Maoist People’s War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal, by Ina Zharkevich

Amy L Johnson

REFERENCES


1 ‘Times have changed,’ is an expression commonly heard in Nepal in the years since the decade-long armed conflict between the Communist Party Nepal-Maoist and the Government of Nepal formally ended in 2006. For some, the phrase conveys a sense of loss for previously familiar facts of social life. For others, it signals the arrival of a brand new era, one in which inequalities based on caste, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and region are giving way to legal and moral commitments to greater inclusivity and progressive social values. Ongoing violence against Dalits, women’s unequal citizenship, calls for a Hindu state and the detention of indigenous political activists are, however, evidence that times have not changed enough in Nepal for those situated outside the social-political elite. Regardless of how fast or slow time appears to change, the process of social transformation set in motion by the Maoist-state conflict is discernible not only in the realm of law and policy, but in the embodied and experiential domains of everyday, ordinary social interactions and practices. In this context, what it means to live through revolutionary social change and how social changes become incorporated and sustained in the intimacy of everyday life emerge as fundamental questions for contemporary Nepali society.

2 Ina Zharkevich’s Maoist People’s War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal skilfully explores these questions in an historically grounded, self-reflexive and
ethnographically rich portrayal of revolution and social change in rural Nepal. The monograph, Zharkevich’s first, presents an account of the social and cultural legacies of revolution from the vantage point of a uniquely positioned group of rural Nepalis, the Thabangi. The latter belong to the village of Thabang in Kham Magar territory in Rolpa District. A predominately agrarian and pastoral Kham Magar community, Thabang became the base for the Maoist movement and served as the location of the first People’s Government in 1997. Consequently, Thabang was also the site of elaborate social experimentations by Maoists in the years before and after the People’s War. In this context, the author sets out to study how social changes that were introduced in Thabang during this period, sometimes under duress and as seemingly temporary strategies for cohabitation with Maoist activists, lasted beyond what has been thought of conventionally as the ‘exceptional time’ of war. Her ethnography compellingly challenges the idea of war as a hiatus in social norms in order to argue, using the Sanskrit concept *apaddharma* (rules that apply in times of crisis) and Thabangi explanations, that war creates its own temporality with its own definitions of proper conduct. Dwelling in this expanded temporality and morality, Zharkevich examines how modifications to inter-caste commensality, beef eating, alcohol consumption, agrarian and pastoral livelihoods, courtship and family, which were instituted during the conflict as part of the Maoist’s cultural revolution, have persisted in the embodied habits of ordinary Thabangi, altering self-evident cultural practices and beliefs (*doxa*) and revising what was deemed ‘normal’ in Thabangi society.

3 Zharkevich is well prepared to deliver the arguments and observations shared in *Maoist People’s War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal*. Her insights come from fieldwork carried out in Thabang over several periods between 2008 and 2016. As described in chapter two, Zharkevich first visited Thabang to conduct research with Maoist ex-combatants in 2008. She returned in 2011 to begin her doctoral dissertation fieldwork, staying in the village for nine months. She also carried out fieldwork in Thabang during a postdoctoral fellowship in 2016, which provided her with an opportunity to follow and revisit changes observed during earlier periods of research. Zharkevich’s long-term commitment to Thabang and to the Thabangi is reflected in the depth, detail and sensitivity of her ethnography.

4 *Maoist People’s War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal* is organised into an introduction, eight chapters and a conclusion. The text transitions easily between the first four chapters, which detail a Thabangi history of the conflict period, and the last four chapters which trace the effect of conflict-era changes on social norms and practices in Thabang. Supplementing the text is a helpful glossary of Nepali terms, an appendix of verses and drawings produced by Thabangi from the Maoist Model School, and an appendix of maps locating Thabang.

5 The main concepts and scholarly contributions of Zharkevich’s ethnography are described in the introduction. As already mentioned, these include attention to the body as a site of social transformation and generation as *habitus* - a term taken from Pierre Bourdieu that is enlivened throughout the ethnography in the author’s careful description of the process of acquiring and normalising formerly forbidden practices. After specifying her intellectual location, Zharkevich introduces her reader to the village of Thabang and its inhabitants in chapter one, ‘Thabang: From Remote Village to Revolutionary Myth’. This opening chapter elaborates Thabang’s history and representation of Thabang in mainstream narratives of Nepali Maoism, while
familiarising readers with the Kham Magar community and scholarship. Chapter one is also where Zharkevich describes her methodology in detail, including a critical reflection on the challenges of working with changing oral histories over a long-term project. Together, the introduction and chapter one lay firm foundations for Zharkevich’s subsequent ethnographic insights.

