

# Regicide and Maoist revolutionary warfare in Nepal

## Modern incarnations of a warrior kingdom

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*Fig. 1. A photograph discovered by the Royal Nepalese Army on the body of a killed Maoist soldier, and subsequently circulated to the press. It shows, from right to left, supreme Maoist leader, Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal), Badal (Ram Bahadur Thapa), Parvati (Hisila Yemi, wife of Baburam Bhattarai), Baburam Bhattarai, and Prachanda's son. The anxious faces of the unknown followers behind form a stark contrast to the expressions of their leaders. This is only the third known photograph of Prachanda.*

A first version of this paper was presented at a conference entitled 'Figures de la guerre' ('Images of war'), organized by Brigitte Steinmann in Montpellier in December 2002. I wish to dedicate it to Badri, a Magar friend from Timal, who accompanied me in central and western Nepal several times. He died in May 2001, shortly after our trip to Gorkha; but for him I would perhaps still be sitting there, hesitating to cross the vertiginous cliffs along the Budhi Ganga river. I am grateful to Kiyoko Ogura, an expert journalist on Nepali politics and the Maoist insurgency (see Ogura 2001) for illustrations.



On 1 June 2001 a drunken Crown Prince Dipendra of Nepal killed his parents, King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, and seven other close relatives in a shooting spree, after which – according to the official report – he shot himself. By 4 June the assassin, having been declared king in the interim, had died, and his uncle Prince Gyanendra, Birendra's only surviving brother, succeeded him to the throne. As if this was not enough, the leaders of the Maoist insurgency sought to make use of the occasion to spark uprisings in the cities. These failed to take off, but after a ceasefire in the summer the Maoists began to launch direct attacks on the Nepalese army for the first time, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency and what was in effect a civil war throughout the country. US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Nepal in January 2002 to offer the government support against the Maoist 'terrorists'. Although a second ceasefire was negotiated in January 2003, this too broke down by September, leading to renewed violence and spiralling human rights abuses.

In spite of the worldwide media attention that the royal massacre received, and in spite of detailed coverage, in Kathmandu at least, of the intricacies of Nepalese politics, the symbolism employed by the two sides – the king and the Maoists – has remained largely unexplored. In this paper I reflect specifically on the relationship between the development of the Maoist movement and the royal massacre. Though the so-called People's War was launched by the Nepalese Maoist Party (CPN-Maoist) as early as 1996, the royal massacre marked a new phase both in the development of its rhetoric and in its confrontation with the king. I interpret the emergence of the Maoist movement as reflecting the gradual weakening of royal power in Nepal, and at the same time note how it establishes significant continuities with the royal past, despite its communist ideology.

### Warrior kings in a caste society

Nepal is a warrior kingdom. This presentation of the country might seem clichéd, since every Hindu king is, by definition, a member of the Kshatriya or warrior caste. During the second half of the 18th century the kingdom of

Gorkha forcibly unified more than 50 independent kingdoms and imposed its own characteristics on the new state of Nepal which emerged from this campaign (Stiller 1973). Created by the sword in this way, Nepal has managed to remain an independent kingdom and has experienced neither colonization by Westerners nor civil war. Moreover it has become famous in the outside world for its export of soldiers renowned for their ferocity in battle, the Gurkhas (Caplan 1995).

The apparently gratuitous acts of regicide on 1 June 2001 and the violence of the Maoist movement, both before and after June 2001, cannot be comprehended without taking into account the way in which the Nepalese state emerged, with its very basis in warfare. The Thakuris began to seize power in central Nepal as early as the 15th century. Over a period of two or three centuries these numerous small Himalayan kingdoms, led by kings of the same or related clans, fought incessant wars which may be characterized as 'ritual' or 'honour' conflicts, since they aimed more at establishing a supremacy of status than at seizing the land or resources of the neighbouring kingdoms.

The present kingdom of Nepal emerged from one such small kingdom, that of Gorkha in central Nepal. In the 16th century Gorkha, headed by the Shah lineage, a junior line of the neighbouring kingdom of Lamjung, became the centre of the dynasty that was to rule Nepal. At this time Gorkha was led by two figures dedicated to the overthrow of established powers. Drabya Shah (reigned 1559-70) was a junior prince, but he was assisted – according to myth and dynastic histories – by the god-cum-saint Gorakhnath, a disciple of the tutelary deity of the Kathmandu Valley. It is said that Gorakhnath manifested himself to the young prince Drabya Shah and told him that he would become king and that his dynasty would subsequently conquer the Kathmandu valley because the god was humiliated there. This may explain much of the kingdom's untypically aggressive and expansionist conduct in the years that followed.

The unification campaign of Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-1775), the tenth king of the small kingdom of

1. According to Sharma Dhakal (1963), there is no period of impurity following a death on the battlefield. If one dies from a war wound, the number of days of impurity is equal to the number of days that have passed since the battle. Should seven nights have passed since the battle, then relatives have to observe the usual ten days of impurity.

