killing and torturing people out of ignorance. I even told them that their involvement in the party was useless and asked them whether they were fighting in the party for the people or for money?"*

Trisha was with the troops when news of the final ceasefire agreement reached them. In her memoirs, she writes: *"I was very happy when I heard that we could go to the Terai and stay in a camp. We started to walk from Arghakhanchi and reached Butwal, and then we decided to set up camp in Jerga. After that, we started to build our camp".* However, Trisha's parents found out where she was and came to fetch her. Again she escaped and again they found her. Yet, on that occasion she started back at school for good and decided *"to do something for society"*. She also wanted to improve her image as *"Previously, when I came back to the village, people used to look upon me with a very negative attitude."*

After more than 3 years of *"rebel life"*, Trisha was not yet 15 years old but she was already an experienced fighter with the title of VC, a weapon maintenance officer and an explosive expert. It was not easy for her to give up her military activities. Furthermore, her "friends" were determined not to lose this accomplished fighter. They telephoned her frequently to recruit her again. She agreed to turn up at the newly established cantonment MCS-4 for the verification process<sup>234</sup> since it seemed that the Maoists wanted to put on display as many fighters as possible to

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<sup>234</sup> Exercise launched in November 2007, aimed at counting the exact number of soldiers in Maoist cantonments and verifying that no under 18-year-olds were involved.

legitimate their power and show their military force. She was cleared just like many others thanks to her additional years in the register. She then left the camp again.

Today, looking back at her past, she has bitter memories. She writes: *“There is a lot of pain in the book of life and there is a lot of pain in soft hearts and there are lots of stories of pain and grief in my unfortunate life”*.

Trisha is aware of the fact that she had been indoctrinated and used due to her tender age. She thinks that the individuals she fought with were *“not all (...) good (...) [and were] from very different types”*. Since the transformation of the Maoist movement from a rebellion into an official political party now in power, her judgment about her “friends” is a rather well balanced one. Trisha thinks that there is a discipline crisis, partly due to the involvement of new members. She thinks that male leaders are no longer treating females decently. She has even requested that they be severely punished. But she has been disappointed to see that it turned out to be soft options (cooking and basic cleaning tasks).

Today, she still attends regular meetings with the CPN-M and YCL. She was actively campaigning for her VDC’s CPN-M candidate for the Constituent Assembly in April 2008. She also often goes to MCS-4 on Saturdays. According to her, she tries to convince her friends to walk out on the troops and to return to civilian life and their studies. Due to her arrogant and partly anti-Maoist actions, she receives death threats from the Maoists. For security reasons, she cannot spend the night at her parents’ house and has to move on every night, just like during the conflict. She also keeps up her daily physical training and is not ashamed to admit her passion for guns. She even seems to show off her past and proudly wears a bullet around her neck as a pendant.

Trisha’s parents seem puzzled by the uncontrollable behaviour of their daughter. They appear to be overwhelmed by the situation. Her father confided in me that he tried many times to stop his daughter’s violent activities and to isolate, thus protect, her from the bad influence of the surrounding armed group, but to avail. The social worker who accompanies Trisha in her reinsertion and who is sponsored by a local NGO says that she is a very challenging case. He thinks that she unconsciously exposes herself to great risks, running a local small-scale armed group. He also describes how unstable she is, changing her mind from one day to the next. Trisha is aware of her strange behaviour. She speaks about her personality and the anger stored inside her. She is still learning to cope with all of this nowadays, so she says, but her behavior is still characterized by violent moods.

When asked about her aspirations for the future, she says: “I will leave the party and the movement. I will help to defend children’s rights”. She still dreams of becoming a doctor like so many Nepalese students.

**..And Thousands of Others: “One shall not cut the blossom in the bud”<sup>235</sup>**

Trisha’s story like that of all the children affiliated to armed groups is an original one. Though her experience is obviously extreme, it is not unique. Among the 3,000 children counted in the cantonments, many of them were used as support staff (for tasks such as: cooking, cleaning utensils, portorage, sentry duty, carrying messages, spying, etc.). Yet hundreds of them have also been actually exposed to conflict-related violence, sometimes in the direct line of fire, often on the front line and sometimes assigned to the most awful duties that adults themselves may not have fulfilled quite so well.

This is what happened to Ashok and Darmandra, two childhood friends from Palpa district who lived a nightmare during their two years of services for the PLA, from their eleventh to thirteenth year.

They left their home and joined the movement “*willingly*” sometime in 2003, after taking part in extra-curriculum activities organized to promote Maoism in their school, where affiliation to the movement was compulsory at that time. Darmandra left first because his parents were stricken by poverty and social discrimination due to their low caste origin. He thought he would fight not only to become a soldier earning a remittance, but also in the hope of lessening inequalities in society. A few days later, his best friend Ashok decided to accompany him and enrolled too. At the time they had great expectations. The senior members promised to provide them access to a better education.

In reality, the role they were granted was very different from their expectations. They had been given a choice: either they did or did not want to be on the front line. They did not want to fight as they were afraid, so they were assigned to these tasks. They started among the support staff, cooking and carrying weapons and items of basic necessity from one temporary camp to another. They remember how difficult it was to walk with such heavy loads.

