

# Maoist gates in Jumla and Mugu districts: Illustrations of the 'People's War'

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During the ten years of its insurgency (1996-2006) the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) made extensive use of images, either to convey its ideology or to advertise its presence in a locality.<sup>1</sup> The Maoists often used public, private and religious properties as places to plaster posters, write slogans and erect their party flag.<sup>2</sup> Besides these images, the Maoists also constructed gates and *chautārās* (platforms or resting places for travellers).<sup>3</sup> In fact, building *chautārās* in the name of a dead person is not only a Maoist phenomenon, it has long been a part of Nepalese tradition. A *chautārā* is often built to keep the name of a deceased person alive, and gates are often erected to welcome participants and dignitaries to a particular event; sometimes permanent gates are built to welcome visitors. The Maoist gates are built, particularly in Jumla and Mugu districts, to commemorate fallen comrades and to welcome inhabitants of the region and outsiders, as well as to demarcate territorial divisions. The gates are often constructed on main paths rather than within a village; consequently, every passer-by has to walk through them. Even if the inhabitants want to bypass them, as they do elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> they are not able to do so, because gates are often constructed covering both sides of the path. Furthermore, I have never heard that villagers wanted to go around the gates to avoid walking through them. These gates were often built by villagers on the Maoists' orders; some were built by the Maoists themselves.

Since the peace accord was signed by the CPN (Maoist) and the Government in 2006, most of the gates built by Maoists have become dilapidated; only a few were still in good condition in 2009. Some of the

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1 Fieldwork for this research was financed by the ANR programme on the People's War coordinated by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine.

2 On the use of images in the People's war by Maoists as well as by the Army, see M. Lecomte-Tilouine and P. Ramirez, 2006, 'La guerre du Peuple en Images' in *Le maoïsme au Népal. Lectures d'une révolution*, edited by Brigitte Steinmann. Paris: CNRS, pp. 88-109.

3 They are often constructed to commemorate a deceased.

4 Cf. Lecomte-Tilouine and Ramirez (no 2): 90.

gates I saw in 2007 had disappeared by 2009, and in some places new gates had been constructed. Gates are often decorated with communist symbols such as the hammer and sickle and portraits of communist leaders. The edifices also often bear communist slogans and the names of fallen comrades. In the following pages I will present a series of gates built by Maoists; the pictures were taken between 2006 and 2009 in Jumla and Mugu districts, and are reproduced together at the end of the text. The architecture of the gates changes as we move from one valley to another. The text is divided according to district: we move from Jumla valley to Nagma village, then upstream to the Sinja valley, and finally to Mugu district.

### **Jumla district**

#### *Photo 1. Lamra village [in 2007]*

The wooden gate built of timber is erected on the main path in Lamra village in Jumla valley. It is the first gate I came across while heading west from Jumla bazar (it is located two to three hours walk west of the district headquarters known as Jumla Bazar or Khalanga, in the direction of Kalikot district). During the Maoist heyday, this village was the beginning of the Maoist territory, and it was in this village that the insurgents and the government forces regularly clashed. The gate was constructed on the main path that passes through the village. It looked neglected in 2007 and had completely disappeared by the time of my follow up visit in 2009.

#### *Photo 2. Tato Pani [in 2009]*

This gate, built of stone and cement,<sup>5</sup> is constructed in Tato Pani village, situated three to four hours walk to the west of Jumla Bazar. The gate is built over narrow stone steps which lead to the hot water spring (Tato Pani<sup>6</sup>) bathing area; all the pilgrims have to walk through the gate if they want to bathe in the spring. Tato Pani is a very popular bathing area. It is known to have miraculous powers to cure sickness such as asthma and

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5 Cement is rarely used for construction in the region. Because of unreliable transportation, cement is difficult to get in the local market; if it is available, the price is very high. Stone, clay and wood are generally used as construction materials in this area.

6 The village is named after the Tato Pani (hot water spring) bathing area.

arthritis. Thus, the inhabitants of Jumla and surrounding districts come to take a bath in this hot spring at least once in their lifetime.