2. *Maoist Information Bulletin* 2, 2002.

3. *Maoist Information Bulletin* 3, 2002.

4. *Raja nango 5*, a play on the traditional title of the King, *sri 5* 'five times venerable' (M.Y. Bhattarai, *Janaawaj*).

5. *Maoist Information Bulletin* 3, 2002.

Gorkha, represents a major break from the formalized rules of war that the Thakuris had followed up till then, and this partly explains his success. Instead of making the defeated kings pay tribute and accept other obvious signs of inferiority, Prithvi Narayan waged an expansionist war, aiming to establish not an empire of vassal kings on the received Hindu kingship model, but a large centralized kingdom with no overlord but the ultimate sovereign.

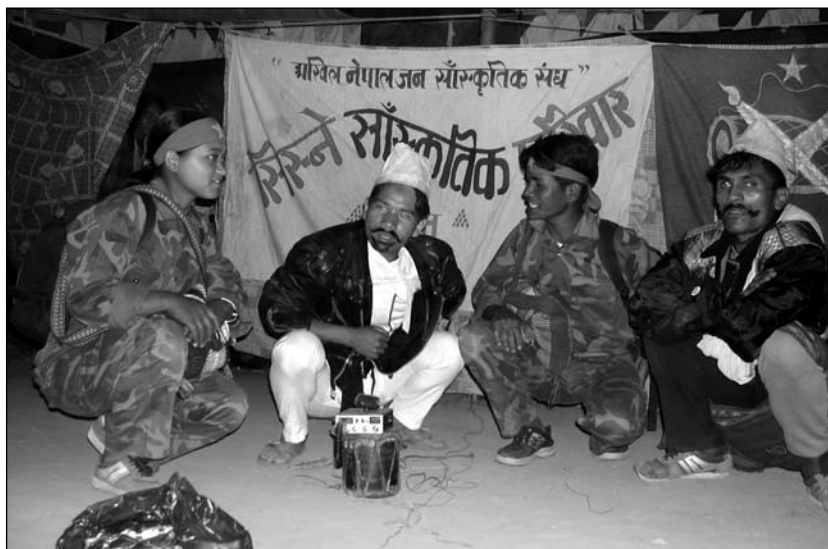
As practised by Prithvi Narayan and his successors, the caste system depended on kings in a very specific sense. As Hocart has emphasized, the holistic coherence of the caste system only becomes apparent in ritual contexts. For Hocart it was above all the treatment of impurity which gave rise to ritual specialisms and to the hierarchy of priests, from which the hierarchy of castes was derived by extension. However, among the Hindus of the Nepalese hills rites of purification such as cremation or shaving the head are not dependent on caste. Caste-based ritual services only structure the entire society in a very specific context: when the whole population gathers around a royal centre and each caste carries out a specific task to celebrate war through worship of the patron goddess and sacred weapons.

### Warfare in the medieval kingdoms of Nepal

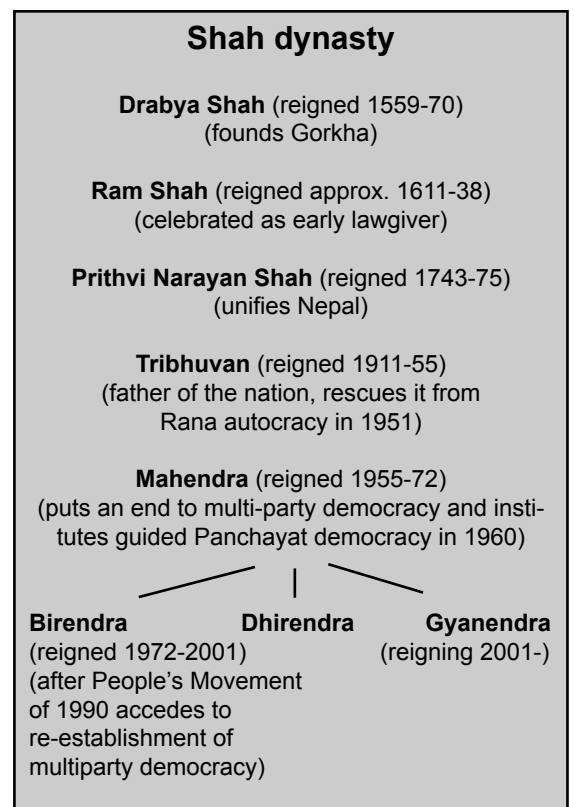
Warfare played an essential and catalysing role in the little kingdoms of west and central Nepal. The ritual services of the different castes were predominantly war-related functions: the Damai drummers and bellringers, the Sarki cobblers and scabbard-makers, the blacksmith-gunsmith Kamis, the tribal and Kshatriya soldiers, and the Brahmin priests and astrologers who propitiate the gods of war and determine the auspicious moments to start fighting or to mobilize troops. This ensemble, focused upon the king, is called up each year to assist in the bloody sacrifices on behalf of the sovereign during the annual celebration of war, the Nepali Dasain or Durga Puja (Krauskopff & Lecomte-Tilouine 1996). This cosmological order, which survives today only in such rituals, was in the past evoked in ritualized warfare. Warfare was the only activity that brought the whole society together around its sovereign, each individual participating, according to specialism and rank, in a common project.

