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# Towards a "Great Transformation"?

*The Maoist Insurgency and Local Perceptions of Social Transformation in Nepal*

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**Front Cover:**

**The historical Palpa Durbar (Palpa Palace) built in 1903 was destroyed and set on fire during the Maoist attack in Tansen in February 2005.**

**The palace is being rebuilt after the Maoists joined the peace process in 2006.**

photo by Jeevan Raj Sharma

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# Abstract

This report presents and analyzes the findings of a two-year field research on local perceptions of social transformation in rural Nepal. In particular, it presents the findings, and our interpretations of them, in a manner that can contribute not only to scholarly debate but, importantly, to current discussions on development policy choices and on the role of aid agencies. One of the first arguments that can be drawn from our fieldwork is that, alongside political transition, there are clear evidence of a qualitative "step-change" in the way Nepali society is organized that is beyond the continual or "normal" processes of incremental change that are always at work. Field evidence clearly suggests that many existing social norms and patterns are being challenged and many are being reconstructed.

However, the field evidence suggests that the political economy of survival in rural Nepal has not changed dramatically. There has been no revolution at the level of livelihoods. The poor remain poor, families receiving remittances are better off, and, in some cases, can access land that traditional landlords have abandoned. An overall land reform remains a distant aspiration. However, the combination (and sometimes the competition) of the political agency of the Maoists and social development work of civil society organizations, in parallel with the development of formal and non-formal education, has resulted in a historical transformation of consciousness. Awareness of rights and gender has increased massively, the collective agency of women and oppressed and marginalized groups has escalated and has probably resulted in durable changes in how individuals, groups, and institutions interrelate. However, the "revolution," such as it is, has yet to make a serious dent in the structural violence that continues to characterize life in rural Nepal.

We found that rural Nepal is being increasingly incorporated into the market economy, as indicated by the commodification of land, labor, and money. It remains to be seen whether the commodification of key factors of production and the transformation that accompanies it will be beneficial to the rural poor and marginalized groups in Nepal. We argue that the incorporation into the market economy of previously ungoverned spaces is likely to be fraught with tensions and ambiguities at the household, local, and national levels. Gramsci's "interregnum" offers a useful framework to understand the current state of Nepal, i.e., caught between the known past and the uncertain future of social organization, balancing the types and nature of traditional livelihoods, power relations, cultural norms, and values, while being propelled toward new constructs emerging from the transformation as it happens.

This study points to a rapidly emerging flashpoint here: if transformation in rural Nepal is more about the symbolic and the "awareness" aspects of social relationships and less about the structural dimensions of the human condition, the perceived disconnect between aspirations and reality is bound to escalate, with potentially serious consequences. Moreover, what we are starting to see is a growing disconnect between aspirations and realities. In the absence of structural changes in the lives and livelihoods of people on the ground, especially if the current stalemate continues at the central political level, this gap is likely to grow further.

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As always, Feinstein International Center values comments and feedback from our readers. These should be sent to Antonio.donini@tufts.edu and Jeevan.Sharma@tufts.edu.



## Acronyms

**CA** . . . . . Constituent Assembly
**CBO** . . . . . Community-Based Organization
**CPA** . . . . . Comprehensive Peace Agreement
**CPN-UML** . . Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxists Leninist
**GTZ** . . . . . Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
**LWF** . . . . . Lutheran World Federation
**MJF** . . . . . Community management of acute malnutrition
**NC** . . . . . Nepali Congress
**NFE** . . . . . Non-Formal Education
**NGO** . . . . . Non-Governmental Organization
**PLA** . . . . . People's Liberation Army
**TMLP** . . . . . Tarai-Madhesh Loktantrik Party
**VDC** . . . . . Village Development Committee
**YCL** . . . . . Young Communist League

# Introduction

This report presents and analyzes the findings of research on local perceptions of social transformation in rural Nepal.[1] Based on fieldwork in multiple sites in 2007-2009, it explores people's perceptions and views on the nature and dynamics of social transformation and drivers of change during the conflict period and its immediate aftermath. Perceptions, of course, do not always match "reality." What this report explores is more about judgements and what local people considered meaningful to themselves, rather than established facts.

The primary rationale for the study is the need to better understand the dynamics of change so that this knowledge can inform policy makers and national and international aid actors. In Nepal, as in all transition situations between armed conflict and (hopefully) post-conflict recovery, the dynamics of social interaction and related tensions are complex and differ from region to region and even within different segments of the same communities. In the last decade, Nepal has undergone a series of complex and chaotic political transitions. Changes are taking place rapidly as we write. Thus, in this report, we attempt to come to grips with this complexity and to present our findings, and our interpretations of them, in a manner that can contribute not only to scholarly debate but, importantly, to current discussions on development policy choices and on the role of aid agencies.

The Maoist insurgency was built around an agenda, which at its core attacked the feudal nature of Nepali society and the structural inequalities inherent in it. Many of the transformative ideas were drawn from Mao's "red book." Whether this agenda was instrumental—a tool for overthrowing the Monarchy and capturing power—or represented the aspiration for a profound social revolution is still an unanswered question, both at the Kathmandu level and in the remotest rural areas. It is not too early, however, to analyze social change resulting from the Maoist agenda and, more broadly, from communities' exposure to conflict. The Maoists introduced, often forcibly, measures aimed at addressing centuries-old, deeply-rooted forms of discrimination in Nepali rural society. Feudal structures, authority, and the caste system were challenged, parallel "people's" structures of governance were introduced, and affirmation of ethnic identity was encouraged. Perhaps more profoundly, women's empowerment was promoted, both through the abolition of social practices (such as relegation during menstruation and childbirth) and encouragement of women's enrollment in the ranks of the People's Liberation Army (in which it is said that some 30 per cent of combatants were women) and in the Maoist governance structures.

After a decade of insurgency, a fragile peace was brokered in 2006. The People's Movement of 2006 (commonly known in Nepal as *Jana Andolan II*) against the direct rule by the King, growing pressure from the international community, and an alliance between mainstream political parties and the Maoists resulted in the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), with the facilitation of India, in November 2006. Reflecting the sentiments of ethnic minorities and those who fought against the Hindu monarchy, the new government declared Nepal a secular state in 2006. Despite much controversy and postponement, Constituent Assembly (CA) elections were held in April 2008. Though none of the political parties won an outright majority in the election, the Maoists were the largest party, and in a position to lead a coalition government. An interesting outcome of the elections was the emergence of regional parties that represent the grievances and aspirations of the people of the Terai (lowlands bordering India). These parties bagged a significant number of seats in the election and became key members of the government coalition. Immediately after the elections, on 28 May 2008, the new parliament declared Nepal a "federal democratic republic." Nepal's CA parliament was tasked to write a new constitution by 28 May 2010 representing the perceived grievances and wishes of one of the world's most diverse and complex societies. At the time of writing this report, the political situation appeared to be extremely volatile and the constitution-drafting

1 This report is a part of a larger research project at the Feinstein International Center (FIC), Tufts University that examines the relationship between aid, conflict, and social transformation in Nepal.

process was stalled. None of the crucial institutional issues—nature of the federal state, reintegration of Maoist combatants into the Nepali Army, demobilization of armed groups—had been resolved.

While it is possible to hold very different views on the current situation in Nepal, there is a general consensus that the country is undergoing a significant "transition process" which has the potential to lead to a major "social transformation." This evolving scenario of telescoped transformations presents a suitable case study to explore change as viewed from the perspective of local people in rural communities. While the macro perspectives on state reconstruction that inform much of the policy debate in Nepal are a useful guide, they do not provide meaningful insights into how such a process is perceived and felt at the local level. It is thus imperative to explore how different actors at the local level view and contribute to this transformation. An anthropological perspective, by its use of methods for capturing and recording "experience," throws light both upon the perspectives of the people studied ("the actor's perspective" or the "native point of view") and upon broader social issues.

The complexities and dynamics of gender, caste, and ethnic and power relations in Nepali society have been well documented by social scientists working in the region.[2] In the post-1990 era, the public sphere in Nepal witnessed the emergence and rapid growth of various forms of caste, ethnicity, gender, and regional activisms, organizations, and movements. Parallel to these developments, this period also saw the growth in international aid and of the activities of NGOs working on a range of development and social issues.

Compared to wider South Asia, the issue of class has been less debated academically or within the policy community in the Nepali context. In the absence of class analysis, there is no doubt that social scientists working in the region failed to see the possibility of a Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Only two scholars, Nickson (1992)[3] and Mikesell (1993)[4] wrote about the potential for a Peruvian Shining Path-style Maoist uprising in Nepal. Interestingly, the Maoist insurgency and movement of landless peasants (*Kamaiyas*) have brought the issue of class and land distribution to the forefront. Though initially begun as a movement mobilizing peasants in rural Nepal, over the years the Maoists tacitly attracted support from other identity-based movements including those mobilizing *Dalits* (lower caste "untouchables"), minority ethnic groups, women, and other minority groups. In our study, we try to capture how local people perceive the nature and dynamics of social transformation in Nepali society.

In this context, the study attempts to address the following questions:

- What is the nature of the social transformation in rural areas of contemporary post-conflict Nepal?
- Has the Maoist presence led to durable changes in issues of caste discrimination, empowerment, and gender and power relations, and perceptions of class?
- What are the other factors/drivers that account for change? How do factors such as migration, education, media development, etc. interrelate with changes resulting from the Maoist agenda?
- What has been the role of external actors, including aid agencies and NGOs, in contributing (or not) to the processes of change?
- What remains of the various forms of empowerment promoted or introduced by the Maoists? Have the "feudal" structures and social norms re-established themselves?
- Are there significant disconnects between people's perceptions of change and the *reality* on the ground? If so, how might we understand this? ■

2 L. Bennett, "Unequal Citizens. Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal" (Kathmandu, World Bank/DFID, Kathmandu, 2006). D. N. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, et al., eds., *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom* (Netherlands, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997). M. Lawoti, *Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society* (New Delhi, London, and Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2005). S. L. Mikesell, *Class, State and Struggle in Nepal: Writings 1989-1995* (New Delhi, Manohar, 1999).

3 Andrew R. Nickson, "Democratisation and the growth of communism in Nepal: A Peruvian scenario in the making," in *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, edited by Deepak Thapa (Kathmandu, Martin Chautari, 2003), 3-34.

4 Stephen L. Mikesell, "The Paradoxical support of Nepal's left for Comrade Gonzalo," in *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, edited by Deepak Thapa (Kathmandu, Martin Chautari, 2003), 35-42.

# Organization of the Study and Methodology

Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions at the community level, the field research attempted to develop a composite picture of the drivers and the nature of change and learn significant lessons on how individuals and communities "metabolize" such external drivers (be they the Maoists, schooling, education, migration, the work of NGOs and CBOs, government policies, new infrastructure, etc.). We are aware that interpreting the meanings of local perceptions is a difficult task since people's views are not necessarily uniform across society on a range of subjects. Our own role as researchers from particular backgrounds does shape the inquiry and the interpretations. This approach has both strengths and limitations.