Both pillars of the gate are used as surfaces on which to write and rewrite Maoist slogans. These are written on top of older slogans that have been partially erased; therefore, some of them are difficult to decipher. The slogan on the left pillar reads: ‘Long live Marxism, Leninism, Maoism and Prachanda Path - CPN-Maobadi (*Mārksbād, Leninbād, Māobād ra Prachandapath jindābād*),’ and the one on the right pillar reads: ‘Give us rice and salt, otherwise give up power...’ (*cāmal, nun de natra sattā chod...*).’ The slogan on the right pillar is a poignant expression of the reality of the region. The region does not produce enough rice to feed the whole district all year round and salt has to be brought in from the Tarai. To compensate for the rice and salt deficit the government regularly distributes subsidised rice and salt to each family in the region. However, due to the government’s incompetence and corruption the villagers do not receive their quotas on time; sometimes, they spend days in district headquarters before they receive their share.

Easing the distribution of rice and salt is a favourite promise of political leaders. However, although the government decentralised distribution to certain VDC offices for a few years, this was once again centralised to the district headquarters because of the Maoist insurgency.

*Photo 3. Nagma village [2007]*

This wooden gate was built on the main path in Nagma village leading towards the Sinja valley. The village stands on the border with Kalikot at a place where two major rivers (the Tila from Jumla valley and the Sinja from Sinja valley), come together and flow westward to Kalikot as the Tila river. It is an important village for Jumli migrants returning from southern parts of Nepal. Because they mistrust the inhabitants of neighbouring districts, most returning migrants try to cross Kalikot district as soon as possible to reach this village, where they usually spend a night before heading to their own villages in Jumla valley or Sinja valley.

This gate stands as a welcome gate to Sinja valley and is constructed by the NCP (Maoist) Kalikot district. It reads: ‘We warmly welcome you all-NCP Maoist Kalikot’ (*ehāharuko āgamanko hārdik swāgat gardachau-Ne.ka.pā. māobādī Kālikot*). The architecture of the gate is very different from the other Maoist gates in Jumla district but very similar to the Maoist gates

in Mugu district. The gate has three distinct steeples, and the one in the middle looks very different from the two others. It resembles a miniature room<sup>7</sup> with a window (with three closed shutters) and a door. A pinnacle is placed on the roof, and next to it a Maoist flag with hammer and sickle similar to that seen on most of the Maoist gates. The gate bears Maoist slogans, Maoist fallen comrades' names and their places of origin. The slogan on the top corner of the left pillar explains why and when the gate was constructed: 'The gate is built in memory of the brave and glorious martyrs of the People's War during the celebration of the 8<sup>th</sup> year of the People's War- Gate 2004' (*āthau (?) bārshik utsabko abasarmā janayuddhakā mahān bīr śahidharuko smritimā nirmī-* Get 2061); a quotation from Karl Marx (the *Mahān Guru*, 'Great Master') is written on the top of the right pillar. The names of martyrs from Kalikot district are written on the right pillar and the names of martyrs from Jumla district on the left pillar. Interestingly, the Maoists have written the real names of their martyrs instead of their *noms de guerre*. They record not only the real identities of their fallen comrades but also their places of origin.

*Photo 4. Macche village [2007]*

This gate is built of stone and plastered with clay and cow dung and stands on the main path to the upper Sinja valley, two hours walk from the border village, Nagma. The gate is built in a narrow valley. The only buildings here are two tea shops next to it; the village proper lies half an hour further up the hill. It is the most imposing gate that I have seen in the region; the thickness of the pillars is more than a meter. Beside a blurred slogan, nothing indicates that it was a Maoist gate. However, the shopkeeper next to the gate confirmed that it was built by Maoists.

*Photo 5. Sanni village [2007]*

This gate is situated a few hours walk from the previous one at Macche along the path towards the upper Sinja valley. It is built on the main path; however, the village is situated ten to fifteen minutes further on. The gate is constructed from stone, clay and wooden beams, like other buildings in the region.

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7 Houses in Jumla district used to be windowless. However, more and more people have now started to place windows while building a house; nevertheless, most of the time these windows remain closed to conserve heat inside the home.

*Photo. 6. Rani Khana [2007]*

These two rundown wooden gates are erected within a few meters of each other on the main path in Rani Khana in Sinja valley. There is a shop next to the second gate and the village is situated a few minutes further from the main path.

*Photo 7. Larja village [2007]*

This colourful wooden gate is erected on the main path in Larja village in upper Sinja valley. On side A, Larja village can be seen in the background, whereas side B shows the main path that leads to the lower Sinja valley. The gate is built on the site of an older gate made of stone and clay, the remains of which are still visible.