Things got worse later, while they were barely 12 years old. They had been assigned to “*cleaning*” (*saphaya*) the battle field: after fighting, they

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<sup>235</sup> Quotation from one of the children interviewed about his traumatic experience in the PLA, meaning that because of his enrolment at such a young age, all his development process has been badly affected. This phrase is commonly used in the Rolpa area in reference to girls’ early marriages. It means that spouses who are too young will never be able to enjoy married life because their wedding took place at a too early stage in their development.



were to carry their injured friends and kill them if necessary. They had to do this if their friends were too badly injured to be saved by basic medical care, or if the hospital was too far away, the treatment too expensive, *etc.* The badly injured often begged them to put them out of their unbearable misery. Then, they had to cut up the bodies and to hide them so that the police and army could not find them and would thus suppose that there were no losses among the Maoist troops. It would crush the morale of the government security forces. Darmandra and Ashok had to behead the bodies to make them unrecognizable in case they were found. They remember the two main battles they took part in: C. and S. They had to carry many dead bodies. At least 30 children carried out the same task and that was only in Darmandra's group.

They had also been assigned to supply arms for the P. battle. Walking to the battle field, they remember, they had to carry many heavy weapons. At some point, they could no longer walk. It was the day Darmandra decided to desert. He left the night before the battle. He remembers that he was afraid, he was tired, he was disappointed and tired of all the commander's unfulfilled promises. A few days later, Ashok, who was in another battalion, also ran away and returned to his home town.

Today, both of them are still very good friends. They have been back to school and are staying with their families. Nonetheless, for some months after they came back, they encountered problems in socializing with other students. When part of a group, they used to remain silent and showed no interest in taking part in the entertainment.

Darmandra and Ashok say that they often have flashbacks. They also used to have nightmares. They are still plagued by an intense feeling of fear in their everyday existence. They feel threatened any time they see an outsider walking round the village. They were afraid of being recruited again by force, even weeks after the CPA.

Today, they also harbour a feeling of guilt about their actions as well as a sense of helplessness. Ashok still has a lot of difficulty in dealing with and speaking about this past. Both of them have recently started to share games again with their school friends.

There is a host of war stories, like the one about three other kids aged 15 to 18 in the same village as Ashok and Darmandra. After being forcibly taken from their schools in Rolpa district by the Maoists, they only stayed there a couple of days, mainly to clean utensils. In spite of their very brief experience, their lives have been transformed. For months, they were afraid of going back to their village too terrified of any potential retaliation or re-recruitment. Now they have started another existence in Palpa district, in a VDC from where at least 60 children were enrolled in the PLA.

All these children have one thing in common: they will have to carry painful scars all their life long and have to deal with traumatic images from the violence they have witnessed or inflicted. Beyond these individual stories, it is undeniable that the People's War has changed something about the mere perception of childhood and youth.

It has been very difficult to obtain these very few narratives recounted by children about the war since most of the children seek refuge in silence. According to all the cases known today, children who wrote about their experiences did so after the event. Indeed, these memoirs were written with some hindsight, rather than in the heat of the moment. Such are the stories reported through published interviews. Though data collection in the field is far from being made easy due to the psychological trauma and social stigma, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of these stories. Most of the time, some fantasy may crop up where facts cannot be verified. The few children willing to speak, often do so exaggerating some aspects, though to what extent, no-one knows. In these narrations, the timeline tends to be blurred, such as the exact name of locations, especially during troops movements, as well as the number of combatants, how long the event lasted, etc.

These stories are engraved in the children's memories. As such, they can help us to get an idea of their mental representation of the war through their eyes. Yet for a more detailed picture, we would need to find more of these narrations and to double-check by comparing several personal stories.

### **Changes in the perception of childhood in the New Nepal**

These children's war experiences may be extremely diverse but all are multifaceted and complex. They have all generated behavioural problems, such as quarrelsome and aggressive behaviour that are hardly addressed due to the lack of any effective reintegration programme. For girls like Trisha, the PLA has been a source of excessive empowerment that led her to an impressive thirst for power, which is now jeopardising her integration in Nepalese society. All these under 18 year olds, who are mainly from vulnerable backgrounds, now have to find their own way with a minimal amount of outside support.

The use of children as fighters during the conflict will undeniably have repercussions on the next generation. Of course, at an individual level, all these child warriors will carry stigmas. Not only will they have to regain their place in civil society, but they also have to deal with their problematic and barely controllable behaviour.

For all their peers, the perception of their surroundings has been changing. The perception of space (with the move away from their native

VDC for the first time for many children), of parenthood (with a child's premature separation from their parents with whom they usually stay until their wedding day for a girl, and all their life long for a boy) and of the notion of safety (home can no longer be considered a safe haven). Over the years schools have become key political ground and a main place, in some areas, for recruitment for the Maoist party. Indeed, schools have stopped being safe areas. Moreover, in hilly districts of the western region –as in Gorkha– many teachers were affiliated to the party and openly supported the insurrection (and as a consequence more or less directly the recruitment of under 18s for military purposes).

At village level, children's involvement in the conflict also brought about deep changes. A feeling of insecurity and suspicion of each other spread among neighbours. Children became the cause of this fear, whereas they were not traditionally perceived as potential dangers by the elders. This is depicted as the "culture of terror" by J. Pettigrew who underlines that the war brings about "*new challenges to understandings of childhood*".<sup>236</sup> The whole social cohesion of the village has been upset. Parents also have to deal with a new set of dynamics with a general slow undermining of their parental control, challenged by competing ideologies.

As in many traditional societies, Nepalese children and young people are "voiceless". They are not recognized fully and consulted by the group until they eventually marry and start their own family. Young people are a non negligible part of the population, prone to be actively involved in politics and contestation movements. As such, they sometimes feel the need to provoke tragic events and to use violence to attract attention to their demands and pressurise their elders, who are more powerful.

Changes can be witnessed today in the Nepalese post-war youth through the emergence of political or armed youth movements, such as YCL, that often perceive violence as the only means of being heard. Though the future of these children is apparently not at the top of the political agenda, it seems that the new government cannot afford to leave them on the margins of the overall decision-making process.

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