At the very outset, we must make it clear that while both authors carried out the interviews, Sharma conducted most of the interviews. Sharma, a Nepali anthropologist, carried out interviews in Nepali. Donini, not a native Nepali, carried out interviews with the help of a local interpreter (often a student or an NGO worker). Although security concerns largely determined the choice of specific communities and respondents, we made a conscious effort to speak to community people from diverse socio-economic, age, gender, caste, and ethnic backgrounds. We sometimes consulted local NGOs or NGO workers, but we consciously avoided their company during the interviews. We introduced ourselves as researchers working for a university (and not representing NGOs or international agencies). We either walked or took hired local jeeps or public transport to travel to the communities.

The fieldwork was carried out in June-July 2007, October-November 2007, March-April 2008, September-October 2008, March 2009, and June 2009. The research was conducted in eight ethnographic sites in rural areas where we examined how local people experienced change, what was meaningful to them in what had happened in the past eight to ten years, and what they perceived the drivers of change to be. In addition, we spoke to a few informants in peri-urban areas of Kathmandu and in small towns and bazaars in the Kathmandu valley. Furthermore, we had travelled to many other sites to carry out fieldwork for other studies as a part of our research on conflict and transition issues (see next section for details on our work in Nepal). We conducted fieldwork in ethnographic sites representing different social and political contexts and made deliberate attempts to speak to people from different socio-economic, gender, caste, and ethnic backgrounds. In our attempt to present findings, we carefully looked for patterns and themes in people's views and drew our interpretation from these. Nevertheless, the findings of this study and the composite picture that emerges from them must be read keeping in mind the specific context: a situation where the peace process was still fragile and informants were careful about what they said to whom.

The choice of the research sites was driven by the research questions mentioned above. Study areas included both Maoist strongholds and areas where Maoists were less influential; areas where NGOs had a thick presence and areas where NGOs were less present; areas that were more accessible by road and other basic services and areas that were less accessible; areas that saw ethnic mobilization and areas that did not see much ethnic movement. Geographically, the areas were spread across the middle hills and in the Terai. All areas were rural, some very remote, with the exception of a handful of interviews in the periphery of Kathmandu valley. The table in Annex I provides details of the fieldwork areas.

About 120 people (approximately 60% male and 40% female) were interviewed either individually or in small focus groups. Respondents were selected randomly. Typically, the researcher(s), accompanied by a local person, a student or an NGO worker from the area, would arrive in a village and try to meet with a wide range of people (from different socio-economic, caste, gender, ethnicity, and age backgrounds). Many interviews were held in or outside villagers' houses, in tea shops, or in the fields. Some were held in public places such as schools, health posts, or Village Development Centers (VDCs). No formal questionnaires were utilized, though we used a "grid" of issues and questions we were interested in. Conversations were allowed to develop organically starting from very general questions such as "What has changed in the village/in your life in the last five to seven years?" This qualitative approach is basically the same as that utilized for earlier Tufts/FIC studies on local perceptions, including in Nepal. ■

# Feinstein International Center Research in Nepal

The present study is part of a wider set of research initiatives that Tufts/FIC is pursuing in Nepal. Starting with the case study on local perceptions of the work of humanitarian agencies conducted in 2008[5] and with a report on Aid and Violence published in 2009,[6] Tufts/FIC has become increasingly involved in research on conflict and transition issues.

In 2009, Tufts/FIC undertook a field-based study on youth participation and transformations in the Maoist organizations. This projects aims to understand transformations of young men and women within the Maoist party during the so-called "people's war," as well as the transformation of the Maoist party organizations, mainly the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Young Communist League (YCL), during the conflict and post-conflict period up to 2009. The research is based on interviews with members of PLA, YCL, and other party cadres. It focuses on how young men and women view their involvement in the insurgency. It attempts to understand the question of "becoming and being a man or a woman" in the Maoist insurgency. The key questions are: How did young people make decisions about joining the armed struggle? Why did some leave the village to join the armed struggle while others stayed back? How do they view their involvement in the insurgency? How transformative was their participation in the insurgency? The writing up of this study is underway and it will be released later in 2010.

Moreover, in order to better understand various aspects of transition in Nepal, we have commissioned four mini-studies to young Nepali researchers on forms of protests, perceptions of everyday political violence in the Terai, mapping of international migrant recruitment agencies operations in Nepal, and ethnography of Nepal-India cross-border flows. These are currently being written up.

In the coming years, we will continue to explore the nature of transformation and the restructuring of the Nepali state in the context of conflict, aid, ethnic revival, migration, and global political and economic flows. Our research program aims to document how the "new Nepal" is being constructed and understood by different actors and the Nepali population.

In 2011, we plan to start a study on how Nepali migrants contribute to transformation of gender, caste, ethnicity, and class identities at the personal and local levels and to the restructuring of the state in a still-turbulent post-conflict environment. Through mapping the current flows of Nepali migration in India, the Gulf, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom, this project aims to understand migrants' economic and socio-cultural impact *and* the manner in which they support and influence political developments in their homeland. Based on multi-sited fieldwork, it will investigate the economic and political life of migrants, how Nepali social networks, migrant organizations, and remittances contribute to social transformation, at the precise moment when the Nepali state is going through a major process of reconstruction. ■

5 Antonio Donini and Jeevan Raj Sharma, Nepal Case Study, Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions Research project, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, available at fic.tufts.edu. This study was part of a series of 13 case studies exploring perceptions of the work of humanitarian agencies. All are available at fic.tufts.edu.

6 Antonio Donini and Francesca Bonino, Aid and Violence: Development Policies and Conflict in Nepal, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford June 2009, available at fic.tufts.edu.

# Background

This section presents the general background of the fieldwork area. Perceptions are grouped thematically under generic headings starting from the overall picture and the perceptions of key problems.

## People's perception of major problems

Despite the excitement and enthusiasm around the electoral process, the structural realities of rural Nepal were very much on the mind of the people we interviewed. The following paragraphs provide essential background information based on conversations in the field, which is key to understanding people's perceptions of social transformation in their communities.

### Unemployment

Unemployment was the most recurring problem mentioned by local people during interviews and group discussions. Young men (and a few women) felt that there were no employment opportunities for them and expressed their frustration. With the growth in numbers of youth who completed their schooling and degrees, there was a high aspiration for salaried employment among young people. However, they were faced with very limited opportunities and were increasingly considering to "flee" in search of work opportunities, i.e., to migrate. In the communities where they lived and among their peers, young men (and women) were under intense pressure to find employment and avoid being labelled as "*berojar* (unemployed)" or "*faltu* (useless)." Thus, unemployment had caused hardship in meeting the day-to-day needs of households. At the same time, it put tremendous pressure on young people to prove their worth.

In many ways, access to modern schooling has impacted on the ideals of young men and increasing numbers of women. Schooling taught them to imagine the possibilities of modern forms of salaried employment but it was increasingly difficult for them to realize these goals. After completing their schooling, men and women did not want to be seen as working in the traditional occupations in the agrarian sector as this signified backwardness. The poor economic situation of the Nepali state meant that there were fewer employment opportunities and the competition for limited number of job opportunities was extremely high. Further, violent conflict had discouraged the growth of the private sector and thus reduced the number of job opportunities. All this meant that the competition for employment within Nepal was very high and very few, those who had greater access to social, economic, and cultural capital, were successful.

Therefore, the high aspirations to migration were shaped both by the lack of opportunities for employment and to avoid being labelled as "useless" in their communities. Despite being aware of the hardships in migration destinations (mainly Indian cities and the Gulf), young men both aspired and were under pressure to move in search for work.

### Price increases

The significant rise in prices of market goods in the recent years has meant that most of the households in the study areas found it extremely difficult to make ends meet. There were obvious signs that the poorer households had begun to cut expenditure on food, health, education of their children, and other household costs. Some people had begun to work longer hours and borrow money from local moneylenders and credit societies. It was obvious that such processes would have considerable impact on the long-term well-being of people. Despite stiff increases in the prices of essential goods, the wage/earnings had remained more or less the same. The increasing dependence of households on market and consumer goods had directly affected their livelihoods security. There was no safety net or social protection available to these groups.

### Low wages

As indicated above, while the prices of goods had increased, there was virtually no increase in wages. People we spoke to felt that they had very little say in negotiating an increase in their wages. Furthermore, women and men were paid differently. For instance, in Morang, women day laborers were paid NRs 30 (plus snacks) while men were paid NRs 60-80 (plus snacks) per day. There was evidence that some laboring households were

living on a single meal a day. For example, *Mushahars* (an impoverished Terai *Dalit* group) interviewed in Morang ate one meal a day.

Low wages have meant that the entire household, including in many cases school-age children who had dropped out of school, had started to work to earn livelihoods for the households. This meant that the laboring households were busy most of the time and were unable to access any services. They were often not reached by the development workers and NGOs.

## Neglect from the state

Almost all the people we spoke to in the communities had grievances against the state. There was a widespread feeling of discontent among the local people and a sense of injustice. People felt that state had neglected them and their communities (people explained neglect in different terms including region, caste, ethnic group, and gender). Regardless of their socio-economic or cultural background, people in remote rural areas who lacked facilities and services felt that their region/area was neglected by the state. There was a feeling that most of the facilities, including roads, health services, and educational and employment opportunities, were centered in Kathmandu, other big cities, and in the Terai. Women in the fieldwork areas felt that they had been discriminated against, which they said was obvious in their lower educational status and lack of representation in state administration and politics. *Dalits* and ethnic groups strongly felt that the Nepali state was dominated by high castes and had completely excluded them from the mainstream.

The language that people used to talk about neglect came from the Maoists and NGOs. For instance, a middle-aged *Dalit* man in Rupandehi felt that, despite living in the same village since he was born, the state administration had long denied giving him and his family citizenship cards until very recently. Relatively better-off households throughout the fieldwork areas complained that the state had failed to provide them adequate security and safety. High caste *Bahuns*, *Chettris*, landowning *Tharus*, and migrants from the hills to the Terai (all slightly better-off groups) felt that "the time was against them" and complained that the state did not provide them with protection.

In fieldwork areas, we met several people who had lost one or more family members during the conflict. One middle-aged man in Dang who had lost his son and daughter-in-law spoke with anger and disgust against the state, the Maoists, and humanitarian/human rights agencies. He was critical of the Maoists for "taking away" his son and daughter-in-law to fight. They had died within a few months of joining the Maoists. He was very angry with the army for killing them. He felt that repeated visits by aid agencies that had asked him questions about his son and daughter-in-law had been painful. He was fed up with "human rights activists/development workers/humanitarian workers/other outsiders" who came to collect the same information again and again ("How did they die? How do you feel?" etc.) with little "empathetic support from them." He said that he had been promised assistance many times but had received none.

A *Tamang* shopkeeper in a village close to Kathmandu recounted how he was "disappeared" by the state for eight months in an army base in 2003 and the anxiety faced by his family: "Nobody helped my family. They could neither turn to the state or to the Maoists for help." He describes a climate of terror and abandonment in the village with his family caught between powerful forces over which it had no control.