Both sides of the gate are beautifully carved and painted with communist symbols: hammer and sickle, portraits of communist leaders and their ideologues. The top of the gate is decorated on both sides with two peacocks that are facing each other and with two wheels, one wheel in each corner. On each side of the gate, these are accompanied by communist symbols: the hammer and sickle, and a pheasant.<sup>8</sup> In the centre of side A the gate has two portraits, one on each pillar. The left pillar has the portrait of an unidentified woman, and the right pillar has a portrait of Prachanda with his fist raised. Prachandra is given the appearance of a modern revolutionary man wearing a shirt and a green tie with the hammer and sickle. Although ties are generally not worn in villages in the region, jackets are popular. Side B of the gate has four portraits, two on each pillar. Portraits of Mao and Lenin are painted on the right pillar and portraits of Prachanda and Stalin are painted on the left pillar. In this portrait, Prachanda is presented as a PLA (People's Liberation Army) leader wearing a green military outfit. The lower part of the gate is decorated with pheasants and the hammer and sickle.

This gate, on the one hand defines the Maoist territorial division (NCP-M area No. 6) and on the other hand it commemorates the fallen comrade 'Martyr C. Narendra Shahi (*śahid k. Narendra Śāhī*)'. But the portrait does not specify where Shahi came from, unlike the portrait

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8 The peacock is not native to this area, and unlike other parts of Nepal this region does not have any traditions that entail engraving its picture in temples. However the Kalij pheasant (*Lophura leucomelanos*) is commonly found in this region and is hunted for meat.

of the martyrs in Nagma village. We presume that Shahi came from a neighbouring village, because there is a large Thakuri (Shahi) settlement in this area.

*Photo 8. Hat Sinja [2006,2007, 2009]*

Hat Sinja village has two Maoist gates on the main path at both ends of the village, and is one of the few villages with two gates. The wooden gate (Gate A) is erected at the eastern part of the village and the stone gate (Gate B) is built at the western part of the village. Gate B is built by piling up stones and is therefore very fragile, it has been rebuilt many times.

The wooden gate was only carved during my visit in 2006. The top part of the gate contains the Maoist symbol of the hammer and sickle. Next to these, each pillar has a carved figure of a PLA member. Both PLA members are portrayed in a standing position, with their right fist raised and holding a rifle in their left hand as if to suggest they are undergoing military training. There are carvings of water jars on the lower part of the gate, and there is a carving of a Maoist flag with the hammer and sickle on the top part of the gate. A Maoist based in Hat Sinja in 2006 told me that this gate looked ugly, and that he was going to make those 'Sinjals' (inhabitants of Hat Sinja) work on it to make it similar to the gates from Larja village (Photo 7) and from Botan village (Photo 10). The Maoist kept his word and at the time of my subsequent visit in 2007, the gate was painted and looked similar to the gate from Larja and Botan villages. At the same time, the portrait of Prachanda with his fist raised and some Swastikas were added.

*Photo 9. Front of Botan village [2007]*

This wooden gate was erected in front of Botan village on the main path between Hat Sinja and Jumla district headquarter after the peace accord was signed. Edifices are often built by villagers on Maoists' orders, and this gate was built by a Maoist from Botan village, who spent many years in the PLA. The architecture of the gate is very different to the local architecture and most other gates in the region. According to the villagers, the builder tried to copy the style of the architecture he had seen during his seasonal migration to Northern India. The gate does not contain any slogans, there is just the Maoist flag with the hammer and sickle on the top of the gate that indicates this is a 'Maoist gate.' According to the villagers, it is not

a 'memorial gate,' but just a 'welcome gate', built to make the area more attractive.

*Photo 10. Botan village [2006, 2007]*

This village is well-hidden between two hills and security forces cannot approach the village without the knowledge of the inhabitants. The landscape of the village therefore provided the Maoists with a safe haven, where they could operate in the open. The Maoists used the village to train the PLA on a small scale and to organise political activities. Consequently, there was lots of movement in and out of the village. To welcome all the visitors who came to take part in the different political programmes, the Maoists who were based at the village built 'welcome gates' and put up banners and written slogans.

The 'Welcome (*swāgatam*) Gates' A and B were built in the middle of Botan village. Gate A, which I saw during my field visit in 2006, was not there anymore during my subsequent field visit in 2007; however, another gate (Gate B) was built a few meters away from the place where Gate A once stood. Both welcome gates look very similar, though some details set them apart. All the decorations on both gates are carved and painted.

On the top of both gates, there is a carving of a figure. The figure on the top of Gate A is portrayed wearing a hat, which gives him the allure of a PLA member who is keeping an eye on passers-by, whereas the figure on the top of Gate B is a more traditional one, similar to those figures made as offerings to local divinities. Some villagers do install such figures on their newly built houses, some say this is to protect their house from the evil eye and others say this is to make their house look attractive.

