

# Learning in a Guerrilla Community of Practice: Literacy practices, situated learning and youth in Nepal's Maoist movement (1996-2006)

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The arts of war are better than no arts at all.

(Richards 1998: 24)

Young people and conflict, unemployed youth, risk and resilience have emerged as key research themes over the past decade or so. The so-called 'youth bulge theories' have contributed considerably to research on youth and the policy agendas that prioritise the study of youth. It is postulated that the vast numbers of young people in developing countries do not have opportunities for employment and are therefore at risk of becoming trouble-makers (see the critique in Boyden 2006).

The situation in South Asia might be considered a good example. According to the World Bank Survey, South Asia has the highest proportion of unemployed and inactive youth in the world (*The Economist*, 2013).<sup>1</sup> So, what do young unemployed and inactive people do? Since the category of 'unemployed youth' includes people of different class, caste and educational backgrounds, at the risk of oversimplifying the picture, one could argue that some have joined leftist guerrilla movements, while others, especially in India, have filled the rank and file of the Hindu right – either the groups of RSS volunteers (Froerer 2006) or the paramilitaries, such as Salwa Judum (Miklian 2009), who are fighting the Indian Maoists. Both in Nepal and in India, others are in limbo after receiving their degrees, waiting for the prospect of salaried employment whilst largely relying on the political patronage they gained through their membership of the youth wings of various political parties (Jeffrey 2010), which is a common occurrence on university campuses in both India and Nepal (Snellinger 2007).

This article seeks to understand why young people are attracted to all kinds of political and quasi-political activities in South Asia. What is it that drives youth towards political movements with ideologies ranging from

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<sup>1</sup> This is partially explained by the exclusion of young women from the labour force.

the far right to the far left? This article suggests that the constraints of the economic environment and the dire prospects for social mobility are only a part of the answer to this question of young people's involvement in radical movements.

By drawing on the extreme case of the participation of young people in the Nepali Maoist Movement during the conflict of 1996-2006, this article explores whether there is more to the experience of youth within radical movements than just violence. In doing so, the article attempts to shift the emphasis away from violence as a key concept in the exploration of the youth experience of conflict and towards other social processes, such as learning and skill acquisition. Building on the work of Richards on youth and conflict in Sierra Leone (1998), the present article stresses the potential of radical organisations to become a source of schooling and a contemporary form of apprenticeship in the context of war. To quote, 'Where they [young people] joined the rebels with any degree of enthusiasm it was to seek training. The arts of war are better than no arts at all. The army was simply seen as a new form of schooling' (Richards 1998: 24). While Richards stresses that the competencies Sierra Leone youth acquired in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were mostly 'the violent skills of guerrilla bush-craft' (ibid: 28), my research<sup>2</sup> on the participation of young people in the Nepali Maoist Movement suggests that the learning process in guerrilla movements is not limited to military fighting. According to many of my informants, books were part of the daily routine of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighters as well as guns:

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2 This article is largely based on fieldwork carried out in Nepal during the summer of 2008, in Kathmandu and the district of Rolpa. It is based on in-depth interviews with 27 Maoist youths, of whom eight were interviewed more than once. These were complemented by conversations with parents of Maoist youths (in Rolpa), with NGO staff, and with unaffiliated youths who had experienced Maoist campaigns. Access to the field was negotiated through Maoist sister organisations. All the interviewees started their Maoist career during the insurgency and considered themselves to be committed Maoists at the time of my fieldwork in 2008. Therefore, this research focused not on Nepali youth as such, but specifically on young Nepali Maoists. These features of my research invariably affected not only the process of my fieldwork but also the angle of my subsequent analyses. Subsequent fieldwork, carried out with a different research theme in mind in 2011, complemented and enriched the findings from 2008. Especially fruitful in this respect was my trip to one of the Maoist cantonments in the south of Rolpa in 2011, where I had the chance to observe the post-war activities of former Maoist combatants and speak to them about their war-time and post-war experiences of the movement.

PLA got different books for us and asked us to study them every day. It was difficult to carry all the books around, so each would carry one or two books and exchange them [Kedar].<sup>3</sup>

There was always a book in my rucksack, one or two. We stored books in villagers' homes, in the safe ones [Narendra].

Carrying books in backpacks, compulsory independent study for several hours per day, and learning the basics of Marxist social theory and propagating it to Nepali villagers were common practices among Maoist youth during the 'People's War' of 1996-2006. In a country where a book is still rare in many remote villages and libraries virtually non-existent, and where schools in remote areas are often not functioning because of the absence of teachers, these facts pose a question about whether the Maoist Movement can be viewed as a source of learning, acquiring skills and participating in a range of literacy practices that are otherwise inaccessible to young people in rural parts of Nepal.

The article explores this proposition by first outlining the theory of situated learning, which it uses as a framework for understanding the kind of learning young people were exposed to in the Maoist Movement. The article then gives a concise historical overview of the educational and pedagogical strategies of communist movements around the world. Next, it explores literacy practices within the Maoist Movement and then concludes by analysing the nature of learning as experienced by young people within the Maoist communities of practice during the war.

### **Theory and practice: situated learning in the Maoist Movement**

I will argue in this article that in order to understand the educational experiences of young people within Maoist or other kinds of radical movements, it is important to understand learning to be not merely a result of teaching or ideological training but rather an outcome of 'the social practice in the lived-in-world' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 36) and participation in distinct communities of practice. Drawing on the ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991), who argue that learning is not equated solely with cognitive processes but involves the whole person, where individual relations, feelings and activities become an important source of knowing,

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3 All names are coded. For the backgrounds of interviewees, see Annex 1.

I will argue that informal or situated learning has played an important role in the process of educating Maoist youth.