## Access to basic facilities

From the perspective of local communities, the state had failed in its role as provider of basic services. In many ways, neglect was mentioned in the form of limited access to basic facilities. The most basic services provided by the state, i.e., health and education, were often inaccessible to the most needy. While education was supposed to be free, there were associated costs, which made it difficult for families to send their children to school. Education beyond primary was considered extremely difficult as with increasing age it was difficult for the parents to meet the costs, and there were expectations for boys and girls to mature early and become economically active to support their households.

In Doti and Palpa, the lack of a secondary school in a nearby village meant that most of the households chose not to send their children beyond primary school. Sending children to the nearby town/city required resources (social networks and money), which very few could afford. Better-off households had bought a house or rented a flat in a nearby town in order to allow their children to go to secondary school. Health facilities were available but often lacked the basics (trained manpower and medicine). While the private sector had grown both in education and health, it was not affordable to most. In the absence of good health care at state facilities, people often went to private clinics, which required them to borrow money or sell assets. In Doti, many women (wives of migrants) infected with HIV found it impossible to travel to the district center to get Antiretroviral (ARV) treatment. After a two-hour walk, the fare of the public transport was NRs 160 to travel from the village to the district center.

Lack of drinking water was considered a problem in most areas. Similarly, lack of proper irrigation was mentioned in Rupandehi and Morang. In a fieldwork village

in Morang, there was a feeling that only the people with political influence benefited from irrigation schemes.

### Discrimination against women

Discrimination against women was a regular feature mentioned throughout the fieldwork areas. Generally, women and men did acknowledge that discrimination against women (in the households, communities, and political structure) was a major issue, but women didn't always mention this as the most important problem faced by them. It was obvious that women had become increasingly aware of the sense of discrimination against them in recent years. This awareness was very high among some women who had had access to schooling and those who took part in various social and political activities (NGO activities, meetings, etc.).

Despite the heightened sense of discrimination, women did not always feel comfortable talking about the discrimination they faced when they were alone with the interviewer. In meetings and group discussions, however, women did speak openly, and often with a radical tone, about discrimination by the state, society, and within their households. Collective meetings/voice provided women with a space to speak about discrimination in public.

### Discrimination against *Dalits*

Not surprisingly, caste discrimination was considered a major issue by *Dalits*. *Dalits* throughout the study area felt that they were facing discrimination from the state as well as from local high caste people. There was a deep sense of exploitation, and an expectation that it would be reversed in the "New Nepal." As discussed later in this paper, *Dalits* (and non-*Dalits*) felt that discrimination had decreased over the last ten years and there was a greater acknowledgment of the issue. In a village in Palpa, *Dalits* had abandoned the *bali ghare* system (providing various services including tailoring, iron work, etc. on bonded contract), which was considered exploitative. Similarly, the *haliya* (ploughing on a bonded contract) system was abandoned in Doti and Dadeldhura districts on the same grounds. The caste system was more relative than absolute, however: in a village in Rolpa we met a *Dalit* social activist working for an NGO who had changed his name so as not to be identifiable as a *Dalit*. He was able to do so because he was originally from another district. He felt that not being identified as a *Dalit* made his advocacy against discrimination more effective.

*Dalits* felt that caste discrimination was still the most important issue for them, whereas many non-*Dalits* felt that things had changed in the last 15-20 years and people no longer discriminated on the basis of caste. In the Terai, one often heard comments from upper caste people: "There is no discrimination here, *Dalits* can go to the temple or to the school" (even if newspaper articles often confirmed the contrary).

### Security/fear and law and order

Security and fear remained an important issue for many people in the fieldwork areas. While there was a general agreement that the overall physical security situation had improved considerably in the last few years, there were new kinds of security concerns. People still felt intimidated by the Maoists in several areas. Similarly, migrants from the hills (*Pahadis*) often lived in fear in the Terai. There was a sense of helplessness among people who had traditionally supported the Monarchy that the state was not there to provide any form of protection. People felt that the law and order situation had become worse and many found it very difficult to cope with this. The police and administration were not listening to the complaints against the Maoists, the YCL, and the state security forces. "These days the situation is not good, you have to be extremely careful," commented a *Chettri* teacher in Doti. In a village in Kailali, close to the Indian border, people mentioned that there had been an increase in crime in recent months as Indian *dacoits* (criminals) came and looted their property. Local people took extra care and protection to ensure their own security and did not have faith in the police or administration to provide them with security and justice.

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**Street protest organized by Maoists in Bhairahawa**

### Landlessness

Landlessness or near landlessness remained a major issue in all the fieldwork areas. People who were landless or only had very small land holdings felt that they were not being listened to by the state. These people squatted on a small piece of land but worked in someone else's land on a share-cropping or contract basis. Very generally speaking, there were more landless households in the Terai than in the hills. In the Terai (in Morang, Rupandehi, Kailali, and Dang), there were many absentee landlords who lived in the nearby cities but gave their land to village households on a share-cropping or contract basis. The situation was different in the hills where, although most families owned some land, productive land was rarely available and lack of productivity of land was considered a major problem.

There has been a move towards more mechanized farming with the introduction of tractors, which has reduced the demand for agricultural labor in the Terai. The surplus labor was now displaced to work as wage laborers in the construction and service sectors in small towns and cities. All these changes are indicative of an accelerated integration of rural Nepal into larger economic processes and of the commodification of land and labor.

## Changing livelihoods

All the households in the fieldwork areas were engaged in multiple economic activities. People identified themselves as subsistence farmers in the sense that they produced mostly for consumption and not for trade. Apart from their engagement in managing their farms or in share-cropping, the most obvious source of income for poorer households was daily wage labor. Given the demand for fresh vegetables in towns, a few farming households had begun to experiment with vegetables (cauliflower, tomato, modern hybrid beans, modern cucumber, etc.) in their fields. Dairy cooperatives had been introduced in the villages, serving as a form of cash income for the households that sold milk.

There was a general move towards growing cash crops (including growing vegetables to sell in nearby markets) and engagement in small-scale livestock enterprises like rearing goats, chicken, or buffaloes. Agricultural programs introduced by the Nepali state in partnership with aid agencies and NGOs had led to transformation in agricultural practices. Small towns had shops that sold modern fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid seeds. Employment outside the village, both long and short distance, was becoming more common for most of the house-

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**Woman carry fodder in a "doko" in a village in Rolpa**

holds. While farming and agrarian labor remain key aspects of people's livelihoods, migration and expansion of the market have emerged as major sources of people's livelihoods. This signals the massive incorporation of hill economy in the wider economic flows.

### Migration

Migration to work in Indian cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Punjab) was a popular practice among men in villages in Doti, Dadelhura, Kailali, Dang, and Palpa. Poorer households in Terai villages in Kailali, Rupandehi, Dang, and Morang went to India on a short-term basis as agricultural laborers. Though migration to India was the least desired form of migration because of low pay and difficult working/living conditions, it was considered better than working as an agricultural laborer in the village. Despite exploitation, migration to Indian cities did enable men to remit money to support their households and occasionally provided them with opportunities for consumption of goods and experiences.[7] It is likely that remittance flows in the villages had functioned as a safety net for households of migrants and helped to cope with the rising food prices. A few women went with their husbands or relatives to find work in India. In the recent years, an increasing number of women out-migrated on their own within and outside of Nepal, mainly to India and the Gulf.

Migration to the Gulf and particularly to Qatar had emerged as a more desired form of migration among many young men and women. Gulf migration was very common in Palpa and was increasingly becoming common in Rupandehi, Dang, and Morang. Only a few men from Doti and Kailali went to the Gulf. A few women from Palpa had gone to the Gulf. However, the high level of investment (agency fees and air travel) required for migration to the Gulf meant that not everybody who aspired was able to go. Gulf migration was popular among the households who could manage to accumulate, on their own or by taking a loan, a large sum of money (around NRs 70,000-80,000) to go abroad.

Throughout the fieldwork areas, migration to Kathmandu and other major cities within Nepal was common among high caste people who had the educational qualifications and social networks to look for jobs in the cities. In the last five to seven years, increasing numbers of women with educational qualifications, mostly high caste, were migrating to the nearby towns and cities like Kathmandu in search of job opportunities.

### Expansion of the market economy

The growth of the market economy, the expansion of road networks and the growth of the service sector in recent years had opened new work opportunities. A few people, including wives of migrants and widows, had opened small shops, hotels, or bars (*bhattis*) on the sides of the newly-built roads. Some young men went to work as helpers in public transport (bus and jeeps), which had considerably increased in the recent years.

A larger number of households received remittances from their family members working in different locations within and outside Nepal. Despite this, people in the villages identified farming as their primary occupation. It was not necessary for the households to depend on agriculture to identify themselves as farmers. Farming provided a partial means of livelihoods for households, who continued to engage in farming, though it played a less significant role in their day-to-day living. The very identification of themselves as people from the village meant that they introduced themselves as farmers.

## Presence of the Maoists

Maoists were present throughout the fieldwork areas. It was very common to find people who happily introduced themselves as Maoists (*Maobadi*) or as members of the YCL. However, the degree of presence varied. In all the areas, it was common to see the physical presence of the Maoists, i.e., a Maoist party office, Maoist activists moving around the village or organizing different activities. Similarly, Maoists had a strong psychological presence, i.e., people often thought of or considered the Maoists' position on a particular issue and their possible reactions before doing anything. In this sense, people's choices were mediated by the potential reactions from the Maoists.

While we did not see any armed presence of the Maoists, people in all the areas believed that Maoists often carried weapons. At the same time, there was a strong political presence of the Maoists in all the areas. Signalling the influence of the Maoists, people often referred to particular areas/villages as "the Maoist village."

In general, the Maoists appeared to be popular and most people in the fieldwork areas accepted them as a strong political force, although people did not always agree with their tactics. A few people did not trust the Maoists as political actors and were sceptical of their activities. Their presence was comparatively thinner in

7 The findings from this fieldwork confirm Jeevan Raj Sharma's doctoral research findings. See: J. R. Sharma, "Mobility, Pathology and Livelihoods: an ethnography of forms of mobility in/from Nepal" (Graduate School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 2007). J. R. Sharma, "Practices of Male Labor Migration from the Hills of Nepal to India in Development Discourses: Which Pathology?" *Gender, Technology and Development* 12, no. 3 (2008): 303-323.

the fieldwork area in Morang, whereas they had thick presence in Rolpa, Dang, Palpa, Rupandehi, Doti, and Kailali.

Young men (and a few women) had become attracted to the Maoist cause and joined their organizations. These young men and women often introduced themselves as YCL. "We are all YCL, you will only find YCLs here," commented a group of *Dalit* men whom we met in Doti. A large number of *Dalit* men had become YCL in Doti and in Palpa. Many Bahun older teenagers introduced themselves as YCL in Palpa. It was obvious that young unemployed men were the most important source of supporters for the Maoists.

Generally, the Maoists had established themselves as a strong, militarized, political force in the local communities. Thus, people who were not sympathetic to the Maoists preferred to keep quiet and did not make any comments about them. We were able to observe a threat issued by a local Maoist activist to a group of community people in Palpa. The young Maoist activist was issuing a threat to all present not to attempt erasing the Maoist slogans on the local community hall. He raised his finger in front of everybody and said, "Or else...."

There were rumors that many community people who were activists for other political parties had joined the Maoists in recent months. Local people called them "opportunists" and made comments that these people were after the money.