Rituals of war often preceded a period of real warfare. Social and political relationships were open for contestation throughout: this included relationships of subordination or supremacy between kingdoms, of course, but also structural relationships internal to kingdoms, since positions of honour and status were redistributed on the basis of conduct in combat. Thus bravery, even on the part of an Untouchable, could lead to a rise in the caste hierarchy, not

Fig. 2. Maoist activists put on a play at a mass meeting in Chaurjahari, Rukum district (see Figs 3 & 4).



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just for the individual concerned, but for his entire group. More often the reward consisted in being granted a position of confidence close to the king, with land being assigned to go with the position. Those who performed badly on these occasions were correspondingly punished. In this way the warrior king ordered both the world and his society by means of his sword, which today is still used to represent the king, and by extension as a metonym for royal power itself.

War offered the chance to rise in society, an opportunity no other institution could provide. Furthermore, every adult male was a potential warrior, since it was the rule that one man from each house should take part in armed conflicts. (The Maoists have revived this rule in certain places with respect to participation in their meetings and contributions to forced labour, as well as, more recently, for participation in battle.) All men thus had an equal opportunity to distinguish themselves before the sovereign in time of war, which thus represented a quasi-egalitarian context, a kind of counterpoint to the hierarchical and exclusivist logics which ordered all other activities. It is true that opportunities to shine were more frequent for warriors or priests than for those who served them, such as musicians and armourers. But in the chaos that followed a setback or a defeat, anyone of any rank could seize their chance.

More generally, war is placed structurally outside Hindu law because it triggers the notion of 'the dharma of dire straits' (*apat dharma*), which allows all rules of caste to be broken in times of mortal danger. An important consequence follows from this: if the king's duty is to enforce respect for the law, as a warrior king he has in addition the right, and even the duty, to plunge his kingdom periodically into a state of temporary lawlessness. The leaders of the People's War have renewed this tradition by abrogating fundamental Hindu laws (traditionally the great Hindu crimes were murder of a Brahmin, a woman, a child, or a cow). Women, who traditionally do not have the right to kill, not even a chicken, are recruited in great numbers by the Maoists, whereas it is forbidden to recruit them into the Royal Nepalese Army. It appears that children, who are similarly supposed to be kept out of conflict, have also found a place within it, though this is denied by Maoist



Fig. 3. Santosh Budha, a member of the CPN(M) central committee and the 'United Revolutionary People's Council', gives a *lal salaam* at a mass meeting in Chaurjahari. A former high school teacher and a Magar leader born in Thawang, Budha said in his speech: 'Some foreign forces are trying to benefit from the political situation in Nepal. It is possible that our main enemy might not be the Royal Nepalese Army but these forces. In that case, we may have a situation where the two armies could work together.'



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Fig. 4. Thousands of people gathered at this mass meeting organized by Maoists at Chaurjahari on 3 March 2003. Twenty-five members of the newly elected United District Council of Rukum were introduced to the gathering. Celebrations lasted till 3 am and the Maoists put on a play that revolved around 'the families of the Royal Nepalese Army and the People's Army' and tried to show how these two armies could work together for the sake of the nation.

leaders, who are highly sensitive to international condemnation on this point.

The kingdoms of the central Himalayas were not just geographically close. They were also similar to each other in size, population, army, armaments and, above all, cultural values. Thus the medieval period was characterized by war within and between groups which were sociologically alike. The People's War preserves this characteristic, since the fighters on each side are so similar to each other: 'Ram Bahadur kills Shyam Bahadur', as Nepalis put it – village neighbours kill one another.

Medieval Himalayan warfare appears as a kind of ritual contest which barely disturbed the social order and perhaps even worked to preserve it. Later, from the 19th century onwards, the army, and war in particular, have offered peasants of modest means a chance of social mobility: those who managed to join the British Gurkhas, for example, were able to earn salaries that others could only dream of, to travel the world, and, particularly in the First and Second World Wars, to win the highest military hon-



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ours. In recent years this fundamental role that war and the army have played in the regulation of society, and even more in people's dreams of social mobility, has fallen away as a consequence of rising levels of education – and this has been skillfully taken advantage of by the advocates of the People's War. For several years before the advent of the war, in most districts, the Royal Nepalese Army did not recruit anyone who had not passed his School Leaving Certificate. As failure rates in rural areas are extremely high, a large number of young men whose senior relatives were retired soldiers found themselves categorically excluded from a military career.