Concentrating on Maoist cultural groups and political motivation teams, I will show that by participating in these communities of practice young people accessed not only a new set of skills or a new corpus of ideas, but also learned a distinct set of values and mores. This process is crucial for understanding the nature of the learning that happens within ideologically inspired movements. It is therefore important to stress that the intellectual or ideological side of learning, whether it be attending political 'indoctrination' sessions or reading certain books, is only part of the transformative learning process experienced by youths once they are in radical movements. Arguably, the most important change happens at the level of values and worldview. This is accomplished through the intensity of their engagement with the real world, either in the form of interaction with fellow comrades or critical engagement with non-aligned people. It is no coincidence that the members of all radical movements are marked by a zeal to change and transform the world around them, their own selves having been deeply altered in the process.

The transformative nature of knowledge is stressed in the Marxist and Maoist theory of knowledge, where learning is seen as a collaborative form of social activity aimed at transforming reality (Stetsenko & Arieivitch 2004: 68). According to Mao,

Marxists hold that man's social practice alone is the criterion of the truth of his knowledge of the external world... If you want to know a certain thing... you must personally participate in the practical struggle to change reality, to change that thing or class of things... only through personal participation in the practical struggle to change reality can you uncover the essence of that thing or class of things and comprehend them (Mao 1937).

Mao defines knowledge as one's engagement in social practice, which, in his view, involves first and foremost the revolutionary project of transforming society and engaging in the social problems of the real world. Not only is knowledge derived from practice; it should also have a practical, i.e. transformative, value to it. Interestingly, the theory of situated learning developed by Lave and Wenger echoes the Marxist

theory by saying that practice, activity and engagement with the world are key to learning:

Learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world. Conceiving learning in terms of participation focuses attention on the way in which it is an evolving, continuously renewed set of relationships; this is of course consistent with a relational view of persons, their actions, and the world, typical of the 'theory of social practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 50).

In short, knowledge creation is not an individual process but rather a process that happens in context and is constituted through multiple interactions with the world and the people and objects in it. This article takes this point further by exploring how a certain historical situation (that of war) and a certain type of radical organisation (the Maoist Movement) enabled a distinct experience of learning in Nepal – one which was largely derived from the praxis of realising the Maoist revolutionary project through the use of military, ideological or cultural tools. The striking and peculiar feature of war-time learning within the Maoist Movement is that it combined both intellectual and practical modes at a time when most formal institutions of learning, for instance rural schools, became dysfunctional due to the vicissitudes of war and the legacy of the state's unequal education system.

### **Literacy practices in leftist movements around the world**

The Maoist Movement of Nepal was not unique among leftist movements around the world<sup>4</sup> in its attempt to be self-consciously pedagogical. Raising political awareness and educational levels among disenfranchised parts of the population were key components of the emancipatory projects of revolutionary movements in highly illiterate societies, from the Bolsheviks in Russia in the 1920s to the Maoists in China in the 1940s.

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<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on education is not unique to leftist radical movements. Both the Hindu right and Islamic activists emphasise the importance of transforming the minds of people and spreading new ideas through different educational practices. For more detail on various strategies of the Hindu right see Jaffrelot (2005) and on Islamic movements in South Asia see Metcalf (2002).

According to Russian revolutionaries, imparting education to the masses was not simply an educational issue, but also a *political* issue, for ideals of 'equality, fraternity and freedom' could not be realised in a society where knowledge was the privilege of a small stratum of the population (Lunacharsky 1984: 285) – as was the case in Russia before the Bolshevik revolution in 1917.

Bukharin, one of the ideologues of the October Revolution, clearly stated that 'liquidating illiteracy among working class youth' was a basic task without which it would be impossible 'to move forward' (Bukharin 1984: 59). The efforts of radical educators in Soviet Russia to bring about comprehensive literacy by organising united labour schools, *rab-faks* (working faculties), Pioneer children organisations and Proletkult (Proletarian Cultural Organisation) illustrate the centrality of the educational project in the revolutionary endeavours of the Bolsheviks. The fact that the Ministry of Education in the former USSR was called the Ministry of Enlightenment is in itself a sign that the Bolsheviks were approaching the educational project not just as a task of imparting literacy skills, but rather as a task of forming new kinds of citizens, social and political subjects. In the words of the first Soviet Minister of Education, the overarching goal was the 'transfer of knowledge to each individual, that is, with broad enlightening work resulting in maximum mass consciousness' (Lunacharsky 1984: 286).

China was another highly illiterate peasant society where communist ideas received considerable popular support. It has been recorded that during the period of the civil war in China, the routine of the Chinese PLA was full of educational sessions where fighters learned how to read by using communist concepts such as 'Red flag, communism and landlord' (Snow 1972: 243). In addition, where Maoists controlled the territory, they engaged in the process of 'changing the mentality of people' by organising ideological classes for Chinese peasants (Snow 1972: 241). The Socialist Education Movement was launched in China in the 1960s, and while pursuing the goal of fighting 'reactionary' elements within the Communist Party, it was also part of the socialist education project aimed at enlightening the 'dark masses'. Brigades of zealous young people were sent into the countryside to impart Maoist ideology to villagers through the medium of stories, songs and study groups (Madsen 1984: 108–120). Like the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia, the Maoists in China approached

education as one of the central political issues faced by the new socialist state, the issue of nation-building.

In quite a different story, the Shining Path of Peru, of which Nepalese Maoists claim to be successors, concentrated on ideological work with disenfranchised student youth who comprised the backbone of the Peruvian Maoists (Degregori 1992). Rather than imparting basic literacy skills or Maoist ideology to peasants, Peruvian Maoists worked with educated but unemployed youth from the backwaters of the country. Apparently, the youth, who did not have many prospects for employment or activities elsewhere, were keen to absorb the Maoist vision of reality, which explained their grievances and provided them with a sense of purpose in life (Degregori 1992). It is symbolic that almost a decade after the start of the civil war, the leader of the Shining Path, who was a former university professor, has never been depicted in a military uniform or with a gun. Instead, he was always portrayed clutching a book (Goriti 1992: 151), making the book the symbol that was associated with the leadership of the Maoist guerrillas in Peru, rather than the gun.