## NGOs and community organization/development activities

NGOs and CBOs were present throughout the fieldwork areas. During the last decade, there has been a massive growth of small community-based organizations as well as of the presence of local, national, and international NGOs in the villages. People were very conscious of this growth, as it had impacted their life directly. For a few educated people, the growth of NGO activities had opened opportunities for full-employment (based on monthly salary) or some other benefits (allowances for participating in meetings, assisting in surveys, etc.).

All the NGOs and CBOs had a strong element of people's participation and community organization in their programs. NGO work was mainly focussed around "capacity building," "social mobilization," and "awareness-raising." The usual methods of most of the NGOs included community organization, relationship building, forming groups of beneficiaries (women, *Dalits*, or general community people), conducting regular meetings, running training programs, taking a few individuals on educational trips (exposure visits), and recruiting some of the local people as community mobilizers, peer educators, or outreach educators. NGO activities and facilities were often most visible and attractive and tended to undermine state facilities/services. NGO workers were visible conducting meetings/home visits and other activities. NGOs had provided a few local people with jobs as social mobilizers and outreach workers. Saving and credit schemes were common throughout the fieldwork areas.

Several people gave credit to NGOs for bringing some important changes in their communities. These people compared the work of NGOs with government initiatives and considered the latter ineffective and inefficient. Generally speaking, a larger number of people believed that NGOs (commonly referred to as NGOs, *sanstha* or organizations, *pariyojana* or project, or the name of the project) had supported their community. However, the same participants were quick to provide very critical assessments of these same NGOs, which according to them didn't do good work and were there to make money. In this sense, people maintained an ambivalent attitude towards NGOs. The NGOs we spoke to viewed themselves as agents of change. In this, they were similar to the Maoists, more in terms of the issues raised than in the methods employed. As we shall see below, the latent competition between these two approaches was both a source of tension and of synergies. ■

# Dynamics of Change and Social Transformation

All the people who took part in the study felt that things had changed considerably in their communities in the past 10-12 years. Referring to the recent political changes and the elections, a middle-aged woman in Doti said, "Everywhere there is change. Everything is new these days, isn't it? Old days are gone (laughs)." People often used the term *samajik pariwartan* (social change) to talk about the changes and transformation seen in their communities. People gave various examples of "step-changes" that had taken place in their villages and communities. Generally speaking, people frequently referred to improvements or positive changes (*ramro kura* or *sakaratmak pariwartan*) that often included: heightened confidence and awareness of people's rights; impressive changes in women's participation, education, and status; reduced caste-based discrimination; opportunities for schooling and employment; growth of market, roads, facilities, and services, among others. Very rarely people spoke of what they called negative changes (*nakaratmak pariwartan*) that had taken place during the conflict years. These included: use of violence to get things done; increase in prices of goods; growth in anarchic activities; lack of protection and safety; and undermining of traditional values and spiritual culture and lack of discipline.

In the following paragraphs, we present the perceptions of the nature of the transformations that have taken place in rural Nepal and the drivers of social transformations, drawing on our interviews and discussions with local people. We discuss people's perceptions in three arenas: caste, women's position, and economic relations. Although the choice of these three variables is based on the issues people raised during our fieldwork, they nonetheless reflect the major patterns of inequalities and structural violence in Nepal. This report does not discuss the issue of ethnic identity, not because it does not represent an important dimension of inequality in Nepal, which has been statistically proven and remains the central focus of politics of representation in Nepal, but because the local people we interacted did not raise the issue of ethnic representation.

After presenting what was meaningful to people in terms of nature and drivers of change, we attempt an analysis of the wider meaning of these perceptions and what they tell us about the nature and drivers of social transformation more generally.

## Caste

"Earlier, people used to call us '*Damai*' (tailor) and looked down at us and spoke to us in an authoritative voice (*hepera*), these days they call us 'Dalit.' It is different. Their language has become softer, at least in public." Perhaps what this middle-aged *Dalit* woman in Palpa said best reflects the nature of transformation in caste relations in contemporary rural Nepal. There have been visible and significant changes in the caste domain, including increased agency of *Dalits* and a proliferation of *Dalit* identity movements at the local level. Social mobility among *Dalits* had increased and there was a significant reduction in caste-based discrimination.

A *Dalit* activist who ran a local NGO in Doti and Dadeldhura said that it was difficult to change the attitude of people, especially older *Dalits* and non-*Dalits*. He said, "It is easy to educate people who are ignorant about something but it is very difficult to work with people who already know."

One of the most significant changes has been the growth in schooling practices among *Dalits*. *Dalits* saw education as a route to social mobility. Citing the examples of successful *Dalits* who completed their schooling and found salaried employment, several *Dalits* emphasized that it was the lack of education that put them at a disadvantage. In recent years, we were told, several *Dalit* men and women had completed their studies and had been recruited by NGOs, the civil service, and the private sector in the cities. In many villages, we saw *Dalit* families who clearly valued education and felt empowered by it. Often these families seemed to be more self-assured and upwardly mobile than impoverished upper-caste families.

Very generally speaking, people (*Dalits* and non-*Dalits*/women and men) agreed that both formal and informal education had played an important role in bringing about this transformation. The growth in schooling and participation in various forms of non-formal education classes run by the state or NGOs had made people aware

(*chetna*) and was considered a very important vector of transformation. NGOs that worked on social inclusion issues were given credit for organizing community people with a caste focus. This had played a central role in organizing *Dalit* consciousness.

*Dalits* and non-*Dalits* alike felt that the Maoists had provided important political support to bring about changes in their position in society. Maoists were often given credit for providing justice to *Dalits* when there were instances of caste-based discrimination in local communities. High caste people who did not support the Maoists felt that the *Dalits* had become very powerful in the villages with the support of Maoists.

## Increased political agency of Dalits

In the study areas, frequently participants used the term *Dalit*, which literally means "the oppressed" to refer to people from lower castes. The word is adopted from the *Dalit* movement in India. It is used to symbolize a common identity of all the "untouchable" caste groups into a single one so that they can collectively reject the hierarchically organized ritual pollution and injustice embedded in the caste system.

There was a high level of consciousness among *Dalits* of their social position. A new sense of *Dalit* identity was visible. People now identified themselves as *Dalits*, and not necessarily their occupational names like *Damai*, *Kami*, *Sarki*, and *Gaine*, among others. In the focus group discussions, both men and women introduced themselves with their full name and added "Dalit bata" (meaning from the oppressed caste group). The increase in public meetings in the villages, often organized by NGOs or CBOs, had meant that the formal practice of introducing participants had expanded, and such meetings provided a space to assert *Dalit* identity. Everybody present in the meeting introduced themselves with their name. The new *Dalit* identity had provided a space for organizing into local groups and building coalitions and networks.

Caste-based discrimination had become a significant and sensitive public issue in the communities and attracted a considerable interest among people. It was obvious that society had become more political and it had become easier for *Dalits* to confront non-*Dalits*. Referring to the upper caste in his village, a young man in Dang said, "The situation is not like before, now we don't keep quiet." *Dalits* felt that the activities of the Maoists had provided them with a space to enjoy their rights. "Whatever we may say about the Maoists, they did raise our issue," said a *Dalit* woman in Palpa. As woman in Dang put it, "The Maoists say we are all equal; there are only two castes: man and woman." *Dalits* felt that the changing political context and the popularity of the Maoists had provided them with a space to enjoy their rights. Young *Dalit* men and women had a high degree of confidence and self-esteem to speak against injustice in their "community." They had begun to speak for themselves and build networks. *Dalit* mobilization with the support of NGOs had reached village households in all the areas, but was weaker in the Terai. For example, this was reflected in the situation of *Mushahars* (a very impoverished Terai *Dalit* group) in Morang who were hardly organized.

Unlike previously, *Dalits* came out openly to participate in different community activities, in local committees and local political issues. In all community affairs, there was a *Dalit* quota and educated *Dalit* men and women made efforts to ensure that it was maintained. In all the local institutions, including schools and health posts, there was *Dalit* representation and NGO support often played an instrumental role in this.

In Rupandehi, men (young and middle-aged) from lower caste backgrounds often greeted outsiders with *lal salam* (red salute) and said that Maoists had done a great job by providing them with their "citizenship card" that had been denied to them previously by the state, which claimed they were recent migrants from India. It was very clear that the support for the Maoist party had come largely from young men and women in the villages and overwhelmingly from *Dalits*. A *Dalit* middle-aged man in Rupandehi told me he had been denied a citizenship card until very recently. He felt that because of his background (i.e., a *harijan*, or untouchable, from the Terai) he had been denied his right to citizenship. He felt that the Maoists had provided them with citizenship and justice (*nyaya*).

## Sense of equality and respect

As indicated at the beginning of this section, *Dalits* felt that they were no longer treated with disrespect but were addressed by their name. A *Dalit* activist in Doti said, "Previously if they (high caste) wanted to talk to us, they would call us and we went to their place. Now they come to where we are. Earlier, they would say: 'Ooh Rame, come here' and I would simply go (*Ye, rame, yeta aaija ta ani ma khuru khuru janthe*). Now, they come to me and say: 'Hello Ram brother or Mr. Ram, I wanted to talk to you about something' (*Oho ram bhai or ram ji, euta sallah garnu parne thiyo*). I must say this is a big change, isn't it." Evidence from other areas confirmed this form of "step-change." In Palpa, *Dalit* men and women said that they were addressed by their name with respect and there was no use of abusive or discriminatory language. A *Dalit* woman commented, "They call us by name and treat us with respect in front; I don't know what they do behind our back." High caste men and women said that they used respectful language while speaking to *Dalits*. A man in Doti said, "These days if we show a little bit of carelessness, they will create fire. We have to be extremely careful. Maybe our fathers and grandfathers treated them

with less respect, I don't think we do that." He felt that now people had become "aware" that all are equal and attributed this change to education. Referring to the "new political climate" in favor of "lower caste population," *Dalit* men opined that it was almost impossible for people from high caste to treat them with disrespect.

However, stereotypes live on. An upper caste teacher in the Terai said: "Dalits can now go to the temple, but they don't know how to pray."

Change is not linear. In Chaimale, in the hills above Kathmandu, a middle-aged woman, asked about what had changed in the village, explained that people were now much more aware and there was less discrimination. When asked what she attributed the change to, she hesitated. A young man who was listening to the conversation chipped in: "Tell them, tell them that it was the Maoists who brought the change!" Two things transpired that are emblematic of the kind of transformation that Nepal is going through: the young man was a soldier on leave in the village who had fought the Maoists for several years; the lady was the daughter-in-law of the local Maoist leader, a very strict caste-abiding Brahmin who does not let *Dalits* into his house nor shares food with them.

## Decreased discriminatory practices

*Dalits* throughout the fieldwork areas felt that they had been historically discriminated against and maintained the belief that high castes had exploited them. There was a strong sense of resentment against high caste people.