### War = sacrifice: Brahmins as rulers and warriors

The idea of taking up arms is powerfully attractive, and offers the chance of sovereignty, as Michel Foucault (1994) has remarked. A Maoist battle report (Dipak 2001) illustrates this strikingly: 'As they examined the weapons, comrades showed how much they loved these weapons that were won with the blood of their comrades and that the capture of these weapons was an important factor in the victory.' The sacrificial function of the king's sword revivifies his sovereignty: at regular intervals the king is required to carry out blood sacrifice and the blood regenerates his power. Beheading an enemy in war was itself a kind of sacrifice, a pure death; thus, when a warrior dies in war, his relatives suffer no impurity.<sup>1</sup> As a form of sacrifice, then, war also constitutes a very particular context which is outside the usual norms of purity and impurity. In carrying out his role the warrior has a direct link to the divine, since his very engagement is described as a self-sacrifice, a *bali dan*. Every warrior is thus potentially both a sacrificer and a willing sacrificial victim. In either case the warrior performs a direct sacrifice, without the intercession of a priest.

This conflation of war with the ritual of sacrifice had long been used by warrior kings to reduce their dependence on Brahmins. Now, as Maoists, Brahmins fight back against the king. This new type of challenge represents an unprecedented reversal of the traditional Hindu world order, a supplementary version of the classic antagonism between Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Now it is rebel Brahmin chiefs who oppose the sovereign Kshatriya with warfare, in order to seize temporal power.



Fig. 5. Armed Maoists encountered en route between Karibot bazaar, in Salyan, and Thawang, in Rolpa, March 2003. This group agreed to pose in uniform, but with masks.



Fig. 6. A mass rally in Kathmandu organized by the Maoists on 3 March 2003. Activists carry a huge picture of Prachanda with the slogan 'Resistance is the people's right'. The other banner, held upright, reads 'Peace Talks People's Solidarity Rally'.

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The caste status of the two leaders of the Maoist movement, who are both Brahmins, certainly stands in opposition to their ideology, which is summed up in its simplest form in the name of their movement – the People's War. Neither warriors nor emerging from the people, Brahmins are by definition an elite, traditionally presented as 'gods on earth', and entirely separated from both the power of death and sovereignty, since they have no right to kill (even an animal) and may not be killed. The passage that these Brahmin leaders have been attempting to make from being primarily thinkers, which on its own would not be enough to seize power, to becoming sovereign warriors, would seem to be a rather uneasy trial of strength. It is particularly revealing that the only internal conflict that has been reported, or constructed in order to destabilize the movement, has concerned precisely the attempt of the principal Brahmin leader to control every aspect of the Maoist organization, both its ideology and its military actions. The existence of internal conflict, however, is vigorously denied by the Maoists themselves (see below).

### Maoist Brahmin warrior-kings?

The sociology of the Nepalese Maoist movement is still little understood. Today it has nothing to do with China: the Chinese government condemns it and says it has nothing to do with Mao, while for their part the Nepali Maoists have long regarded the Chinese regime as renegade revisionists. The Nepalese movement is not restricted to a single region, caste group, ethnic group, religious community, or even to a particular economic class. The strategy of the CPN(M) has been to chase out the political and economic elite of the villages in the middle hill region, to put an end to the functioning of all local arms of the state, and finally to replace state structures by those of their own party, along with elections for 'people's governments'. The very nature of the movement is even now undefined. Its leaders proclaim Maoism to be a purely political movement, but the government labels the Maoists 'terrorists' (except when negotiating a ceasefire with them). The Maoists are certainly outside the legal political field and aim to reform it by force; their violence is targeted not primarily on the general population, but rather on those who represent the government – police, army, elected representatives, members of well-known political parties. Thus they align themselves with revolutionary movements that use terror to achieve their aims.

The Maoists' People's War has elaborated a new symbolic system which in its romanticism has attracted large numbers. The followers are offered a whole new way of life which resembles an enormous boy scout organization, in which young people go off in uniform to camp in the forest, and undertake good deeds in villages while supported by the villagers. In this bohemian life of adventure, discussions on how to rebuild the world alternate with revolutionary songs and games of hide-and-seek with the security forces – though obviously with a degree of realism that goes far beyond the purely ludic and symbolic. A striking feature of the movement is also a remarkable degree of logistical organization involving the movement of arms, infiltration of areas controlled by the enemy, holding meetings, and the publication and distribution of revolutionary tracts. The movement's ideology offers its members a new interpretation of their circumstances for those who have not succeeded educationally or economically as they may have wished to; in particular it gives them the opportunity to struggle against their situation and to develop a new understanding of their oppression and exploitation. The Maoists have been able to develop a genuine mystique (to borrow the expression of Sanjeev Pokharel, 2002), which combines violence and the bonds of brotherhood: this produces a very high degree