While one might dismiss such educational efforts as brainwashing aimed at the mobilisation of rebels and the selling of a distorted picture of reality to naive youth or peasants, it is important to note the context in which such efforts proved successful. These were societies characterised by extreme inequalities, of which educational inequalities formed only a minor part, and in which knowledge was the privilege of a small elite. Nepal was no exception to this rule. Whereas in Nepal education is in theory available to everyone, in reality only a small stratum of the population has access to quality education. Furthermore, at the onset of the 'People's War', it is estimated that only 48 % of the population was literate (UNESCO 2000). This feature makes Nepal similar to other semi-literate societies where leftist movements took deep roots and where the conscious-raising campaigns of communists found a fertile ground.

### **Schooling and failed prospects of social mobility in Nepal**

It has been argued that education was deeply embedded in Nepal's violent conflict (Shields & Rappleve 2008). To show why this might be so, one should illustrate the magnitude of educational inequalities in Nepal. Whereas in 1991 the literacy rate of young people (15-24 years) in Kathmandu was 75.9%, it was only 38.3% in the mid-Western region of

Nepal (World Education Forum 2000), the latter being one of the major recruitment grounds for the Maoist Movement during the war.

However, regional inequalities are only a small part of the picture. Nepal has a two-tiered system of school education, which puts graduates of private English-medium schools at a disproportionate advantage (see Graner (1998), Shields and Rapple (2008)). 80% of the graduates from these schools pass the School Leaving Certificate (SLC), in contrast to 30-40% of youth from government schools (Whelpton 2005: 227). In 1996, the year in which the 'People's War' commenced, not a single child from a rural area passed the SLC in the first division (Mikesell 2005). This effectively meant that no young people from rural areas could pursue a higher education that would lead to prestigious professions such as doctors or engineers, which eventually bestow the status of 'big man' in Nepali society. In this context, the voluntary recruitment of young people to the Maoist Movement can be partially attributed to the failure of the Nepali state to provide youth, especially from rural and remote parts of the country, with any opportunities for social mobility, either through formal education or employment. As one Maoist youth explained to me:

The country's education system is about buying and selling. If the person has the capacity to buy, he can study at the higher level. If you don't have money, then you are out. We believe that each individual has similar capacities and skills but the country's system is arranged in a way that makes it impossible for some individuals to study [Ramesh].

In addition, some young people commented that the formal education system was not scientific because it was removed from reality and the practical problems of the world. For instance, one of the interviewees noted that school history classes were based around legendary stories about kings, whereas Maoist sessions approached the history of Nepal from the point of view of contemporary development problems. In advocating communist education (*janabadi shiksha*), the Maoists called not only for a more equal system of opportunities but also for a syllabus which was more relevant to the conditions of life in Nepal.

The inequality of the educational system in Nepal limited the choices of young people in rural parts of the country either to the option of

remaining in the village to do agricultural work, or migrating elsewhere in search of employment, with India and the Gulf states being the most notable destinations. Since school did not serve as a vehicle for social mobility for the majority of Nepali youth, when the conflict broke out many of them chose another path of moving forward in life – that of joining the Maoist Movement.

In this context, it should come as no surprise that rural schools became major recruitment grounds for Maoist guerrillas. The vast majority of my interviewees got to know Maoist ideology at school, in the Student Union.<sup>5</sup> The typical story runs as follows: Maoist district committee members would come to the school, speak with the director, and then go and speak to students, encourage them to form a Maoist Student Union and organise informal classes for the study of Maoist theory. While this politicisation of schools might seem to be associated with the advent of the ‘People’s War’, the Maoists actually followed a tradition of politicisation of schools in Nepal, where school grounds have been used as an avenue of political campaigning at least since the collapse of the Panchayat regime in 1990.

Furthermore, school teachers were among the key agents spreading Maoist ideology in rural Nepal, especially in those areas which came to be known as the Maoist heartland (Ogura 2007: 464–566). In a detailed discussion of the issue, Ogura shows that teachers from Rolpa comprised a considerable percentage of the leadership of the Maoist Movement (ibid). This situation is not at all peculiar to Nepal. The strong presence of school teachers in Peru among the Maoist rank and file led Angel (1982) to call them ‘classroom Maoists’. Furthermore, comparing Sierra Leone’s RUF with Peru’s Shining Path, Richards (1998: 27) notes that despite all the differences between their ideologies, the structural conditions that gave birth to these movements were starkly similar: an ‘educated but embittered leadership’, mostly comprised of pedagogues, and a ‘large pool of modernised rural based youth with few prospects of continuing education or progressive employment’ (Richards 1998: 28). The case of Nepal was not much different: teachers were in the vanguard of the Maoist Movement,

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5 For those whose parents were communists, it was the family environment that was a key factor in socialising children into the Maoist ideology. In Rolpa, the Children’s Organisation replaced the Student Union as the first stage of youth engagement in the Maoist Movement.

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and youth, often from disadvantaged class and/or caste backgrounds, were following the example of the teachers:

Most of the teachers in my school were communist. I was a good pupil and therefore had good relations with teachers...my teachers would tell me about their time in the student union, about the time spent in jail, that there was no food there, about how the Army and the police beat them. And it made me revolutionary [Sahash].