As already noted, there was a common perception, among both high caste and lower caste, that caste-based discrimination had decreased significantly in the last 10-12 years. Very generally speaking, there was a significant difference between the perceptions of high caste people, many of whom denied that there was any significant discrimination left against *Dalits* in their communities, and *Dalits*, who felt that despite some major changes, various forms of discrimination still existed. *Dalits* felt that there had been a significant reduction in caste discrimination in the public sphere (e.g., while fetching water, participating in community festivals, admission to school, inclusion in local administrative and political structures, visiting temples, etc.) but that there had been hardly any change in the private sphere (i.e., eating or sitting together inside each others' houses).

Generally speaking, the practice of pollution/untouchability had decreased in public places (*sarbajanik thau*) in the fieldwork areas. Observation showed that both *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* participated in public meetings or met for discussions in local tea shops. However, it was possible to identify *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* as they often sat in their own groups. As young Dalit man in Dang put it, "We had some money from VDC to do something. So, last week we had a Dalit awareness programme in the village. People from high caste came and gave wonderful speeches. They said this 'thulo jati' (high caste) and 'sano jati' (low caste) are all 'purano soch' (old thinking), we are in new Nepal, etc. But, when the programme was over, they sat together and had samosas. They didn't eat with us." He added, "That is exactly what I call '*bahunbad*' (Brahmanism)." The situation was different when they travelled outside of their villages where both *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* were seen sitting and eating together.

Thus, it was possible for *Dalit* men and women to go and drink tea or eat in restaurants/shops owned by higher castes. Similarly, men from higher castes often went and ate in shops owned by *Dalits*. Unlike previously, Dalit men did not have to wash their own dishes after use. In Doti and Dadeldhura, *Dalits* had begun to rear buffaloes and sell milk. Previously, the practice was forbidden as high caste people would not buy their milk. In the town of Silgari in Doti, *Dalits* could now enter the temple of the goddess Shaileshwari, which was forbidden previously. Though this practice was resisted by the high caste and a strong sense of resentment was present among high castes in the town, strong local *Dalit* activism supported by NGOs had sustained this change.

## Abandoning traditional practices

*Dalits* throughout the fieldwork areas had begun to abandon many practices associated with patronage based on caste. A few high caste men and women said that they did not discriminate against *Dalits* because of their caste but made comments that *Dalits* lacked cleanliness and culture. They often took the example of *Sarkis* (leather workers) who ate *sino* (meat of an animal who has died from illness or natural causes). As a response to such comments and allegations, *Sarkis* had abandoned the practice of eating *sino*.

In Doti and Dadeldhura, *Dalits* had stopped carrying the *dolis* of non-*Dalits*. Traditionally, *Dalits* used to carry the bride and groom in a locally-built basket known as *doli*. In Palpa, *Dalits* had stopped respecting the *bali ghare* system which required *Sarkis* (leather workers), *Damais* (tailors), *Kamis* (iron workers) and *Gaines* (singers) to provide services for upper caste people in their villages and in return receive grains and gifts on an annual basis. *Bali ghare* were not paid on the basis of their daily or hourly service. In many ways, feudal attitudes and practices had been challenged. A *Dalit* man in Rupandehi said that previously landowners exploited them. He added, "They didn't like us wearing good clothes. If they saw you wearing good clothes, they would call you and make you to carry bricks. They were very bad. All these days are gone now; the old man is dead." However, such change was not seen among *Mushaharis* (Terai *Dalits*)

and some *Tharus* in the Terai who continued to work in feudal conditions for their "owners," i.e., landlords.

There was a feeling among the high castes that things were changing and they were losing control and power over *Dalits*. As a response, a few high caste men and women made sarcastic remarks against lower caste people for their active agency in challenging upper caste dominance and activism in the last eight to ten years. "These days we have to be extremely conscious of what we say; people are looking for opportunities. They are very reactive," commented a *Chettri* man in Doti.

We will return in our concluding section to the question of whether these changes constitute fundamental and substantial shifts in relationships between groups and the structural violence affecting these relationships, or should be read more as important changes in the spheres of ritual and symbolism.

## Women's position

There was a common perception among both men and women that gender-based discrimination had decreased significantly in the last 10-15 years. Women we spoke to felt that things had changed considerably for them. Several women spoke with enthusiasm of the changes that had taken place in their lives. These could be categorized in the following three themes:

- recognition of discrimination against women
- direct changes in women's lives
- changes in women's participation in social and political life

### Recognition of discrimination against women

Both men and women throughout the fieldwork areas felt that discrimination against women was an important issue in their communities. Women across different socio-economic and cultural groups had become increasingly "aware" of gender-based discrimination against women and women's rights in recent years. This sense of awareness was very high among women who had had access to schooling and those who took part in various social and political activities in the communities in the form of public meetings organized by NGOs, government, and political parties. Several women in the fieldwork areas introduced themselves as volunteers (*swayam sewika*), facilitators (*sahajkarta*), or community mobilizers (*samudaik parichalak*) working for NGOs. However, most women in the fieldwork areas had very limited opportunity to take part in these various socio-political activities and had very low levels of awareness of their rights. When we asked a *Chettri* woman (approximately 45 years old) in Doti if she knew about women's rights, she told us that she was not educated and asked us to approach other women in her village. She said, "People like me do not understand these things (*ma yesto kura bujhdina*), you should ask other women who understand these things (*kura bujhne mahila*)." Another woman continued, "….they go to meetings, they go to cities, they do a lot of different things, they say women's rights....I never went to school…my fate is to carry fodder and firewood." According to them, there were two types of women in their village, i.e., those who understand (*kura bujhne*) and those who do not understand (*kura naujhne*).

Very generally speaking, men we met opined that discrimination against women was still a problem in their communities, but felt that things had changed considerably in the last 15-20 years.

Throughout the fieldwork areas, there was a general agreement that both formal and informal education (commonly referred to as *sikcha*) had played an important role in increasing awareness (commonly referred to as *chetna*) on the issue of poor representation and participation of women in society. Rama, a middle-aged *Bahun* woman who took part in NGO activities in Palpa said, "Women are now educated, (their) level of awareness in society has increased significantly...it is because of education (*sikcha*)….the situation has changed a lot. These days women are not passive; they come out to take part in meetings and groups." When we asked her how the situation had changed, she replied, "It is education (*sikcha*), radio keeps telling not to discriminate against girl children…in our village you won't find a single girl child who does not go to school…we organised various meetings, went door to door.…people from outside come (NGO workers) and gave us training (*talim haru*)….as you are probably aware women are treated equally in other countries; isn't it?"

The activities (meetings, educational programs, and trainings) of NGOs and CBOs played an important role in creating public awareness and pushing the issue of gender balance and representation at the community level. "NGOs bring various programmes to empower women; some bring programmes on saving groups (*bachat samuha*) other bring programmes on mothers' groups (*ama samuha*) and forest groups (*ban samuha*)…. they give education and teach us," said a *Dalit* woman in Kailali. A *Dalit* woman who was infected with HIV said, "Sir and madam came (NGO workers), formed this group (a local network of people living with HIV) and taught us many things….I have learned many things, I have been to several meetings…I went to Kathmandu once." She added, "Our men are irresponsible, they bring back HIV to the village from India and transmit to us....very few women can force their husbands to use condoms or go for blood test…we are educating women on this."

NGOs and CBOs throughout the fieldwork areas ran various activities and campaigns to tackle gender-based discrimination. Informants opined that radio programs (particularly FM radio) played an important role in public awareness on the issue. Similarly, a few informants felt that many young men and women who went to the cities for further education and employment opportunities brought ideas of women's rights in their villages. Increasingly, the debate on women's backwardness formed a regular topic of discussion in tea shops (among men) and water taps (among women) in the fieldwork areas.

## Changes in women's lives

*"Women used to cover their head with ghungat (a shawl) but now women wear revealing clothes showing their navel. They react aggressively when men tease them."*

-A middle-aged *Dalit* man in Rupandehi

There was a widespread perception (among men and women) that women's lives have changed considerably in the last 15 years. This included increased confidence among women, awareness of their rights, increased freedom to participate in community activities, increased decision-making power, improved health, increased participation in labor, and reduced incidents of domestic violence, among others.

During the fieldwork, women articulated their right to be treated equally; they spoke about the discrimination faced by women in Nepal and argued that women ought to be treated equally. A young *Dalit* girl (aged 20) who worked as a clerk in a government office in Morang said, "Women have long been discriminated against and we are still treated as second class citizens (*doshro darja ko nagarik*)….but the situation is changing; women are getting educated." Increased awareness of their rights had led women to speak up. NGOs and CBOs played an important role in teaching women their rights. Despite a heightened sense of discrimination, women did not always feel comfortable talking about discrimination faced by them when they were alone. Women did, however, speak openly and often with radical tones, about the discrimination by the state, society, and their households in meetings and group discussions. Space for collective meetings created by NGOs and CBOs provided women with a sense of agency.

NGOs'/CBOs' social mobilization activities in the form of group work enabled women to strengthen their confidence and social skills. For instance, a *Tharu* woman in Morang found it extremely difficult to talk about the situation of women in her village when our local field assistant (female) attempted to interview her. However, she spoke openly in the discussions when she was a part of the group. Similarly, women felt that schooling practices among younger women and various literacy and Non-Formal Education (NFE) classes had impacted on women's confidence and self-esteem considerably.

As indicated earlier, women frequently felt that they had become "aware" of their rights and many other social and community level issues. Women mentioned that previously they lacked awareness on nutrition, maternal and child health, importance of savings, and education, among others.

One of the most visible changes in the last two decades was that an increasing number of girls went to school. Both women and men felt that this was a significant change in their communities. It was common to see girls going to school. As a result, socio-economic conditions had improved: some girls had begun to take up salaried employment within the village or in a nearby town.

Increased confidence and self-esteem among women had resulted in women participating in various campaigns against major problems (almost always against men) in their communities. These included campaigns against domestic violence and against the sale of alcohol and playing cards, among others.

There was a shared understanding in the fieldwork areas that women could no longer be discriminated against, as society had become politicized and the issue of women's rights had become a public issue. The cases of domestic violence and neglect of women within the households had decreased significantly as a result of different factors. There were examples in Palpa, Doti, and Bhindungwa of women collectively dealing with incidents of domestic violence and intervening on behalf of abused women and/or reporting the issue to police with the support of NGOs. The presence and moral support of NGOs were critical in these events. While we could not get any clear example of the Maoists' role in challenging domestic violence, we were often told that "Maoists would punish in public men who beat their wives."

In Palpa and Doti, local women's groups had played a significant role in the banning of the uncontrolled sale and public abuse of alcohol. We were told that women often spilled the liquor and put restrictions on the production of alcohol. Women involved in these activities claimed that domestic violence had decreased considerably. Informants said that there was a strong support from the Maoists for this kind of activity.

Another related activity was women taking a collective role in stopping gambling (playing cards) among men. Typically, a group of 15-20 women would enter the gambling venue, burning the cards and giving a warning to the men. Alongside women, Maoists were

active in stopping gambling. The Maoists' usual tactics to stop gambling included forcing the players to eat their cards and declaring non-gambling zones. In one case in Palpa, a young Maoist destroyed the motorcycle of one of the gamblers by burning it.