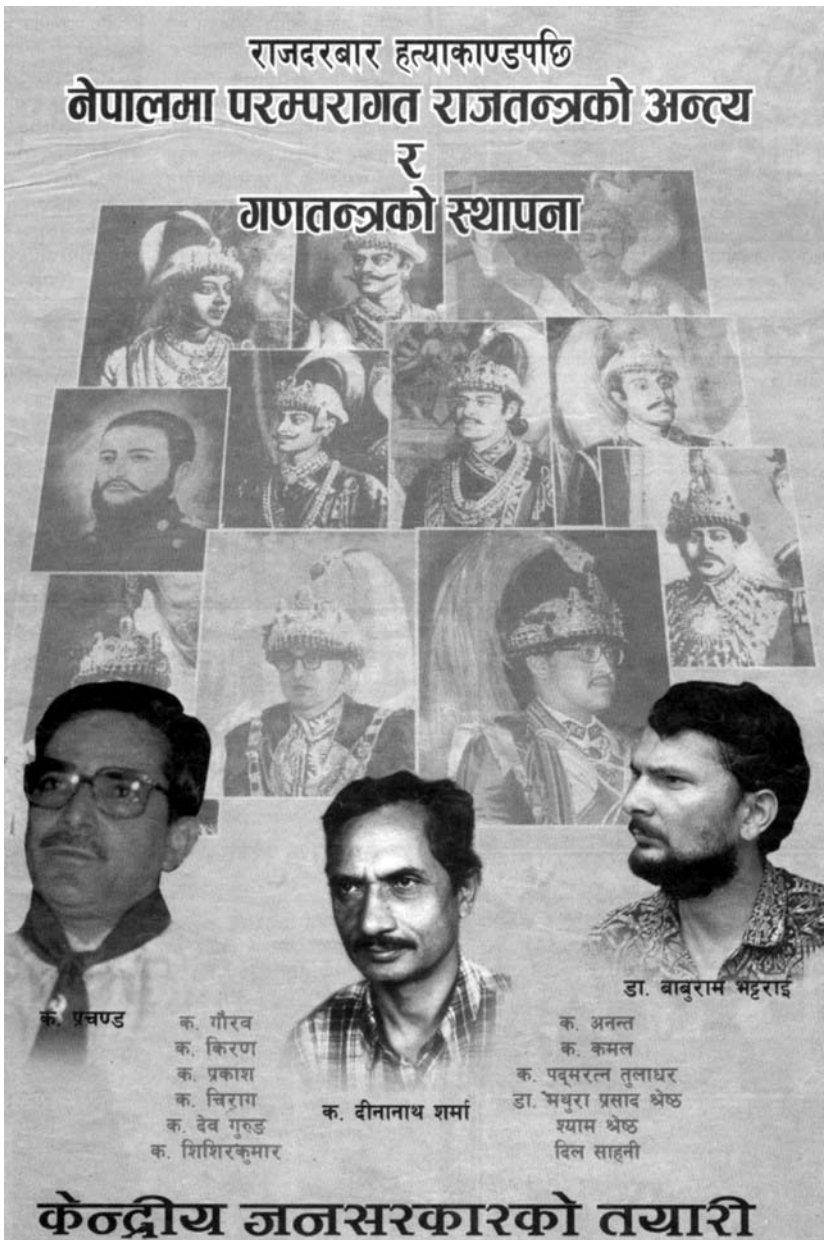


Fig. 7. Cover of the pro-Maoist magazine, Naulo Bihani ('new morning'), which appeared after the royal massacre. The headline reads: 'Following the royal massacre, the end of traditional monarchy in Nepal and the establishment of a republic'. The pictures show successive Shah kings, starting with Prithvi Narayan Shah in the top right-hand corner and ending with King Birendra at the bottom right. Below them are shown three politburo members: from left to right, Comrade Prachanda (the overall leader), Comrade Dinnath Sharma, and Dr Baburam Bhattarai. The headline below that reads 'The central government is prepared'.

of cohesion inside the movement, and terror outside it.

In 1951, when the present king's grandfather Tribhuvan returned to power after a century of government by the Rana prime ministers, who had usurped military leadership, he immediately reclaimed his role as commander-in-chief of the army. King Birendra retained this role even under the 'democratic' constitution of 1990. Lacking other powers (though permitted by the notorious article 127 to 'remove difficulties' to the functioning of the constitution), the role of the king under the present constitution has been reduced to its most basic aspect, that of warrior.

How far does the People's War borrow the model of warrior kingship, and how far has it progressively attempted to replace it, in particular through the behaviour of its two leaders since the royal massacre of June 2001?