It is important to note that in societies where schooling is a recent phenomenon, the figure of an educated person, a teacher, is accorded special reverence. Even now, in Nepali villages, teachers are considered 'big people' and are respectfully addressed as 'sir'. In the absence of the mass media, teachers have a unique power to mould the worldview of students. In several cases, prolonged daily communication with teachers established not a formal but a deeply personal attachment, more akin to traditional systems of learning wherein the master-pupil relationship is crucial for the transmission of knowledge and shapes the moral qualities of a student:

There was a neighbour with whom we would meet on a daily basis because we would do some activities together, such as cutting grass. He was a teacher and he would say to me that I should sacrifice for the country and would encourage me indirectly to participate in the Movement and tell that it is possible to live after death [Bhim].

I suggest that we cannot attribute the mobilisation successes of the Nepali Maoists simply to their formal recruitment techniques and indoctrination campaigns. While the importance of their mobilisation efforts and political training programmes have been analysed elsewhere in detail (Eck 2007), the emphasis has been largely on the agency of the rebel group, i.e. the Maoist indoctrination campaigns, in the luring of Nepali youth towards the revolutionary movement. However, it is well known that from the thousands of children who attended such programmes only a few went on into the rank and file of the PLA, especially during the first years of the war. There were more subtle mechanisms and channels – such as relationships with teachers, kinship networks, and personal histories of

suffering, such as the killing of the family members – which made some youth, but not others, join the movement. Furthermore, if we look at the mobilisation process through the eyes of young people, the whole process will no longer look like a purely instrumental Maoist strategy of recruiting rebels for the needs of war. Instead, the process will acquire the intrinsic value of being conducive to learning, and acquiring skills and a new personal identity.

### **Literacy practices in the Maoist Movement**

Rosen has argued (2005:7) that the socialisation of youth into military life has always taken the form of apprenticeship. Similar to other radical movements around the world, the Maoists in Nepal placed special emphasis on discipline and the training of the cadreship. Before joining the PLA, for instance, each novice had to undergo a process of training to test his or her physical and moral abilities.<sup>6</sup> The training usually lasted for 15 days to one month. The daily routine was structured in a way that left almost no free time for the soon-to-be soldiers: after dawn, the recruits would do two-hour sessions of physical exercise, which would be followed by a meal succeeded by talks from senior leaders, then another two-hour session of exercise. This is how one of the former Maoist fighters remembers the military side of the training;

There are different types of armies...the training in the village and in town is different. We would learn how to disguise ourselves, how to act against the enemies, how to survive during the bombing, how to use the weapons, how to kill enemies and how to make the situation safe for ordinary people so that they don't lose their lives, how to walk on the rope, how to jump up to 12-15 feet, how to creep and jump over the walls. We had to take the training within a short span of time, up to 15 days [Bhim].

Ideological lectures were an equally important component of the Maoist training programmes. As one of the former fighters put it, 'Army is not only the armed force but political as well. If you are not politically aware

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6 One of my informants whose dream was to become a fighter was deemed not to be fit enough. The Party diverted him to the medical brigades.

you can't work for the people. Training yourself blindly physically for the war can do nothing. We can achieve nothing in this way (Narendra).'<sup>7</sup> Thus, the learning process that Maoists were undergoing was not limited to military practice or narrowly defined ideological training. It also included time for self-study, which was spent on activities such as reading, writing and discussion groups. When one of the interviewees noted that he managed to get a 'plus two', i.e. a higher school education, during the war whilst being a full-timer in the PLA, I wondered how this was at all possible. How could a person study and wage a war at the same time? He explained to me that there were at least two hours of compulsory self-study per day in the Maoist camps: this was built into the daily routine of Maoist guerrillas.

While this kind of structured routine might appear in significant, I argue that it reflects a broader educational ethos of the Maoist Movement of Nepal and that this ethos was central to instilling a culture of reading and writing amongst Maoist youth. Its manifestation is starkly evident in the abundance of Maoist memoir literature by the former guerrilla youth that emerged in the wake of the war (see Hutt 2012). The emergence of this body of literature is not just of literary but also of social significance. It shows that writing and publishing stopped being the prerogative of a small circle of a highly educated elite or intellectuals, and became a much more democratic practice in which rural youth, often with poor and marginalised backgrounds, could take full part.

The importance of reading and writing within the Maoist Movement struck me when I heard from some interviewees that Maoist fighters were carrying books in their backpacks, that the Maoist leaders were procuring books for the fighters, and that the award given to one of my interviewees for a successful implementation of their first military task was the book *Mother* by Gorky (1954), which describes the revolutionary struggle in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia.<sup>7</sup> These literacy practices within the Maoist Movement are in line with a strong tradition of reading among members of communist parties around the world (MacRae 1961). The mastering of communist literature and communist vocabulary has always been central to the process of creating committed revolutionaries (MacRae 1961:188). In the

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7 For a discussion of the influence of Gorky's *Mother* on earlier generations of Nepali communists, see Gellner and Karki (2007: 385–388).

context of Nepal, however, the literacy practices in the Maoist Movement, while performing the short-term goal of creating committed revolutionaries, achieved a longer-term goal: that of spreading and democratising the practices of reading and writing, which are fundamental to a semi-literate society, such as Nepal was at the beginning of the war.

*Books as a Symbol of Belonging*

Within the Maoist communities of practice, books were more than objects valued for the knowledge contained in them. For a young Maoist, reading was not just an enjoyable pastime; it was a process of delving into the lore of Maoism, shared by other comrades, and participating in a shared clandestine activity. Books became emblematic of the danger involved in being a Maoist and became expressive of the pathos of revolutionary struggle. The books that had been read by someone could place this person on one side of the barricades, and could become a sign of being underground and a reason for being arrested as a suspect guerrilla. Several youths told me how much care was taken to hide books and war-time diaries in secret places such as caves or cow-sheds high up in the hills:

At that time it was difficult to keep books at home. Police could come at any time and they could check the books...We hid the books in the storing drums... I had two drums and kept them under the ground, and when I needed a book I would go and dig it out [Kedar].

