

EXCLUSIVE : NEPAL POST-GYANENDRA

After victory, revolution!

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Amit Sengupta travels through the still tense and volatile countryside and finds that Maoists are ready for another push if the Koirala government belies popular aspirations.

The night is thick with the smell of the forests and mountains, while beautiful river Karnali ripples below like a shining, pure miracle in the far western end of Nepal. A miracle, because it is perhaps the last untamed river in this Himalayan nation of 6,000-plus small and big rivers, where its biggest rivers like Gandak and Mahakali have become trapped victims of unequal Indo-Nepal treaties, whereby the big brother gobbles all the water and little Nepal is left high, dry and thirsty. The Japanese have built a fantastic hanging bridge over Karnali, and as the night darkens as it does in the forests, children from the village across, Chisapani run across the bridge, shouting 'Loktantric Ganatantra', democracy, democracy, republic, republic, like a childhood chant of magical freedom.

This little village too protested for 19 days, blocked the highway, shouting slogans popular across Nepal - Paras goonda, rukh mein jhunda. (Paras is a goon, hang him on the tree). Paras is the notorious son of autocratic King Gyanendra. Also, Gyane chor, desh chod (Thief Gyanendra, leave the nation). In Nepal, clearly, it's an autocratic king versus the people.

But Gyanendra, or his son, are in no mood to leave. He is still there, hanging on, and so is his Royal Nepal Army, and so is the discredited army chief, General Pyar Jung Thapa, and the miscellaneous feudal chieftains and the stinking rich elite, who have usurped and fleeced this poor nation of its blood, sweat and natural resources; who have killed, arrested, maimed and eliminated thousands of ordinary people and dissenters, especially the underground rebels of the Nepal Communist Party (Maoists); who have gagged the press, co-opted the judiciary, destroyed public institutions, hauled writers, artists, lawyers, housewives, human rights activists inside jails and torture chambers, and who had unleashed a reign of State terror and the nights of long knives after the Emergency last year.

We crossed river Karnali in the midnight dark. A wiry man in uniform crosses our way and disappears in the shadows. "Maobadi," (Maoist), whispers Guruji, our driver. We have travelled almost 1,000 km in the last nine days across the strongest Maoist territories, so we are not surprised. We move on, further west, into the tense, volatile, often fiercely violent forests and byways of Nepal's first revolution.

Army jeeps upturned, tyres, drums, barbed wire, bunkers, young Gorkha soldiers with their hands on the trigger in blue fatigue, tired and edgy, hundreds of check posts, barricades, barriers. We cross through epic battle-sites, police stations bombed out, bridges under which they killed the Maoists and dumped the bodies, villages where the young ones disappeared, massacred. We enter a sudden battle zone, an empty and desolate army check post on the highway, no soldiers in the bunkers, no guns behind the sandbags, no barricades. It's silence, and even the trees don't seem to move. We slow down and stop.

Anything can happen. They can shoot to kill. They don't trust anybody. We can be the enemy. In

these mountains of dense forests, the Maoists can come anytime, from any side, this too is their stronghold and they know the terrain so well. Sometimes they attack the army or district headquarters (as in Kapilavastu in April) in thousands, 5,000-6,000 strong, as they did at Tansen when they captured the town, led by women commanders. (Women constitute 40 percent of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA)).

We hesitate, fear runs through our veins, but we move. And then suddenly, a flashlight blinds us. It moves inside our Tata Sumo. "Who are you, where are you going in this night?," the voice is far away and anonymous, one voice, but there are others, and the flashlight is still scanning us. It's the army and we can't see them. Guruji tells 'the voice' that we are Indian journalists. The voice retreats but returns. "Okay, go, but don't come back in the night."

Not all army check posts are as tense as this midnight mountain post. Nepal is slowly discovering the first, eclectic, half-empty joys of democracy after a long spell of severe repression. The 19-day non-violent revolution has pushed the king into a corner, but rumours of palace intrigues, betrayals and compromises are all over the place. And the old fears still remain.

Will the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) led by old and wily Girija Prasad Koirala, yet again betray the people, as it has done so many times in the past? Will the army stage a coup? Surely, the elite, fattened by absolute, autocratic power and pelf, will not give up so easily? Will the Maoists be allowed to join the interim government? Will the discredited 1990 Constitution be scrapped, an interim Constitution be formed and the SPA's 12 point-agreement with the Maoists be adhered to in its totality? Will the Constituent Assembly be formed, and what will happen to the king and the army, and the PLA spread across the rural landscape? Will there be a counter-revolution?

The truth is that Maoists, now following a ceasefire, control most of Nepal, whereas the king earlier had only Kathmandu and the satellite towns under heavy army control. But still, of the 75 districts, the Maoists control 75 percent, and their mass popularity is entrenched across the landscape. They are feared and admired for their sacrifice, tenacity and guts, they live and die for the poorest of the poor, among whom they work and survive, building schools and roads, distributing land, providing instant justice, and most crucially, creating social and political empowerment, political awareness and effectively destroying the ancient structures of feudal oppression.