The lower parts of both gates are decorated with *khukuris* (traditional Nepali knives) and water jars<sup>9</sup> with flowers, as if to wish good luck to all who walk through the gates. Gate A is decorated with two figures in a military outfit, with one figure on each pillar. Both figures look like PLA members. The figure on the left pillar is portrayed in a standing position, whereas the one on the right is in a shooting position. Similarly, Gate B is decorated with two figures in green military dress, one figure on each pillar. The figure on the left pillar has a gun under his right arm and is holding a *khukuri* in his

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9 A pair of water jars filled with water and flowers are placed on both sides of a gate or path at the start of any journey.

left hand. The figure with a red beret on the right pillar, which is said to be Prachanda, is raising the index finger of his right hand and holds a *khukuri* in his left hand. He is given the allure of a brave Gorkhali, similar to King Prithvinarayan Shah who unified the Nation and is always portrayed with his right index finger raised, ready to charge on enemies.

In front of Gate A, a big billboard with Maoist slogans is placed. The slogan on the top of the billboard reads: 'Long Live World Revolution (*biśwo krānti jindābād*).' This is followed by another slogan, reading: 'Let's make a big success the celebration of integrated pioneering revolutionary movement (*ekikri[ī]t agragāmī rupāntarṇa abhiyāna bhabyarupmā saphal pārau*).' The text ends with a quotation from Prachanda: 'If the whole country does not rise to protest, the existence of Nepal and the Nepalese will end (*siṅgo deśa uṭhera pratirodha nagarne ho bhane Nepāl ra Nepālīko astitwo samāpta huncha*).' Under the billboard hangs a banner with Maoist slogan, which reads: 'Let's celebrate the 11<sup>th</sup> glorious years of Nepal People's War with fanfare (*mahān Nepālī janayūddhako eghārau bārṣika utsaba bhabyarupmā manāau*).' – United CPN-M (*NeKaPā Māobādi Ekikrita*). By 2007, all the slogans on the billboard and the banner had disappeared.

*Photo 11. Budu village [2007]*

This simple wooden gate is erected in front of Budu village in Sinja valley, where the shrine of Budu Masta (one of the most important divinities of the region) is located. We can see Budu village in the background. Although the village remained under Maoist control during the conflict, the Maoists were not able to make villagers work on the gate as in other places in Jumla. Consequently, the gate remains neglected. It was said that the villagers decorated the gate whenever any high-ranking Maoists visited the area.

## Mugu district

*Photo 12. Kawa village [2007]*

The wooden gate is erected on the main path in Kawa village<sup>10</sup> in the Khatyad khola (river) valley, Khamale ga.bi.sa. in Mugu district. It is a

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10 The village is named after Kawa Masta, one of the Masta brothers and an important divinity of the region, whose shrine is located in this village.



'Martyr's gate (*śahida geṭa*),' erected for a fallen comrade. It reads: 'Long live brave martyr comrade Kisan (*bīr śahida kā. [kāmreḍa] Kisān amara rahun*).' The person standing in front of the gate is a Maoist from Sinja valley. He insisted on being in the picture, and thought it was very appropriate for a Maoist to be photographed in front of a Maoist gate.

### 13. Pāche Chaur [2007]

Gates A and B are built in Pāche Chaura, Gumtha ga.bi.sa, at the confluence of the Khatyad Khola (river) and Mugu Karnali. These gates are built a few meters apart, whereas Gate C is constructed an hour further downstream on the left bank of the Mugu Karnali River. This path was the main trail between Gam Gadhi (Mugu district headquarters) and Bajura district until the construction of the new path on the right bank of the river.

Gate A is made of wood and stands as a 'Welcome (*swāgatam*)' gate. One side of the gate is used to acclaim Prachanda Path: 'Long Live..... and Prachanda Path (... *ra Prachanḍapath jindābād*)' and the other side of the Gate (seen in the background of Gate B) is used to indicate the Maoist territorial division: 'Nepal Communist Party Maobadi district no. 3 Rara Mugu (*Nepāl kamunist pārtī māobādī jillā nambar 3 Rārā Mugu*)'. The pillars of the Gate display the names of the fallen comrades: 'brave glorious martyrs (*mahān bi[ī]r śahidharu*).'