In 2002-2003, my friend's uncle was detained by the policeman... we had to evacuate all materials from his home. I took the books to my mother's-in-law home. In front of that house another Maoist was arrested with a pressure-cooker bomb. I got really scared because I had half a sack of books that were stamped by the Party [Mahendra].

Books were crucial in reproducing the Maoist Movement and in ensuring the creation of an imaginary network of committed individuals: the mere act of reading certain books could make a person take part in the underground reality. When discussing literacy practices in Nepal, Ahearn (2001: 189) shows that reading and writing are socially embedded activities and that one should therefore 'note various contexts in which these practices take place'. Indeed, rather than the contents of the books, it was

the context of the Maoist insurgency that transformed communist books into a sign of rebellion and of being underground. Being in possession of communist books could pose a threat to a person's life. This made the act of reading and keeping communist books into a powerful symbol of resistance, of 'belonging to the elect' (Aron 2001: 323) and being 'part of conspiracy' (MacRae 1961:190).

The social practices surrounding communist literature during the war are reminiscent of the circulation of goods between people, but in this instance, the goods, i.e. books, acquired a non-monetary value. Buying books played only a minor role in spreading communist literature: informal exchange became the primary route of gaining access to books. Whereas getting books in Kathmandu was relatively easy, because the shops that sold communist literature were well-known to earlier generations of Nepali communists (Gellner & Karki 2007: 383), in the rural and remote parts of Nepal and within the Maoist Movement itself, informal exchange was the common way of acquiring books. However, getting hold of communist books, transporting and exchanging them, and giving advice about what to read, went beyond the mere logistics of buying and distributing books. It also established networks of personal communication between the members:

When the war began, our home was a shelter for travelling Maoists: many members of the Party would stay overnight and bring banned books. In the market it was very difficult to find books. People would bring books and exchange them but it was very dangerous... There were two secret channels of supplying books...Members of the Party would bring books from Pyuthan. A small amount would come from India. [Kedar].

Maoist literacy practices were part of a wider context in which any activity associated with the Movement was considered illegal – from holding informal classes to distributing communist pamphlets. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the literacy practices occurred informally, through personal networks or kin relationships. In addition to informal classes organised by Maoists, literacy practices would often take place in informal settings such as the houses of teachers. One of my interviewees had vivid childhood memories of visiting the house of his teacher, where

his teacher would play the song 'Our Red Flag is flying over Peru' and talk about the importance of the Russian revolution. As shown by de Sales (2003), several years before the start of the war it was not uncommon to listen to revolutionary songs in mid-Western parts of Nepal. The influence of such songs on youth was often profound: in the words of one of my informants: 'whenever we would hear the song, we would go to the teacher's place' (Saroj). Another youth, Manoj, recalled that the informal settings of the homes of teachers and personal interaction with the teachers were vital to learning within the Maoist Movement:

I was invited by leaders of the party and visited them quite a lot. I would learn from them, I would often go to their homes. You can't do a lot and learn a lot during the Maoist programmes, you learn a lot in leader's homes. I could use their library... Not everyone can use the library of the leaders and have access to them. I was lucky [Manoj].

It is unsurprising that some of the informants who were well-versed in communist theory came from families with comparatively rich personal libraries where children had easy access to books. 'My father [a teacher] distributed communist books. He kept them in the suitcase in the house. I would steal them to read and then return them and put them in their right places so that my father would not notice it' (Kiran). Unintentionally, the houses of communist families turned into spaces where children would participate in informal literacy practices, such as discovering books on Mao and overhearing discussions between party members during meetings held at people's homes. Their acquaintance with communist ideas would thus take a form of learning which developed from being close to the world of adult communists, 'stealing books', overhearing conversations and talking to family friends. This learning took place despite the fact that parents often expressed reluctance to teach their children about communist ideology, wishing to protect them from the dangers involved in being part of the 'underground' world.

*Books as an inspiration for political work*

It is hard to deny that Maoist intellectual training was highly political, and aimed at converting youth into Maoist supporters. There was much emphasis on learning communist theory, especially during the later

stages of involvement with the Movement. The *Communist Manifesto* was by far the most frequently mentioned theoretical source:

I spoke with my uncle who used to tell me about the proletarian movement and we talked a lot about the Communist Manifesto. My uncle would speak about the unity of workers and the 'world to win': 'Workers of the world, get united, there is a burden for you to lose, and the world for you to win.' Though I haven't read the Manifesto itself, these words impressed me a lot. I thought: what can I lose? The identity of the oppressed, of a Dalit? What if I leave this identity and recreate it completely? [Sahash]

Marx's *Capital* was only mentioned by a few informants who remarked that this work was only for well-educated comrades. While theoretical books were central to mastering the communist vocabulary and ideology, many of my interviewees were much more interested in speaking about other types of books, such as biographies of world communist leaders ranging from Mao and Lenin to CheGuevara, and fiction novels, such as *The Bright Red Star* by Li Xintian and *Nayā Ghar (New Home)* by Ahuti, which describe revolutionary events in China (Long March in the 1930s) and Nepal (the transition to the multiparty system in 1990 and the popular movement associated with it). These novels and biographies clearly had a far stronger impact on my interlocutors and appear to have been more important in shaping their worldviews than the complex treatises on communist theory.

Reading books and rendering them to people who could not read or did not have access to books was an important part of the work of Maoist political motivators. The ideas contained in the books were used by Maoist youth to establish personal connections with the villagers: 'I learned how to make conscious-raising campaigns by reading novels and books, such as *Naya Ghar*, Mao's *Little Red Book*' (Binai). Quite a few of my informants, members of political motivation teams, stressed the importance of the novel *Naya Ghar*, citing it as a source of learning about how to talk to villagers and conduct conscious-raising campaigns:

*Naya Ghar* by Ahuti is my favourite novel. I was crying when I was reading it. It is about a communist movement in Nepal. It describes

the movement of 1990. The main character has to struggle throughout his life, though he faces a lot of deception and difficulties before becoming free...