The second chapter, ‘The Moral Economy of War: The Making of the Base Area’, focuses on the emergence of Thabang as the heart of the Maoist movement. The author grapples with the ways Thabangi negotiated the time of war in the context of moral commitments to kin and shared experiences of deprivation and displacement. Zharkevich argues that the tight-knit community forged in the jungle during this time of crisis generated a *communitas* which echoes into the present. The generational significance of Thabangi *communitas* is examined in the third chapter, ‘Becoming Maoist in a Time of Insurgency’. Here, Zharkevich turns her attention to youths who joined and stayed in the Maoist movement throughout the conflict, as well as those who opted to leave Thabang to avoid forced recruitment. She describes how the generational position of Thabangi youths coincided with the cultural politics of the Maoists to create a revolutionary force committed to self-discipline and egalitarianism. Key to this chapter is Zharkevich’s argument that youths enrolled in the Maoist movement should be understood in terms of their existential search for a certain kind of life.

Chapter four, ‘The Marital Economy of War: Reconfiguring Kinship Loyalties and Conjugality’, delves deeper into the existential journey of Thabangi youths by detailing Maoist efforts to monitor and control libidinal desires. Zharkevich highlights the stories of women, introducing narratives from several Maoist activists. She argues that Thabangi women approached marriage partly as a strategy to prevent recruitment into the People’s Liberation Army because marriage was thought to affirm loyalty to kin instead of revolution. In response, Maoists effectively closed avenues for early marriage by banning premarital sex, child marriage and traditional courtship spaces (*chutti basne*). In this way, they enlarged the pool of potential single recruits and created a force comprised largely of unmarried youths. Once members of the PLA, however, youths invariably fell in love, discovered life partners, married and had children. ‘Revolutionary marriages’, which often happened across caste, ethnic and class lines were characterised by a different structure of feeling than traditional marriages because they emphasised equal partnerships and shared passions between spouses. After the conflict, so Zharkevich contends, preference for love marriage amongst Thabangi youths continued in a hollow form through the resurgence of early or child marriage. Elopements, such as the one that took place between a grade-nine ‘daughter’ of Thabang’s Maoist commune and a classmate described in the chapter’s opening pages, are presented by the author as representative of young people’s burgeoning desire to engage in a marriage of their own choice without privileging parental authority, kinship obligations, or considering age at time of marriage (p130). By the time the author conducted her field research in 2011, these expedited arrangements had, so she writes, become hegemonic, replacing other kinds of marriage as the ideal amongst Thabangi youths and portending lasting changes in Thabang post-war daily life.

The content of chapters five to eight shifts towards the adoption and endurance of conflict-era changes in the habits and generational positions of Thabangi. ‘Remaking the Tribe: “A Farewell to Bad Traditions”’ meditates on the meaning of tradition and
examines how Kham Magar Thabangi regard themselves as a ‘tribe’, identifying transhumant herding, pig raising, and alcohol consumption as important to the Kham Magar way of life. Zharkevich outlines how the Maoists celebrated aspects of Kham Magar culture deemed to mirror communist ideals, while enforcing top-down policies governing ‘backward’ and ‘primitive’ aspects of Thabangi life. The author concludes that changes to practices such as herding were accepted more readily by young people and those already exposed to modernising discourses, situating the ideology of Maoism alongside influences of development and education. She argues that the division between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ is artificial and masks co-dependencies between so-called modern livelihoods and traditional ones that continue to support Thabangi society.

Chapters six and seven depict two practices that upended previously held norms regarding purity and caste. ‘Subverting the “Sacred Cow”: When Beef Becomes Edible’ illustrates the process of embodied social change by describing how some Thabangi acquired and sustained the habit of beef consumption. The chapter historicises wartime circumstances under which slaughtering cows and consuming beef became more acceptable, charting the moral obligation to feed kin, the low price of beef and the concurrent Maoist emphasis on self-transformation and the production of a ‘new man’. One especially poignant passage describes the contrast in the bodily experience of beef consumption between those who acquired the habit and those who rejected it. Here, the author reflects on how the desire to consume beef as a sign of ideological commitment was complicated by ingrained bodily dispositions. In this way, she identifies how ‘free choice’ is situated in a mind-body continuum, which shaped the generational adoption of beef consumption in Thabang, with youths being more overall inclined to consume beef.