When the leaders of the Maoists launched their People's War in February 1996, this very initiative put them, so to speak, in the position of sovereigns, since the first form of sovereignty resides, as we have seen, in the declaration of war, an exaggerated form of the power over death. The publications of the CPN(M) illustrate this perfectly: the Maoist leaders speak to warriors, are surrounded by warriors, reply to the government by means of military actions which speak for them as much as their words. Their victories are above all military ones. However, they are not themselves warriors: they never carry arms and never wear military dress or headgear. By contrast, their troops sport a

red headscarf, the *kaphan*, which is a symbol of mourning, and is said to be the sign that they willingly accept their own death.

Like conquering kings, the Maoist leaders abrogate the legitimate right of the sovereign and his government to raise taxes on the land; the hitherto accepted Hindu view of land as belonging to the king is substituted by the precept that appropriating 'surplus' revenues is illegitimate. Because school teachers 'do not work on Saturdays' and the Maoists consider Saturday a working day, in many places they have to give one-seventh of their salary to the Maoists. One should note, though, that the Maoist opposition to taxes on land is primarily symbolic, since the levels of tax on land are currently insignificant. The Maoists also organize local elections and have set up people's tribunals, supplanting the royal prerogative of administering justice.

### Maoist leaders as successors to Shah kings

Confrontation with the king and the monarchy came to the fore only with the assassination of the royal family in June 2001. During the days immediately following the massacre, Maoist leaders judged that the monarchy had effectively been abolished or, as supreme leader Prachanda put it, 'In the present circumstances, when objectively the monarchical system has ceased to exist...' (Prachanda 2001). The Maoists in fact proclaimed common ground with King Birendra. In Prachanda's words: 'As for those genuine patriots who saw in the king and the monarchy the means of safeguarding the country, there is no reason why they should feel terrified by the Maoist movement, towards which King Birendra had a liberal view' (Prachanda 2001).

Taking advantage of a popular rumour, which has become an increasingly widespread conviction, that Gyanendra must have organized the massacre, since he is not present and was the principal beneficiary of it, the Maoist leaders have openly called him a murderer and illegitimate king. And in an unexpected reversal, the Maoist leaders have taken it upon themselves to uphold the values which the Shah kings supported and present themselves to the world as the natural successors to the Shah dynasty which is now, they claim, extinct.

In a photo-montage published in the pro-Maoist journal *Naulo Bihani* (2001), the Maoist leaders are placed in continuity with the Shah dynasty, which is shown starting with Prithvi Narayan, the great warrior king who 'unified' Nepal. There are also other indications of the Maoist strategy of appropriating the glorious image of the Nepalese royal dynasty: Baburam Bhattarai, the other leader of the party, ends his press statement on the 'new Kot massacre' by citing Prithvi Narayan's famous injunction in his book of advice, the *Dibya Upadesh*, which has an almost sacred status for Nepalis: 'Let everyone be alert'. The analogy between the Kot massacre and the royal massacre is itself rich in subtext, since the former event is seen as ushering in the period of autocratic and authoritarian rule by Rana prime ministers, to the detriment of the legitimate rulers, who were reduced to mere puppets.

The People's War is repeatedly represented in Maoist writings as a replication of Prithvi Narayan's unification, but on a 'voluntary' basis, in order to build a new state. To provide a concrete image of this future state, revolutionary meetings end with cultural shows which give the impression that the whole of Nepal is represented and which demonstrate the voluntary association of different nationalities.

Since the assassination of King Birendra, the conflict has escalated into a direct confrontation between the Maoists and the king, each supported by their own army. The foremost slogan of the party has become: 'Down with



Fig. 8 (above). Ruins of the Rukumkot area police office, built on top of a hill as a secure fort. In April 2001 Maoists raided the station leaving 40 dead, of whom 32 were policemen. After this attack, many police stations in Rukum and neighbouring districts were evacuated.

Fig. 9 (below). The symbols of kingship: a target of the Maoist movement since June 2001. Dullu remained an independent kingdom within the kingdom of Nepal until 1960. The Dullu municipality still had a royal palace inhabited by a member of the local dynasty until April 2002, when it was destroyed by the Maoists. This gesture was explained by a local cadre of the Maoist movement as a necessary evil, in order to build up a totally new and different future in Nepal.

the feudal-murderer Gyanendra clique'.<sup>2</sup> The Royal Nepalese Army is referred to as 'the hired asses of Gyanendra that go by the name of royal army', the Prime Minister is the 'vile lackey' of the king, Gyanendra is the 'self-proclaimed "king"', the 'butcher', 'murderer', or 'puppet',<sup>3</sup> the 'five times naked king'.<sup>4</sup> Thus the whole revolution has evolved into a civil war against the monarchy. Henceforth the army of the people is opposed to the army of the king, which is no longer 'royal' in the sense of defending the kingdom, but merely because it defends the king (*Revolutionary Worker* 1112, 29 July 2001). Baburam Bhattarai goes so far as to say, in a recent statement, that the Maoists want neither to establish a communist republic nor to share power under the current monarch:

...bourgeois (capitalistic) democratic revolution is the immediate political agenda and abolition of monarchy is the core issue of the entire project... Whereas the one motivated (or ill-informed?) section prefers to believe the ultimate goal of this war to be nothing short of a communistic republic, the other keeps on harping it to be mere pressure tactics to get a larger share of loaf within the present monarchical dispensation. Both the views are... wide of the mark of the objective reality. (Bhattarai 2002)

The autocratic and feudal monarchy is a particular target, Bhattarai explains, because it combines in itself all the different forms of oppression: religious, regional and national. Furthermore, the monarchy dangles 'a Damocles sword over the parliament'. Thus the monarchy has become the target to be destroyed.

Shortly after Gyanendra's dismissal of the prime minister on 4 October 2002, which was perceived as a 'coup', Prachanda directly defied the king, calling on him to sac-

rifice himself for the sake of the people and the nation by participating in a constituent assembly which would draw up the new constitution.

Now, in order to present himself as an alternative to the king, the principal leader of the CPN(M) had no choice but to adopt a warrior-like image, which he had only recently begun to cultivate.

### Prachanda becomes a military leader

When the People's Liberation Army (PLA) held its first convention in September 2001, the arrival of Comrade Prachanda was greeted with volleys of gunfire, just like the arrival of the king at a military parade. Prachanda had himself proclaimed 'Supreme Commander of the People's Army' on this occasion, thereby becoming the veritable *alter ego* of the king. There is a further parallel: just as the sovereign retained this position under the new constitution of 1990, the secretary of the Maoist party takes official command of the armed forces just at the time when rumours were rife about his conflict with the man who until then had been described as head of the PLA. This is Badal, a Magar rebel who had started a revolutionary movement called Sija which the CPN(M) had managed to incorporate in their own movement. The rumour was widely put about, especially by the army press organs. For example, the *Voice of the Army*, a mainstream publication, maintains:

Frightened by the popularity of Comrade Badal, Prachanda... shivering and fearing to be killed by Badal... has dismissed him from the party. Having stopped the Sija campaign [led by Badal], he closed up the source of the 'Sija fountain of thought' and... created the Prachanda path. (Sampang 2002)

The Maoist answer to this rumour can be read in *Maoist Information Bulletin* 1:

...the reactionary rulers... tried to create the impression that a so-called military wing headed by Com. Badal [Ram Bahadur Thapa] was responsible for pressurizing the Party leadership to take the current course of action... The actual reality is that our Party has developed a unified and centralized leadership under the supreme command of Chairman Prachanda and all the major decisions have been taken unanimously... Com. Prachanda is the Chairman of the Party and the Supreme Commander of the PLA... Certainly Com. Badal is not the 'Military Chief'...

By combining both executive and legislative powers, Prachanda has succeeded in gaining complete control of the movement and, at least for the moment, in preventing the Magars from emancipating themselves and gaining access to the centre of power. The speeches of Comrade Prachanda demonstrate that his new title of commander-in-chief of the army has required some adjustments: he declares that it is necessary 'to politicize the PLA', suggesting an intention to bring it under the stricter control of the party (and himself).

Henceforth it is no longer a question of a popular movement struggling against oppressive reactionaries, but of the confrontation of two rival armies. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is opposed to the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) as the leader of the party is to the king, with the People's Council presented as 'an alternative structure to the monarchical structure'. Like the monarch, the Maoist leader only expresses himself in the first person plural and controls his image tightly. Only three photos of him are currently known, and these have become veritable icons from which all kinds of photo-montages have been constructed. (It must be said that the second photo already looks like a montage, the head and the neck appearing much thicker than the arm and body of 'Prachanda'. It looks as if Prachanda's head has been put on a body dressed as a Maoist.) Very few have seen him in the flesh and his person is shrouded in mystery for villagers.





Fig. 10. Maoist leader Dr Baburam Bhattarai addresses a mass meeting held in the capital, 3 April 2003.

Maoist Information Bulletin: see [www.insof.org](http://www.insof.org).

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However, they usually reject the suggestion that he may be an imaginary personage created by Bhattarai, or more reasonably someone used by the latter for political purposes. The invisible leader's speech and aura are certainly reinforced by his physical absence, which has raised him to the level of the 'terrible' legend his name suggests (*prachanda* in Nepali meaning 'terrible').