Traditional practices like the *chaupadi* system have been reduced to a large extent in Doti and Dadeldhura districts. In the *chaupadi* system, women were considered polluted and were required to sleep in the cowshed (or a similar hut known as *chaupadi*) during menstruation and at childbirth. This change has been largely attributed to the work of NGOs and CBOs. Informants said that international NGOs like the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) were running various public awareness campaigns in Doti.

The concept of pollution had changed. In the fieldwork areas, women were allowed to give birth in the house rather than in the cowshed. Though most participants acknowledged that some form of pollution was still observed. For example, during menstruation, women have to stay in a separate room and observe pollution while eating. Education was cited as the most important driver of change in this regard. But education had not necessarily led to abandonment of observation of pollution. In Rolpa, an NGO aid worker explained that there was more resistance from higher caste families to these changes. He gave the example of a group of female *Chettri* teachers who had pooled together the money to build a clean room they could retreat to during menstruation. The implication was that at home they were still forced to respect *chaupadi*.

While there has been some impressive increase in women's wages in recent years (e.g., from NRs 70 to NRs 120 in Kailali), the wage differential between men and women was a regular feature throughout the fieldwork areas. In this sense, there had been very little change on the wage difference between men and women.

Generally, it was believed that women's health had improved considerably throughout the fieldwork areas. Despite this, it was possible to see several undernourished women throughout the fieldwork areas. Except for a few cases in Rupandehi, Kailali, and Morang, child marriage was not common. It was widely believed that child marriage and early pregnancy had an adverse impact on women's health.

Generally speaking, women's household and farm-related work burden had increased dramatically because male members had migrated in search of work opportunities. For many women who lived separately from their in-laws, on the other hand, the absence of men in the households enabled them to take part in women's groups and various informal education programs.

## Changes in women's participation and organization

As indicated above, there was a significant change in women's participation in various social and political activities in the last decade or so. It was possible to observe meetings of mother's groups and saving groups. In a village in Morang, we met a group of 30 women who had gathered at nine in the morning for their monthly saving meeting. All the women (married and mostly between the ages of 20-40) were able to take time out of their household chores to take part in this activity for not less than two hours. All the women members came together to make savings and selected women took credit for various income-generating activities. We could see women participants holding money (up to NRs 500) in the meeting. The meeting involved calculating the savings made by the group and working collectively to ensure repayment of the loans. Towards the end of the meeting, women collectively read the "prayer" (*prathana*) written on the back of their savings booklet, which stated their commitment to work as a collective for saving and social development. Though these women were able to come for these meetings, their responsibilities at home had not changed. These women went back to their homes after the meeting and cooked food. In Rupandhi and Kailai, several women were seen travelling out of their village to take part in the meetings organized by NGOs on issues of women's empowerment, forestry, saving and credit, among others. However, women's increased participation in the public sphere does not necessarily indicate that women's position within the households had improved.

Women had begun to migrate to study and in search of work opportunities. Women who migrated to work in the Gulf were seen as being "from troubled backgrounds." Women who went to gain education and who could get good jobs were respected.

Informants said that previously women's representation was minimal and almost non-existent. In the last 10-15 years, women were increasingly represented in local committees and decision-making structures at the local level, i.e., representation in VDC, user's groups, health post advisory committee, school governing boards, etc. Informants in the fieldwork areas opined that women's representation in these committees was considered mandatory and important. Participation in these activities had resulted in some women's agency increasing considerably. There was increased leadership of women in the village-level committees. Many men felt that women ought to be given representation, and put forward their argument using the language of women's rights. It was also possible to meet women in the fieldwork areas who were activists for different political parties.

Despite impressive changes in women's participation

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**A group of women gather in their saving and credit group meeting in a village in Morang**

and representation in various public activities, traditional roles in terms of household chores had not transformed. One young married woman in Dang commented, "The only change is that we have been told that we too have rights. In our daily life, we continue to cook, look after children and wash." She added, "We talk about equality but men's attitude has not changed. My neighbour picks his wife's petticoat (drying in the sun) using sticks but not using his hand." It was almost impossible for us to organize interviews and groups discussions with women in the evenings. Men would say that women would not be able to come to meetings, as it was time for them to cook. Public places like village tea shops were still occupied by village men.

In Rolpa, a group of women were meeting in the yard of a village house. When asked what had changed in their lives, they said that they were still poor but now they were "aware." When asked to give examples of what that meant practically, one woman quipped: "It means that if my husband beats me, I know I have the right to beat him back!"

Out-migration of men had left many women alone at home, looking after children. This had no doubt provided them with more "agency" but it also meant increased responsibility. In the absence of their husbands, women faced social pressure to prove that they remained faithful to their husbands. Women's movements and daily life were often closely watched by neighbors and relatives.

The formation of women's groups was considered a major change in the communities. Informants in these areas said that previously women did not come to take part in community meetings. Formation of groups meant that women had become active, took part in the meetings, and asked questions. In Palpa, we were able to observe a meeting of a dairy user's group; there were about 15 men and eight women who were participating in the monthly meeting of the dairy committee. Collectively women (who sat together) were vocal in the meeting and questioned the decisions made by the core group dominated by men. After their monthly meeting, we asked the women what they thought about the women's situation in their village. Before women could reply, a man replied to the question, saying that discrimination against women had decreased in recent years. He said, "Women are no longer discriminated against; these days women have got rights. Things have changed considerably." A woman angrily reacted to his comments, "How can you say so? How do you know? You can't say anything just like that; you should ask us….What

do you know about us?" Following this, all the other women echoed her. Women's participation in the public sphere had strengthened their confidence to raise their questions.

During the fieldwork, we were not able to meet women who had participated in the PLA.[8] However, we met a few women in Palpa, Rolpa, Doti, and Rupandehi who supported the Maoists; they were young women who had been to school. They said that women's involvement in the Maoist movement had challenged gender-based discrimination significantly. A young married woman in Dang who was otherwise critical of the Maoists opined that some of the actions of the Maoists had given more confidence to women. She said, "Many women now walk around with AK 47. We have to remember that previously they were not allowed to go out of their house. This leads to a 'mental change'." This view was not always shared by others for whom there was no connection between women's empowerment and the Maoist movement. They felt that the Maoists had done nothing apart from recruiting Maoists to fight and punishing a few men for drinking and playing cards.

## Economic relations



"Previously *zamindars* (landlords) ruled, we had to consult them for everything (looks towards his father for approval). Now we can do what we want, isn't it? Now they have left; you can go and see their house; it's all reduced to rubble." This young man in Dang was referring to three landlords who owned 50 *bigha*[9] of land and who had left the village following the conflict. When asked what had happened to their property, including the land, he replied, "Their relatives are looking after the house, landless people cultivate some land....I don't know what will happen now? I hear that the land will be returned to them." What his young man told us in Dang largely reflects the situation of landlords and captured land in rural Nepal.

We aimed to explore people's perception of transformation in the economic and power structures and the drivers of change in the fieldwork areas. While the respondents came from different class backgrounds, most of them were rural peasants and laboring households. Rich landlords from the villages had migrated to nearby cities or to Kathmandu in search of protection.

There was a common perception throughout the fieldwork areas that the landlords and other upper class people had lost some of their authority during the conflict period. Comparatively, this was more visible in the hill villages (Doti, Dadeldhura, Rolpa, Dang, and Palpa) than in the Terai (Kailali, Rupandehi, and Morang). Following the Maoist insurgency, most upper class people had left the village (voluntarily or by force) and migrated to nearby towns or Kathmandu. In the areas where Maoists had a strong presence (e.g., in the villages in Rolpa, Doti, Dang, Rupandehi), several landlords had completely abandoned their property while in other areas (e.g., in Palpa) upper class people had left their property to someone they trusted in the village (usually a relative) and became absentee landlords. After joining mainstream politics, the Maoists had begun to return land that belonged to landlords in areas where their influence was less strong. In this sense, there was no long-term effect on land distribution as a result of Maoists capturing property/land. However, the situation in Maoist strongholds like Dang was different: a significant number of Maoists (and those calling themselves "free *Kamaiyas*") had captured land belonging to absentee landlords and, more recently, forest land belonging to the state and were still holding on to it.

With the popularity and growth of the Maoists' influence, land holding had become a problem for the land-owning class. Landowners perceived that the Maoist government would either take their property away or significantly reduce the size of land ceilings. As a result, the landowners were making every effort to sell their agricultural land or reduce the size of land holdings. It was households with migrant remittances from the Gulf (and to some extent from India) who bought land from landowners. There was a clear sign of land distribution/fragmentation as a result of remittance flow into the villages. This process enabled the land-owning households to buy small pieces of land in the nearby cities or in Kathmandu and eventually shift their residence there.

Further, one of the significant changes in the household economy was the rapid growth of non-farm economy in the fieldwork areas. Thus, land was not always an important symbol of class in the villages; rather it was money (mostly gained through remittances and wage labor), a secure job, and education that were increasingly considered important symbols of status in the villages. Schooling and education were perceived as the most important routes to social mobility, though people were aware that schooling and education did not automatically mean social mobility. People were aware that social networks were very important to get jobs and thereby ensure cash inflows into the household. The opening of roads and market access had facilitated improvement in the economic situation of a few households. As a result, some peasant households had turned entrepreneurs

8 However, we have met many women who actively participated in the Maoist insurgency as a part of another Tufts/FIC research project. We will discuss the experiences of women who took part in the armed movement in another report.

9 1 *bigha* is equal to 8,316.8 square meters.

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**A young man works in the land with plough in a village in Dang**

(e.g., selling milk, vegetables, or fruits in local markets), successfully improving their socio-economic situation. To some extent, this process undermined the traditional authority of the land-owning class. This was evident in all the fieldwork areas. Similarly, absentee landlords meant that poorer household did not have to live under the traditional authority of the *zamindars*.

Traditional occupations among untouchable occupational castes (*Damai*, *Sarki*, *Kami*, etc.) were diminishing. For instance, except for one or two people, *Damais* were not working as tailors, *Kamis* were not seen making agricultural and household tools, and *Sarkis* were not seen making leather shoes and other leather products. People found it cheaper and easier (and fashionable) to buy ready-made Chinese clothes. Markets were full of cheap plastic and aluminium utensils. Shoes and bags of different designs and colors were readily available. Similarly, with the popularity and spread of *Dalit* movements, there was a general push to abandon traditional occupations, which were believed to be based on the Hindu system of hierarchy. Likewise, very few *Bahuns* were seen working as priests; the young *Bahuns* did not want to work as priests as the profession had been challenged by *Dalits* and ethnic activists and ridiculed in recent years. As indicated above, employment within security sector (police and army) had decreased considerably, due to the threat from the Maoists. Thus, in many ways, traditional livelihood strategies throughout the fieldwork areas had undergone profound transformations.