Gate B is built by piling up stone slabs on top of each other. One side of the Gate (B-1) is decorated with Communist flags and a portrait of Prachanda with his right fist raised, whereas a slogan is written on the other side of the Gate (B-2), which reads: 'Kasital memorial, 9<sup>th</sup> year assembly 2004 (*kāsital smārikā nabau barṣaḡaṭh 2061*).'

Gate C is made of wood and is also built as a welcome gate, at the same time it indicates the Maoist territorial division: 'Welcome. Nepal Communist Party Maobadi district no. 3 Rara Mugu (*swāgatam Nepāl kamunist pārtī (māobādī) Rārā Mugu*).' A Maoist flag is placed on the top of the Gate.

### 14. Rara National Park [2009]

This is the last Maoist gate one comes across when walking towards Gam Gadhi (Mugu district headquarters). It is made of timber and is built in a desolate area at the entrance of the Rara National Park. Except for a military camp located near Rara Lake that protects the National Park, no

human settlements are allowed in its vicinity. As a result there is nobody to repair the gate that was constructed for a Maoist function and the gate is in a dilapidated state.

As we have noticed throughout this article, most Maoist gates are found in areas where the State had little or no control during the ten years of conflict, such as in Sinja valley where many gates were built. This region remained under Maoist control throughout the conflict, only on rare occasions did the security personnel come to patrol this part of the region. While I was in Jumla, I found only two gates. This being the administrative centre of the whole district, the government tried to maintain its control throughout the Jumla valley and as a result the security forces often went to patrol the area and destroyed these gates whenever they came across them. They also destroyed gates in Sinja valley, but these would be rebuilt when the security forces had left the area.

The building of gates became one of the ways of showing Maoist presence as well as Maoist authority in the region. These edifices were deliberately built in busy places to reach wider audience, where many people would come together, e.g., Tato Pani (the hot water spring bathing area; photo 2), or pass through, e.g. main paths (most of the gates are erected on main paths rather than in villages). The majority of the people inhabiting this region are not educated, Maoists therefore made extensive use of visual means to spread their beliefs and to inspire villagers. They carved figures of Maoist leaders and their ideologues on gates or painted their portraits on walls, particularly in Sinja valley, to make these leaders seem more familiar to the villagers, which sometimes succeeded. The gates are sometimes also used to write down slogans, although most slogans are written on walls, or used to indicate territorial division. Some gates portray PLA members in action as if to glorify their acts, and some gates are constructed to commemorate fallen comrades. These represent 'memorial gates,' on which the names of their martyrs were written. Although Maoists are very attached to their *noms de guerre* and like to be known by these names, in Sinja valley they identified their martyrs by their real names and the places they originally came from. This suggests that the Maoists tried to return the real identity of their fallen comrades to them upon their death, by specifying their real names and the places they hailed from. Any passer-by can look at the list and pinpoint who came from his or her own village. However, in Mugu district, only the *noms de*

*guerre* of the martyrs are mentioned, so if a passer-by is not familiar with these, he or she can only count the total number of martyrs.

These Maoist gates have great local significance and were built at a particular moment in a very violent period of Nepalese history. Maoists built the gates to spread their convictions, to inspire villagers and also to honour their dead. The gates are living witnesses of the intensity of the Maoist movement at a local level. Some of the gates have now disappeared and some have fallen into ruin. In the future they might completely disappear and take some local history away with them. Therefore, these gates must be seen as historical evidence at the local level of the bloody civil war that Nepal fought for ten years, which cost more than 15,000 lives.

## Jumla District

Photo 1. Lamra village [in 2007]



Photo 2. Tato Pani [in 2009]



Photo 3. Nagma village [in 2007]



Photo 4. Macche village [in 2007]



Photo 5. Sanni village [in 2007]



Photo 6. Ranni Khana [in 2007]



Photo 7. Larja village [in 2007]



Side A (left)



Side B (right)

Photo 8. Hat Sinja [in 2006, 2009]



Gate A [in 2006]



Gate A [in 2009]



Gate B [in 2006]



Gate B [in 2009]



Photo 9. Front of Botan village [2009]



Photo 10. Botan village [in 2006, 2007]



Gate A [in 2006]



Gate B [in 2007]

Photo 11. Budu village [ in 2007]



## Mugu District

Photo 12. Kawa village [in 2007]



Photo 13. Pāche Chaur [ 2007]



Gate A



Gate B



Gate B-1



Gate B-2

Photo 13a. Pâche Chaur [ 2007]



Gate C

Photo 14. Rara National Park [ in 2009]