The themes of generation, agency and embodiment are picked up in chapter seven, ‘When All Castes Become One: Transgressing Caste Boundaries during War’. The two boundaries Zharkevich focuses on are sharing food and sharing space. She examines how the Maoists performed commensality and modelled inter-caste interaction in their efforts to eradicate untouchability and promote caste equality. The author explains that, for the older generation in Thabang, normative ideas and behaviour that served to separate castes were difficult to dislodge, even if they were questioned, because they had been acquired during childhood at a different historical period. Youths more readily adapted to what were perceived as radical changes to everyday inter-caste relations because they had been born into an altogether different historical era from their elders. Importantly, Zharkevich proposes that this tendency had less to do with the values of individual youths than with their generational location. In this way, the chapter emphasises caste as habitus and offers a Thabangi theorisation of agency as a product of historical times.

Chapter eight, ‘When Gods Return to Their Homeland in the Himalayas: Maoism, Religion, and Change’, is a sweeping overview of religion as practised in Thabang. The chapter contextualises Maoist perspectives on religion and gives an account of Thabangi religious practices, encounters with Maoist ideology and subsequent changes in religious life in Thabang. Of special note is Zharkevich’s description of the alternating secularisation and sacralisation of religious spaces such as Jaljala – the abode of the Kham Magar protective deity Barbhai Braha – over the duration of the conflict and its aftermath. She also offers an intimate view of how religious life takes
place within Thabangi homes, a preference born of the conflict which endured and replaced the past popularity of public worship. The chapter ends with a reflection on Christianity as a source of religious change in Thabang, comparing parallel ideological, political and material goals of Christian converts and Maoist revolutionaries.

12 The book’s conclusion provides a retrospective on the People’s War and the effects of what, at the time, were regarded as transgressive social practices on the fabric of Nepali society. Zharkevich reminds us that while the war was of a generational dimension insofar as it sought to eradicate ‘backward’ traditions, it was not aimed against older generations. It was a struggle for the formation of a new generational habitus (p266). This argument, as well as the overwhelming ethnographic exposition that supports it throughout the text, is one of the book’s major contributions to scholarly understandings of the role of generation in conflicts.

13 As the terminology used in this review indicates, the conceptual foundation of the book builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s theorisation of habit and embodiment and Émile Durkheim’s concern with investigating the uncontested, unconscious domains of social life and *communitas*. ‘Changing times’ are explored mainly in reference to practices and processes of accommodation, habituation and norm stabilisation. Agency and individualism are played down in the text, an approach that mirrors what is presented as a Thabangi perspective on agency and historical time. Tension between agency and structure, and conscious and unconscious behaviour, is palpable throughout the ethnography as the author and the Thabangi contemplate the extent to which choice and will are linked to individual desire or the affordances of a given historical moment. The interplay of the individual and society is, of course, a topic that has long fascinated anthropology and has been central to the development of phenomenological anthropology and psychological anthropology. Interestingly, neither are interlocutors in this book. This comes across as a missed opportunity, given not only the book’s subject but the very close connections phenomenological and psychological anthropology have with Nepal Anthropology. Although continental social theory does much in the way of accounting for the theoretical arguments of the text, as a reader, I would have liked the inclusion of diverse, ethnographically grounded discussions of interior worlds, the body and social transformation that are particularly abundant in Nepal Anthropology (a sample would include Desjarlais 1992; Hardman 2000; Leve 2017; Levy 1990; Ortner 1978; Parish 1996; Skinner, Pach III and Holland 1998).

14 In conclusion, *Maoist People’s War and the Revolution of Everyday Life in Nepal* is an excellent study of a rural Nepali community’s experiences of the Maoist People’s War and what it means to be caught up in history. The book will be valuable for anyone interested in the powerful quotidian dimensions of the conflict, the embodiment of social practices and norms, and subaltern views of Nepali Maoism. While the theoretical discussions in the introduction and conclusion may be too advanced for an introductory undergraduate course, the book would be a welcome addition to an advanced undergraduate syllabus or graduate course in South Asian studies, conflict studies, or socio-cultural anthropology. This ethnography will certainly be a benchmark for all future scholarship on the complex social and cultural legacies of Nepal’s Maoist-state conflict.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


AUTHORS

AMY L JOHNSON

Amy Leigh Johnson is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences at Northumbria University.