Very generally speaking, there was a consensus among informants that the consumption of manufactured goods and wage labor among poorer households had increased considerably in recent years. However, poorer households felt that it was becoming difficult to manage daily livelihoods in the face of price increases. For the households relying on day labor (e.g., *Mushahars* in Morang), the pressure seemed acute and they had begun to make significant reductions in their diet (mostly one meal a day); hunger and malnutrition among men, women, and children was clearly visible. Generally, the situation of poor peasants and day laborer households that did not have family members working abroad was severe. Those households who were excluded from opportunities of migration were missing out on its benefits. ■

# The Nature of Social Transformation

When we embarked on this study, we had assumed that by analyzing the "views from below" it would be possible to determine whether there was a "before" and "after" to the Maoist insurgency. We had assumed that because the insurgency, at its core, addressed the issues of rights, discrimination, and state and development failure, it would be relatively easy to document a causal relationship between the Maoist agenda and change in rural Nepal. It turns out that things are not so simple. Clearly, the conflict and the agency of the Maoists have had an impact. In some ways, the Maoists were an accelerator of change, an important vector of transformation. But they were not the only one and their relationship with the other vectors is difficult to unscramble.



One of the first conclusions, therefore, that can be drawn from this research is that alongside the political transformation, largely attributed to the Maoists, the people who took part in the study felt that that there has been a remarkable set of social and cultural changes in their communities in the past decade which had little to do with the Maoist presence and agenda.

It seems to us that the Nepali state is going through a qualitative "step-change" in the way society is organized that is beyond the continual or "normal" processes of incremental social change that are always at work in any society. The state is going through a transformative phase in which many existing social norms and patterns are being challenged and many are being reconstructed. The process of current transition is leading towards major shifts in dominant political, economic, and socio-cultural relationships. The Maoists have contributed to this process in a significant way, but there were, and are, other factors at play.

The two most important forms of transformation we identify are: increased awareness and education and increased collective agency of discriminated groups. People we spoke to repeatedly emphasised that "they had become aware" and their "sense of confidence and self-esteem had increased considerably." People had gone through an internal process of transformation from "not knowing" to "knowing" and from "lack of confidence" to "increased collective agency to raise their concerns and rights." There was evidence of changes in caste, gender, and power relations at varying degrees at the local level. Perhaps the most important "step-change" was seen in the caste domain, where there has been significant reduction in discriminatory practices, more evident in the public than in the private sphere. Women's collective agency had equally increased.

Alongside the politicization of ethnicity, which had been a key component of the Maoist agenda, there was a sense that local people were increasingly aware of their ethnicity and had begun to take part in various ethnic mobilizations at the local level, although people did not speak directly about affirmation of ethnic identity as a form of social transformation. Despite the heated scholarly and popular debate on federal state structure, affirmative action, ethnicity-based political mobilizations, and ongoing politics of representation in contemporary Nepal, people we spoke to at the local level did not view this issue as a form of social transformation. However, we do maintain that this is likely to change in the next few years with the mass politicization of ethnicity associated with growth and expansion of organizations and networks.

However, while it was clear that there had been major changes in the representation of and participation in the social sphere, our evidence suggests that there was no remarkable change in "class" relations and in the structural underdevelopment of Nepal's rural areas. Even if migrant remittances during and after the conflict period had enabled some households to improve their socio-economic position in the community, the conditions of structural violence affecting the majority of the rural poor do not seem to have changed substantially. It was thus almost impossible to find clear evidence of "step-changes" in people's standard of living as a result of the transformations that have occurred.

More research is no doubt required better to understand the nature of change. For now, our provisional conclusion is that in the rural areas there has been significant symbolic change but little substantive change. Symbolic change itself needs to be nuanced: it has affected relations among groups in the public sphere (caste, gender, and other forms of discrimination, social

rituals, etc.), less so in the private sphere.

There has also been change in the "opening-up" of remote areas to ideas, communication, and markets as a result of road construction, migration, remittances, and the penetration of media and telecommunications. Such global processes are undoubtedly affecting the lives of rural families in important ways. So far, however, it would seem that while caste has changed, class has not. In this sense, the concept of class and the political economy of class relations seems to be more relevant and a better indicator of substantive change (or lack thereof) than the concept of caste. This is important for future research and conceptualization of transformation.

What then were the drivers of change? Two factors stand out: education and conscientization. They are connected and difficult to unscramble. Education was perhaps seen as the most important factor in bringing about transformation in Nepali society. People again and again emphasized the role of education in making them "aware" and building up their confidence. At the same time, conscientization, both through the political agency of the the Maoists and the work of aid agencies, in particular NGOs and CBOs, seems to be an important vector of social transformation (in terms of caste and gender). The Maoists and the agencies operated in related but very different and sometimes competitive ways.

Our analysis suggests that the Maoist movement played an important role in two ways. *First*, the political discourse and slogans used by the Maoists provided a political space required for the emergence and sustenance of a transformative process in Nepali society. This was useful to place the issues of representation, voice and equality in political and administrative structures on the political agenda and to achieve political legitimacy for transformation. *Second*, at the local level, Maoists tactics of social transformation were seen to be more reactive than proactive. Generally, Maoist activists did not take a proactive role in challenging discrimination or mobilizing oppressed groups; they did, however, play a reactive role, i.e., they were quick to intervene when cases of discrimination were reported locally. Their usual method was to punish the "culprit." They focussed on "culprits" rather than on "victims." However, the Maoists did carry out a range of political advocacy activities (in the form of various forms of messages, public speeches, village theatres, cultural programs, etc.) in some areas of Nepal, which were aimed at promoting the agency of *Dalits*, women, landless peasants, and other marginalized groups.

While sometimes competing around the same agenda of discrimination and rights, the role of NGOs and CBOs in promoting social transformation was different from that of the Maoists. The NGO approach was based on social mobilization and community organization, and educating local people using Freirian models of conscientization and empowerment. The approach was group-based and was proactive rather than reactive. NGOs focussed on working directly with the marginalized and oppressed groups and not with the institutions, individuals, or groups who were responsible for the discrimination.

Therefore, the occupation of political space at the macro level (largely created by the Maoists) and local social space (largely created by the NGOs and CBOs and to some extent by the Maoists) together seem to have been instrumental in bringing about the transformation that has occurred. It is too early to say convincingly whether this transformation is durable or not. Our sense is that there is probably no "going back" on issues of awareness of rights and the more symbolic/ritualistic aspects of caste discrimination. It is far from clear, however, whether the structural determinants of socio-economic livelihoods in rural Nepal have been deeply affected. The feudal/caste system may well have been affected in its external manifestations, but as yet there has been no "revolution" in power and class relations nor in the manner in which rural Nepalis eke out their livelihoods.

What emerges nonetheless is an interesting relationship between education and awareness-raising on the one hand, and the Maoist insurgency and the role of aid agencies and NGOs on the other, in bringing about social transformation. The politicization of women, caste, and power relations may be the unexpected result of successful development programs that aimed to "empower" women, landless *Kamaiyas*, and *Dalits* by raising their consciousness of gender-, class-, and caste-based oppression issues. Even if the conscientization activities of civil society organizations had to some extent prepared the terrain, it is unlikely that the level and the pace of such changes would have been possible in the absence of the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists, by their example of taking up arms, provided the political space for change to actually happen. The paradox here is that the Maoist discourse was built, at least in part, around the narrative of "failed development" as a justification for armed struggle while the NGOs were actually an example of "development success" in articulating a very similar agenda but from a very different perspective.[10] The fact that the Maoists and civil society organizations were essentially competing on the same terrain

10 On the competing narratives of development "success" and "failure" see Antonio Donini and Francesca Bonino, *Aid and Violence: Development Policies and Conflict in Nepal*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, June 2009; also Lauren G. Leve, "'Failed Development' and Rural Revolution in Nepal: Rethinking Subaltern Consciousness and Women's Empowerment," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 80, no. 1 (2007): 127-172.

of rights and empowerment explains the frictions and misunderstandings that occurred on the ground. The Maoists viewed the NGOs with hostility—particularly US-based NGOs—at least initially and only came to an accommodation with them over time. The tensions, misunderstandings, and intersections between these somewhat parallel but very different processes deserve further study.

On the structural side of the transformation equation, change has been less substantive. The Maoist insurgency led to the displacement of many upper class landlords and to the stagnation in land prices in rural areas. This, and the perceived threat of the imposition of a land ceiling, made it possible for migrant households (households with migrant workers who sent remittances) to buy land and assert power. In some areas of Mid-western Nepal, with the support of the Maoists, landless *Kamaiyas* have begun to squat in government forest land and have captured the land of the absentee landlords. As well, the rapid expansion of road-networks, markets, state services, increased mobility/migration, media, and telecommunication has integrated the hill economy and society into various social and economic processes associated with forces of modernization and globalization. In addition, the rural population have been exposed to the *ideas* of modernity and development through various modernizing projects that continue to transform the consciousness of the population, if not structural realities, on the ground.

In sum, the political economy of survival in rural Nepal has not changed dramatically. There has been no revolution at the level of livelihoods. The poor remain poor, families receiving remittances are better off, and in some cases can access land that traditional *zamindars* have abandoned. An overall land reform remains a distant aspiration. However, the combination (and sometimes the competition) of the political agency of the Maoists and social development work of civil society organizations, in parallel with the development of formal and non- formal education, has resulted in a historical transformation of consciousness. Awareness of rights and gender has increased massively, the collective agency of women and oppressed and marginalized groups has escalated and has probably resulted in durable changes in how individuals, groups, and institutions interrelate. However, the "revolution," such as it is, has yet to make a serious dent in the structural violence that continues to characterize life in rural Nepal.

Moreover, what we are starting to see is a growing disconnect between aspirations and realities. In the absence of structural changes in the lives and livelihoods of people on the ground, especially if the current stalemate continues at the central political level, this gap is likely to grow further. Disconnect coupled with disillusionment could well lead to more "morbid symptoms" in the transition process, and potentially even violence. Thus, understanding evolving perceptions on the nature of change would seem to be not only an exciting ethnographic experience, but also one with immediate policy implications for decision-makers, whether Nepali or outsiders. For our part, at Tufts/FIC, we plan to continue to remain engaged on these issues, including through further fieldwork on social change and transformation. ■

# Larger Meanings: from Social Reproduction to Social Transformation?

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**Cart is loaded with rice to be sold in the nearby market in a village in Morang**

There are many ways of conceptualizing the current period of post-conflict uncertainty and transition in contemporary Nepal. Our findings prompt us to view the transition as a Gramscian "interregnum"[11] between the known past and the uncertain future as a complex passage from forms of social organization based on reproduction—of the types and nature of livelihoods, power relations, cultural norms, and values—to new emerging and transformative forms of livelihoods, power, and culture.

Change is not uniform, but it is happening. The conflict and the Maoist agenda seem to have functioned as an accelerator of change, certainly in terms of the "awareness" of the issues of structural violence that is attributed by many to the agency of the Maoists and to some extent of the NGOs. These issues are now clearly in the minds of people and have been acted upon, at least symbolically, through the activities of the Maoists themselves but also much more broadly in the social conscience. This is expressed in many ways—including the denial by high caste people that there is any discrimination based on caste and, conversely, in the widespread perception among *Bahun* and *Chettri* communities that they are suffering from reverse discrimination.