*Q. How would you convince the people to become Maoists?*

I would speak with people and tell them that they are exploited, that they are controlled. I would tell them, "There is no right of the fed to represent the hungry. You have to fight for yourself". It is from *Naya Ghar* that I took these phrases [Saroj].

It would be an exaggeration to say that reading communist books turned people into Maoists. Only in a few cases, for instance in a family in which the father was a committed communist teacher, did extensive reading at an early age precede entering the party. The majority of cases followed the line of gradual acquaintance with the literature in the course of an individual's progression along the Maoist career path. As many interviewees noted, becoming a Party member obliged them to read and even participate in reading competitions:

The first book I read was *The Bright Red Star*. Then I read *Naya Ghar* and *Red Rock (Rato Chatan)*...these two are the most impressive books for me. I wanted to join the party as a school-student and after I joined the party I read more. And the more books I read, the more I felt my decision was right [Narendra].

*Writing diaries, letters and notebooks: unpublished testimonies of war*

It is important to stress that writing as well as reading was a widespread activity among members of the Nepali Maoist Movement. The upsurge in different kinds of Maoist writings is quite spectacular: they range from memoirs and diaries to poems and songs (for an analysis of Maoist memoirs see Hutt (2012); for Maoist poetry see Lecomte-Tilouine (2006)). During the war, many of these written sources were published in the Maoist press, whereas after the war they were published as separate books. I suggest that there is a large corpus of wartime documents which have received little scholarly attention yet, such as the letters and diaries of Maoist fighters. Because the war was waged at a time when the mobile network was not present in most parts of Nepal, letters were the only means of communication between guerrillas and their kin. However, even

though diaries and letters were plentiful during the war, many of them were lost or destroyed during the conflict. Several of my interviewees, who are former PLA members, said that they kept their diaries but had to hide them in remote cow-sheds for fear that the police or Army might get hold of them during raids in the village. In several cases, diaries could not be retrieved after the war because they were either destroyed by the Army or simply got lost. Similarly, the letters sent by Maoist fighters were lost, or to be more specific, burned during the war. The villagers told me that after having read the letters they would immediately destroy them. If the police or the Army found such letters, they could cost a life.

Apart from letters and diaries, wartime notebooks, such as those I saw during my last visit to one of the villages in Rolpa, serve as a testimony of the active learning process that was occurring within the Maoist Movement. The notebooks belonged to one of the former Maoist cultural workers, who migrated for wage labour to the Gulf states after the end of the war. The copybooks were full of songs and poems composed by cultural workers. They also contained lecture notes from political training sessions with detailed descriptions of the biographies of Lenin and Mao and the Marxist five-stage model of historical development. After the war, sadly, the notebooks were kept in the backroom of the village house, serving as the living testament to an impressive educational endeavour and creativity that was present in the midst of war, and to the fading of this spirit in its aftermath.

During the conflict, these notebooks served not only as a repository of theoretical knowledge, aimed at self-education or passing exams, but rather as an inspirational guide and an instrument for transforming society, for working with people and changing 'mass consciousness'. Indeed, while young people in Nepal have been analysed as objects of political indoctrination (Eck 2007), less has been said about young people as subjects who played the role of agents of change and transmitters of a new ideology during the war. From young people's narratives, it becomes clear that Maoist activists considered that exerting an influence on people's worldview to be one of their most important goals. Thus, one member of a political motivation team remembered how cultural and political workers quarrelled about 'who would win the hearts of people, who would help them and get to know them in every possible way, who would be able to connect to them more' (Sahash). The learning of Maoist youth, thus,

reflected the Marxist notion of knowledge, which is rooted in practice and in the active endeavour to change the social world.

*Cultural groups and political motivation teams: learning through practice*

According to Freire (2003), any true revolutionary process, in contrast to a change of power, involves a conscientisation process and a transformation of people from objects into subjects. Echoing many revolutionary movements throughout the world, the Maoists put special emphasis on working at grass-roots level by organising campaigns similar to the pre-revolutionary Russian movement known as ‘going to the people’ (Field 1987), the Ethiopian *zemecha* campaigns (Donham 1999: 29) and the Socialist Education Movement in China (Madsen 1984). In Nepal, a similar educational movement took the form of Maoist consciousness-raising campaigns, which were often referred to by Maoists as attempts to develop or change the consciousness of peasants (*chhetana bikas pariwartan*). As with other strategies, such as cultural performances or torchlight processions, Maoists followed in the footsteps of an already existing tradition. Nepal has a long history of attempts by various actors to raise the awareness of the rural population, from the earlier generation of communists (Shneiderman 2003; 2010) to development workers who based their programmes on Freire’s critical pedagogy (Leve 2009).

The Maoist political motivators were given the task of building up the party organisation in places where it was weak or non-existent. This task was done not only by summoning villagers to attend various sessions in the jungle, but also by conducting research, similar to the research political parties in some parts of India would do before elections:

While going to various places we would gather information notes on class, caste, majority and minority groups: after that we would send the data to the higher level of the Party... We would try to calculate how many people support us, what type of people could support us... (Mishra).

While being distinctly different in form, cultural groups in Nepal performed a function similar to the function of political motivation teams. Used by Maoists to tell villagers about the injustices of the existing order, cultural performances continued the tradition in Nepal of expressing grievances

and protest through songs and theatre (Shneiderman 2003; Skinner & Holland 1996). Describing Maoist cultural groups in China, Snow (1972: 119) wrote that

There is no more powerful weapon of propaganda in the Communist movement than the Reds' dramatic troupes...When the Reds occupy new areas, too, it is the Red Theatre which calms the fears of the people, gives them rudimentary ideas of the Red Programme, dispenses great quantities of revolutionary ideas, and counter-propaganda, to win the people's confidence.