### Sacrifice and power

The rise of the Maoist leaders to heights they had never previously reached, and the evolution of their movement, can only be understood in relation to the image and behaviour of King Gyanendra. Steeped in the sea of blood which was the occasion for his accession to the throne, and the father of a prince infamous as the alleged perpetrator of hit-and-run manslaughter offences, the king is described by the Maoists with sanguinary imagery:

As if to fulfil a predetermined quota of human sacrifice every day, on an average more than two dozen persons per day have been brutally massacred by the RNA [also called 'the royal butchers' in the same text]...<sup>5</sup>

But far from trying to dissociate himself from this bloodthirsty image, King Gyanendra has evidently opted to embrace it. His record so far is stamped with blood sacrifices and forceful actions, reverting to wholly traditional models of the seizure and deployment of royal power in Nepal. At his first Dasain as king, Gyanendra set off on a pilgrimage to offer worship and sacrifice at all the temples on Nepalese territory with links to his dynasty, going right back to its origins – Lasargha, Gorkha, Nuwakot. Dasain, let us remember, is the great warrior festival, which reaffirms the sovereign in his position. During his first official visit to India, Gyanendra offered a total of five blood sacrifices to Kamakhya, the great Tantric goddess of Assam, which kept him in the news (see, for example, 'Nepal King leaves bloody trail behind', *The Indian Express*, 28 June 2002). Then he dismissed the prime minister and formed a new government, making use of a rather vague clause in the constitution. Even though a large part of the royal family had been exterminated, the new king augmented his annual allowance from the state considerably.

In this way the king has done much that is seen as obnoxious, making appeal to the gods and causing blood to flow. He has placed himself in a long tradition that could issue in the sacrifice – as the Maoists see it – of his own person, in either symbolic or real terms. This appeal for the sacrifice of the Butcher King on the Maoist movement's altar is made in a Nepali poem by Samir Yatri, published in the Maoist journal *Janaawaj*:

... swimming in a thick sea of blood

Which intoxicates and excites the gambler on his throne,  
He staked all on the bloody tragedy of wiping out the  
family of his own elder brother and killed him,  
And calls himself the legitimate inheritor of the crown;  
He killed him by drowning him in an ocean of blood,  
And tasting blood, he feels exquisite pleasure.  
He has become the puppet of the White House,  
The butcher raised up in Narayan Hiti palace,  
Has transformed a beautiful country into a charnel house,  
He has made himself the Great King of slaughter.  
This is the moment to burn the emperor on his funeral pyre,  
This is the moment to throw the emperor in his tomb...  
Let us wipe this emperor out with torture,  
Let us turn his throne into his bed of thorns...

It might be said that the figure of the king has regained its catalytic role and even been reinvigorated in the context of the People's War and following the royal massacre. This kind of renewal of the monarchy by the murder of the father (and/or the brother in the popular imagination), and the assumption of power by the junior line, takes us right back to the origins of the Gorkha dynasty. Once again the sovereign has allied himself with the Magar ethnic group which predominates in the western hill districts where the Maoists have their stronghold – just as his ancestors did on numerous occasions in order to strengthen the king's power (his sword). After dismissing the elected prime minister in October 2002, Gyanendra appointed the president of the Magar ethnic association, Gore Bahadur Khapangi, a minister. Shortly afterwards, by what mysterious process is still not clear, Lok Bahadur Thapa, the leader and founder of the Magar National Liberation Front, which had been an important ally of the Maoist movement, surrendered to the authorities. Then another Magar, the Minister of Works and Physical Planning Narayan Singh Pun, was appointed by the king, without consultation with any of the political parties, to lead negotiations with the revolutionary leaders. This return to ancient forms of authority is not without its difficulties in the present context, and is likely to appear anachronistic to the growing urban elite.

On the other hand, the initial Maoist call for the sacrifice of (or by) the king has spread among the other political parties, particularly the Nepali Congress, as a recent newspaper headline indicates: 'King's sacrifice needed for political stability: Experts' (Ojha 2003). Among the experts quoted, Lok Raj Baral, professor of political science at Tribhuvan University, declares: 'The more the king sacrifices, the easier will be the outlet.' Laxman Aryal, former Supreme Court justice and a member of the committee which drafted the 1990 Constitution adds: 'It is high time the king should express his sacrifice for the country.'

### Conclusion

I have argued that there is a connection between the emergence of the People's War and the gradual weakening of royal power in Nepal. Prachanda has increasingly represented himself as the king's *alter ego*, and furthermore as a legitimate ruler opposed by a king who has been relegated to the rank of 'butcher', and therefore transformed into an unworthy version of the warrior king. The king has attempted to reinforce his role of sacrificer, but the notion is understood in manifold ways. The king does indeed sacrifice to the gods; from the point of view of many he is sacrificing his subjects; the Maoists believe he should be sacrificed; while the main political parties proclaim that he should sacrifice his own privileges for the welfare of the nation and for their benefit. Kingly sacrifice is thus a matter of political consensus in present-day Nepal, perhaps even the only political symbol on which everyone agrees. But as a complex notion, and a highly contested one, it is impossible to predict how it will apply to political developments in future. ●