In the anthropological and development scholarly literature on Nepal, there has been a strong tendency until recently to view life in the hills of Nepal largely as

11 "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear," Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere, Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 276.

a discrete and timeless society unaffected by the outside world.[12] To some degree, there was a romanticization of life in a kind of Shangri-la kingdom in the mountains. More precisely, there was a "sedentary bias," i.e., an overwhelming focus on the village and local cultural practices as main units of research.[13] Furthermore, while recent studies clearly focus on the importance of mobility in social change and people's livelihoods, as well as on the dynamic relations between the traditional and the modern, these studies often view such inside-outside dynamics as peripheral variables to the understanding of local situations and provide little insights into evolving economic frameworks and their socio-cultural dimensions.

The concept of social transformation "implies a fundamental change in the way society is organized that goes beyond the continual processes of social change that are always at work."[14] Undoubtedly, such a transformation is at work in Nepal. What is happening in the middle hills and in the Terai is not a linear transition from "reproduction" to "transformation." Change had started before the war, particularly in the Terai, but also in the hills (because of migration to the Terai and abroad, remittances, some development of education and health services, improved agricultural practices, the slow emergence of cash crops as alternatives to subsistence agriculture, presence of development agencies, and so on). Some "awareness-raising" activities had also started before the war.[15] Not all areas visited displayed the same qualitative changes. The process of change in Nepal, as everywhere, is dictated by context and is confusing, uneven, and fraught with backlashes. It is dialectical in the sense that forces and counter-forces are at play. It does not necessarily lead to a new synthesis. Hence the pertinence of the interregnum metaphor and of the "morbid symptoms" that describe the current situation.

We are struck, however, by the fact that the three indicators of the transition from "reproduction" to "transformation" that Polanyi identified in the 1940s resonate with the current situation in Nepal.[16] These are the commodification of land, labor, and money. Polanyi, of course, was writing about the transformation of pre-industrial Europe, but his insights are analogous and relevant to contemporary transformations in the Third World.[17] Our findings point to the increasingly rapid incorporation of rural Nepal, including its remotest areas, into the market economy. Wage labor is becoming more frequent as is the production of cash crops. Land is increasingly bought and sold and no longer seen just as the place where one grows one's food. Remittances have further boosted the commodification of money within a market economy—as confirmed by the immediate opening of a Western Union outlet even in the remotest areas as soon as the telecom network reaches there.

It remains to be seen whether the commodification of key factors of production and the transformation that accompanies it will be beneficial to the rural poor in Nepal. Evidence of globalization is everywhere in the middle hills. But the question that arises is whether the increasing "marketization" of rural Nepal will make a difference in terms of the conditions of structural violence that characterize these hitherto marginal or "forgotten" areas. And whether the changes will be essentially positive or negative. As in other countries in or recovering from conflict—Afghanistan and Somalia come to mind—the incorporation of previously ungoverned or poorly governed spaces into the globalized economy is fraught with tensions and contradictions. All the more so when expectations, as in Nepal, are extremely high.

A re-reading of Polanyi is useful because it reminds us that the tools that allowed the great transformation to take off in Britain and in the West—protectionism and state intervention in the regulation of markets—are being denied to the countries emerging from crisis today.[18]

12 See literature review in Antonio Donini and Francesca Bonino, *Aid and Violence: Development Policies and Conflict in Nepal*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, June 2009.

13 L. H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995). J. R. Sharma, "Practices of Male Labor Migration from the Hills of Nepal to India in Development Discourses: Which Pathology?" *Gender, Technology and Development* 12, no. 3 (2008): 303-323.

14 S. Castles, "Understanding Global Migration: A Social Transformation Perspective" (Conference on Theories of Migration and Social Change, Oxford, IMI, 2008), 11.

15 In our fieldwork, we came across several older villagers who had fond memories of Peace Corps volunteers who "lived in our village and even spoke our language." The same applies to NGOs who pioneered non-formal education projects for women before the war.

16 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2001), particularly chapter six.

17 F. Stewart, "Do we need a new 'Great Transformation'? Is one likely?" (QEH Working Paper Series – QEHWPS136, Oxford, Queen Elizabeth House, February 2006).

18 C. Cramer, C., (2006), *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing. Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries* (London, Hurst & Company, 2006). F. Stewart, ed., Horizontal inequalities and conflict: understanding group violence in multiethnic societies (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Today's industrialized countries were able to define the parameters that allowed them to "develop." They then set the standards for others to be incorporated in the northern modernizing (and civilizing) narrative.

The combination of structural inequalities in North-South relations and the imposition of northern standards and processes of globalization, or "network power,"[19] creates a vise from which countries in transition like Nepal cannot escape. This is tantamount to "kicking away the ladder" to development.[20] The lateness of the transition makes the ladder even more difficult to climb. There may well be "transformation" in the rural areas of Nepal, but not necessarily "modernization," i.e., a transformative structural development process that is broadly beneficial to the livelihoods and rights of the populations concerned.[21] There is no evidence that the Nepali "borderlands," like their Somali or Afghan counterparts, have any prospect of "catching up" or even of influencing the course the global processes that are affecting them. Indeed, it may be prudent to hypothesize that what is in store for Nepal is a continuing, if not permanent, transition.

Our study points to a rapidly emerging flashpoint here: if the odds are stacked against climbing the ladder (or developing a new one), if transformation in rural Nepal is more about the symbolic and the "awareness" aspects of social relationships and less about the structural dimensions of the human condition, the perceived disconnect between aspirations and reality is bound to escalate, with potentially serious consequences. Further work to understand the implications of this disconnect is necessary and urgent.



19 "Network power" refers to the global dominance of standards that have achieved critical mass in language, technology, trade, law, and in many other areas. The dominance of a successful standard involves a form of power. Thus, while these new standards allow for global coordination, they also eclipse local standards, incompatible with dominant ones. Therefore, many of the choices driving globalization are only formally free because the network power of a dominant approach makes it the only effectively available option. As such, it reflects a new imperialism. See D. Grewal, Network Power: *The Social Dynamics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2008).

20 Cramer, 230.

21 On the distinctions between development and "modernization," see Mark Duffield, "Development, territories and people: consolidating the external sovereign frontier," *Alternatives* 32, no. 2 (2007): 225–246.

# About the Authors

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# Annex I: Fieldwork Sites Details

| Region | District | Fieldwork Area | Social Groups | Political Influence | Major Source of Livlihoods | Major Problems |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Far-west** | | | | | | |
| Terai | Kailali | Gaurikatan | Dalits, Tharus | Maoists, CPN-UML | Wage labor; migration to India | unemployment; security; discrimination; poor road; access to schools; exclusion from state |
| Terai | Kailali | Godavari | Dalits, Thakuris/ Chetttris, Bahuns | Maoists, NC | Wage labor; subsistence farming; migration to India | unemployment; HIV/AIDS; irrigation; poor health facility |
| Hill | Dadeldhura | Dadeldhura town | Bahuns, Chettris, Newars, Dalits | NC, Maoists | Small business; subsistence agriculture; government/NGO jobs; migration to India | unemployment; poor health facility; price rise |
| Hill | Dadeldhura | Mastamandu | Chettris, Dalits, Bahuns | NC, Maoists | Migration to India; subsistence agriculture; wage labor | unemployment; fear/security; poor health facility; poor education facility; discrimination |
| Hill | Doti | Silgari | Newars, Dalits, Chettris, Bahuns | NC, Maoists | Small business; wage labor; subsistence agriculture; government/ NGO jobs | unemployment; poor health facility; fear/security |
| Hill | Doti | Gajari | Chettris, Dalits, Bahuns | Maoists, NC, CPN-UML | Migration to India; wage labor; subsistence farming | unemployment; poor health facility; HIV/AIDS; security; discrimination; poor education facility |
| **Mid-west** | | | | | | |
| Hill Valley | Dang | Dharna | Chettris, Dalits, Bahuns | Maoists, NC | Subsistence farming; migration to India/Gulf; wage labor | Unemployment; floods; lack of facilities |

# Annex I: Fieldwork Sites Details (continued)

| Region | District | Fieldwork Area | Social Groups | Political Influence | Major Source of Livlihoods | Major Problems |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inner Terai | Dang | Gadawa | Chettris, Bahuns, Muslims, Yadavs, Dalits, Magar | Maoists, NC | Subsistence farming; wage labor | Unemployment; floods; lack of facilities |
| Valley | Dang | Ghorahi | Chettris, Bahuns, Magars, Dalits | Maoists, NC | Salaried employment in state; NGOs and private sector; small business; migration to Gulf | Unemployment; neglect/discrimination from state; lack of facilities |
| Inner Terai | Dang | Gobardiya | Chettris, Tharus, Dalits, Magars | Maoists, NC | Subsistence farming; wage labor; migration to India | Unemployment; landlessness; floods; security/protection |
| Hill | Rolpa | Jaimakasala | Magars and Dalits | Maoists, NC | Subsistence agriculture; day labor and migration | Unemployment; lack of services; difficulty of access; lack of water for irrigation; no development projects (except road construction supported by GTZ and the Maoists) |
| **Western** | | | | | | |
| Terai | Rupandehi | Bishnupura | Tharu, Terai Dalits, Muslims | MJF, Maoists | Agricultural labor; subsistence farming; migration to India/Gulf or nearby town | security/fear; landlessness; discrimination from state administration |
| Terai | Rupandehi | Ekla | Chamar, Harijan, Muslims, Bahuns, Chettris | MJF, TMLP, Maoists | Agricultural labor; subsistence farming; migration to India/Gulf or nearby town | security/fear; landlessness; discrimination from state |
| Hill | Palpa | Tansen | Newars, Bahuns, Chettris, Dalits | NC, CPN-UML, Maoists | Small business; wage labor; subsistence agriculture; government/ NGO jobs | unemployment; security/fear; drinking water |

# Annex I: Fieldwork Sites Details

| Region | District | Area | Fieldwork Groups | Social Influence | Political of Livlihoods | Major Source Major Problems |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hill | Palpa | Yamgha | Bahuns, Magars, Dalits | CPN-UML, Maoists | Migration to India/Gulf; subsistence farming; wage labor | unemployment; price rise; poor road; poor market access |
| Hill | Palpa | Garandada | Bahuns, Magars, Dalits | Maoists, CPN-UML | Migration to India/Gulf; subsistence farming; wage labor | unemployment; price rise; poor road; poor market access |
| **Eastern** | | | | | | |
| Terai | Morang | Piderbani, Jhorahat | Tharus, Yadavs Mushahars, Bahuns Chettris, Rajbansis | NC, MJF, Maoists | Subsistence farming; wage labor; migration to India/Gulf | unemployment/low wage; price rise; landlessness; poor productivity |
| Terai | Morang | Baudaha | Yadavs, Tharus Mushahars, Rajbanshis | MJF, NC, TMLP | Subsistence farming; wage labor; migration to India/Gulf | unemployment/low wage; price rise; landlessness; poor productivity |
| **Central** | | | | | | |
| Hill | Kathmandu | Chaimale | Bahuns, Chettris, Tamangs, Dalits | Maoists, NC, CPN-UML | Subsistence farming; salaried employment (jagir); wage labor | Unemployment; price rise |
| Hill | Kathmandu | Bhimdhunga | Tamangs, Chettris, Dalits | Maoists, CPN-UML | Wage labor; salaried employment (jagir); subsistence farming | unemployment/low wage; price rise; landlessness; high rate of school drop out/poor educational infrastructure |

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