Similarly, in Nepal cultural groups were one of the first Maoist divisions that started preparing the ground for the 'People's War', largely through the so-called Sijacampaign of 1995 (see Ogura 2007: 436). This might be regarded as a clever move, since cultural performances were much more popular among the villagers than political sessions. For many people, the cultural programmes were not only political performances but also a substitute for festivals, the majority of which were banned by the Maoists during the war.

Particularly during the early years of the insurgency, cultural groups became a major entry point into the Maoist Movement for dozens of young people. As early as 1995, cadres of the first cultural groups started passing on their skills to inexperienced youth who would take up the places of their teachers, most of whom would join the ranks of the PLA in the early stages of the war. Whereas for some youths, cultural groups were a transit point on the route to the PLA, for others they became a major community of practice which opened doors to the worlds of politics and art, and turned dancing and singing into work aimed at the transformation of society. This is how a young Dalit woman, Asha, recalls being persuaded to join the local cultural group by the local Maoist village in-charge:

You will learn there, learn there to dance and sing, learn the behaviour you might be lacking now; you will get a change from your life, you will be able to walk and travel freely, you will forget your sorrows; if there is only sorrow in one's mind, it is not good; after you walk with the cultural group, you will get to experience some happy days in your life.

Asha's mother died when she was a child, and she was raised by her father. Being the eldest daughter in the family, Asha spent her childhood taking care of her siblings and the household and did not go to school. Hence the insistence of the local in-charge that Asha would get some relief from her hard life in the cultural group. The emphasis in the recruitment speech as remembered by Asha is on learning the skills and mores within the Maoist Movement, something that many rural youths dreamt of. Another former Maoist girl, a Dalit from Rukum, stressed in her account that by being associated with the Maoist Movement she had become more educated (*padheko*), more travelled (*ghumekeo*) and more knowledgeable (*bujheko*) than the village youths who stayed 'behind' in the village.

In Nepal, the notion of knowledge is closely linked to the practice of spatial mobility – in other words, the opportunity to leave the boundaries of one's own valley, often encircled by high hills. Therefore, when referring to knowledgeable persons, people sometimes used the term *sghumekeo* (literally 'one who has travelled') or *hideko* ('one who has walked') – which are applied not only to people who travel beyond the place where they were born, but also to the ones who know. It is not surprising that travelling to different parts of the country – which was a common routine for both cultural workers and political motivation teams – was valued by the Maoist youth as an important part of the educational experience. As in other countries, travelling to new places constitutes a valuable form of learning and an opportunity to discover the world for young people in Nepal. My interviewees told me of their dreams to travel and they had 'a great desire to see the world' (Puran). 'I enjoyed my work in the PLA. I would visit Jumla and other districts. I would never have had a chance to visit all these places if I were not part of the Maoist Movement' (Kedar). For many young people the Maoist Movement became a window into the social worlds beyond their birth villages, especially so for girls, since the notion of *ghumekeo* is highly gendered in the Nepali context.

Through travelling, performing and living together, young people formed strong bonds of friendship and a distinct sense of identity. According to Lave and Wenger (1991: 53), learning in any community of practice is inseparable from identity building and becoming a certain kind of person, 'a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by different systems of relations'. Whilst narrating their wartime experiences, cultural performers placed special emphasis on the nature

of relationships within the Maoist Movement, 'It was giving identity, we were practising every day. This routine gave strength...We had very good relations – we were very close' [Bahadur].

The feeling of belonging to a distinct social group, egalitarian relationships forged with fellow-members<sup>8</sup> and a new sense of identity were no less important in the processes of learning than the more formal Maoist training. Far from being an exception, this appears to be a general rule within communist groups throughout the world. Leftist movements and their cells have been described as 'a microcosm of a classless society' (MacRae 1961: 190) where all caste, class and gender distinctions are erased. Karuna, a Kham Magar woman in her early 30s, was a performer in a Maoist cultural group during the war. She joined the group at the age of 16, partially influenced by her maternal uncle. Now that the war is over, and the Maoist wartime unions are no longer in operation, what Karuna misses most is the community of friends and the wartime communion with the villagers. In other words, what she remembers most are the relationships forged during the war:

How do you remember the experience of being in the cultural group?  
I was very happy then because I could sing the sorrows which befell me, I could be with ordinary people, and I could express my feelings [in songs]. And telling these stories to other people, I felt I could influence the people...

*Were there many people during performances?*

A lot [with emotion]. And therefore singing and dancing in front of so many people was so enjoyable. From the time I left the work in the cultural group my life turned dark (*andhyaro*) – I was left alone, and this is what I came to realise: walking with friends and enjoying (*ramaune*), going among the people and singing, this is all gone forever.

The narrative makes it clear that the relationships and attachments that were valued by Maoists spanned not only personal ties within the Maoist communities of practice, but also the ties forged with so-called 'ordinary people'. Maoist youth, many of whom left their birth families behind, found

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8 See Donner (2009) for a similar observation about the importance of friendship among older generation of Naxalites in India.

a substitute for kin in the Maoist Movement and in the villages where they worked. Bhim, a Dalit political motivator, who had to spend several months in one village in Sindhupalchowk, recalled that the ‘villagers were like a family for me’. This new kind of allegiance stemmed not only from an emotional attachment to the fictive kin but from what MacRae refers to as a feeling of ‘unity with the oppressed’ (1961: 190). Arguably, this gave meaning to the youth’s activity and their struggles, and provided them with moral justification for the many possibilities for transgression inherent to the transformative measures of any revolutionary movement.

Finally, establishing warm relations with the villagers and ‘winning the hearts of the people’ was part of the Maoists’ strategy of ensuring continuing support for their cause among the rural inhabitants of Nepal. ‘We had 25-26 items [which could be anything from poetry to dances] to practise every day. Since our main goal and motivation was to influence people, we felt that much depended on us. We would train very hard every day...’ [Mishra]. The learning processes at war were, thus, closely linked with the revolutionary praxis and with the process of *acting* in the world. One could argue that young people were so receptive to learning, training and acquiring skills because they felt that these were *needed* in the here and no wand that these activities had immediate *practical* value, not only for their own sake but also for the greater mission of which they were a part.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that a guerrilla movement, an institution which is often regarded as hostile to the notions of creative work and education, can become a site of learning, of developing competencies and informal literacy practices. Similar to other communist movements around the world, the Maoist Movement in Nepal was self-consciously pedagogical, even if it was pursuing a goal opposite to that of formal schooling, i.e. creating committed revolutionaries. Arguably, in the context of war, and with a lack of opportunities for social mobility, a guerrilla movement can attract young people as an alternative provision for learning and a vehicle for social mobility. The case of Nepal’s Maoist Movement provides an example of how the apparently unfavourable socio-political environment of conflict can foster particular literacy practices, such as reading communist literature, organising discussion groups and holding consciousness-raising campaigns.

While one might claim that these war-time literacy practices were highly ideological and instrumental in character because they were aimed at the creation of a network of committed cadres, I would argue that in the context of Nepal, where books remain scarce in many rural areas, these literacy practices were pivotal in the instilment and democratisation of the culture of reading and writing. This is especially important if we recall that Nepal was a semi-literate society at the start of the war.

The article has also stressed that the educational experience of Maoist youth was not limited to ideological or military training. Situated learning, which happened through increased participation in the Maoist communities of practice, constituted an important part of the learning experience of young people. By living in closely-knit 'underground' communities, by travelling together and actively interacting with the rural population of Nepal, the Maoist youth gained hands-on experience of a world in which social activity, practice and human relationships all served as an important source of knowledge.

Whilst the Maoist vision of learning, with its strong emphasis on practice, worked well during a time of protracted guerrilla warfare, it is questionable whether this vision of learning still holds in a post-conflict environment. One could easily dismiss the war-time learning processes within the Movement as being useless in the aftermath of the conflict. It is especially tempting to do so now that significant numbers of former Maoist guerrillas claim to regret having joined the revolutionary forces, and to have forsaken formal education without gaining much in return. However, one should keep in mind that these statements are made with the hindsight of five years and that in Nepal formal educational degrees also often turn out to be utterly useless.

If we regard education as having only intrinsic and not instrumental value, it would be hard to deny that in many cases the Maoist Movement had a deep impact not only on the skills and practices of youth, such as reading and writing, but also on the value they attached to education. When I visited one of the Maoist cantonments in 2011, I was impressed by the discipline of the former PLA members, who used the wealth of time that was available to them not merely for 'time-pass' but also to get a formal education, which many of them had not been able to complete due to the war. They attended different courses, ranging from computer use to first aid, they revised for exams and, as was the case with the girls with

whom I was stationed, they simply read before going to bed. To me, all of these activities appear to be remarkable signs of how radical political movements can foster a culture of learning rather than violence amongst young people.

Finally, there is a clear indication that the members of some of the Maoist communities of practice which are not discussed in this paper, such as the medical brigades, are much better positioned to use the knowledge and skills they gained during the war in the post-conflict environment (Devkota & Van Teijlingen 2010). In 2011, I met at least five former 'barefoot doctors', all of whom were engaged in the medical trade after the war, either by running medical shops or by working as health-assistants in the village, and in some cases by continuing their medical education at a higher level. However, the situation is not so bright for the former cultural or political workers. In the wake of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, all of the former cultural and political workers were disbanded, except for the cultural team at the central level. Unlike the skills of medical workers, their skills were not easily transferable in the post-conflict context. While most of the female former cultural group members got married and started raising families (the usual lot of revolutionary women after a war), some of the male cultural workers migrated to the Gulf States or became peasant farmers. Yet, I would argue that the situated and intellectual learning of which young people partook during the war has intrinsic value, even when it is not directly relevant or beneficial to their present circumstances. It has changed their personalities forever and forms an important part of their new subjectivities and post-war lives.

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### Annex 1: Background of Interviewees

Name (coded)	Age (in 2008)	Age at entry	Caste/ Ethnicity	Formal Educn.	District	Community of Practice
Asha	30	14	Dalit	n/a	Rolpa	Cultural Group (CG)
Bhim	26	15	Dalit	Masters	Baglung	Militia, PLA
Karuna	31	16	Magar	n/a	Rolpa	CG, Women's Union
Kedar	23	11	Magar	10cl	Rolpa	<i>Balsanghatan</i> , militia, PLA (medical brigade), YCL
Kiran	28	14	Magar	10cl	Rolpa	YCL, ANNISU-R
Manoj	30	15	Chettri	Masters	Lamjung	ANNISU-R
Mishra	31	17	Magar	10cl	Rolpa	CG, political motivator
Narendra	26	14	Bahun	SLC+2	Nuwakot	ANNISU-R, political motivator, PLA, YCL
Puran	22	12	Magar	BA	Rolpa	<i>Balsangathan</i>
Sahash	26	15	Dalit	Masters	-	ANNISU-R, political motivator
Saroj	26	13	NewarBa-hun	Masters	Tanahu	ANNISU-R, political motivator

#### Key

Balsanghatan: Children's Organisation

YCL: Young Communist League

ANNISU-R: All Nepal National Independent Students' Union (Communist Party Maoist).