And the people hate the king. They blame him for the palace massacre. "We personally abused the king and his son. He has to go," said Maoist Comrade Athak in Nepalganj at the Bahraich border in UP. He is the district secretary of Bako and Bardia. In Mahendranagar at the Uttaranchal border (now renamed Bhimnagar by the revolution after Bhim Dutt Pant who led an armed peasant movement in the 1960s and was killed by the king's men), Krishna Dutt of the Communist Party (u/ml) says, "The Maoists are an invisible force, but they are always there, and they should be in the government because they too were a major force in this jan andolan."

Across Nepal, even in the Terai region of Madhesis bordering UP and Bihar, from Pokhara, 200 km from Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, and hundreds of miles beyond to Gyangsha, Butawal, Lumbini, Kapilavastu, Nawalparisi, Nepalganj, Banke, Bardia, and to Bhimnagar in Mahakali, as in Rolpa where the Maoists first began their struggle in the mid-90s, the red graffiti is written everywhere on the walls: Destroy the criminal autocrat murderer King, Create a democratic people's republic. Their tangible presence is everywhere. And it was they who had mobilised the villagers who had gathered in the towns all over the country in April in thousands.

"The SPA, people and the Maoists were the three forces behind the non-violent jan andolan, but the Maoists were the biggest force," says human rights lawyer Gopal Sivakuti Chintan. "The Maoists have to be integrated in the interim government, the 1990 Constitution should be scrapped, a

Constitution should be immediately drafted, the king and his son should be put on trial and their property confiscated, all political prisoners should be released, those who committed crimes against the people should be punished and the Constituent Assembly process should have begun. Or else, Nepal will go for a second revolution.”

Indeed, Nepal is already going through a second revolution. A million stories, buried by repression, are coming out. A million memories. In Bhimnagar they renamed the Gyanendra Marg as Jan Marg. All hoardings of his majesty’s government have been replaced across the rural landscape, including the one right opposite the Singh Darbar, which includes the parliament in Kathmandu by the sickle and hammer of the People’s Republic of Nepal. Statues of the king and his ancestors have been broken, new songs and poetry are being written, the ‘criminals and oppressors’ are being chased out, and people are closely watching the SPA in Kathmandu. “If they betray, we will not spare them this time,” declared Comrade Karan, the young Maoist district secretary of Pokhara, in a jampacked auditorium commemorating the martyrdom of Comrade Vikas Dahal, killed by the army in a fake encounter.

The non-violent movement has seen 21 deaths all over Nepal, including one protestor shot dead at point blank range in Kathmandu reportedly by notorious ssp Durja Kumar Rai, who has been suspended. Several have been shot in the leg, like farmer Yamlal of Guleria village in Bardia district. “If they betray, I will again go to the streets,” he says. What if he is shot dead? “I will die for the nation. But a republic we must have, and this king must go.”

In the poor dalit colony of Khajura village, the three emaciated children of Shahid Setu Bika run after us shouting pro-democracy slogans. Where has your mother gone, I ask. “She was shot dead by the king,” says Ashish. Setu, 26, a dalit, travelled 10 km to Nepalgunj to participate in the struggle. “There were one lakh people on the streets,” remembers Sushma, her neighbour. “A teargas shell hit her and she choked and died.” Incredible tales of valour and sacrifice mark the landscape. The people, in thousands, braved the police, and destroyed the Gyanendra Memorial at the Gyanendra Chowk in Nepalganj, after Setu died. Now the broken memorial has a new board - Shahid Setu Bika Chowk.

Some Maoists now come overground for brief periods since the terrorist tag is gone. They are still wary and alert. They don’t trust the army and the government. So how does it feel to be overground? Comrade Ramil Ram, 25, explains: “We know there are conspiracies to kill us, but when the people become strong, we will be protected by them. We have declared ceasefire, but we have other ways of protection.”

But not all the time. According to Comrade Athak, 12,000 people have been killed by the army and police in the last ten years, 5,000 Maoists, and 7,000 ordinary people and Maoist sympathisers. While 2,000 Maoists are still in jail, 1,400 cadre and supporters have disappeared. Like Arti Sharma’s husband, Tanka Sharma, a grocery shop owner, in Dhulegauda village in Kaski district near Pokhara. “Yes, he was a Maoist,” she says, tears rolling down her eyes. Tara Adhikari, 34, a poor peasant from Saimaran in the same area, said her husband Chabi Adhikari and his sister, Muna, both Maoists, were killed in fake encounters. Only her body was found in the field, her eyes strapped with a cloth, her hands tied behind the back, a bullet in her neck.

While the army doesn’t disclose its list of casualties for security reasons, there are sisters, brothers, wives, mothers whose loved ones have disappeared, there are stories of torture, kidnappings, rapes, and murders stalking the bylanes of Nepal’s villages. But the resolve of the people seems amazing. You can experience the heightened consciousness, the political clarity and the determination of the humble, friendly, passionate and articulate Nepali people in town after town, village after village. Crushed by feudalism, poverty and oppression, they are ready to die for a free republic - of equality,

freedom and justice.

Comrade Suraj from the Kaski area in Pokhara is 25, he has been underground since he was a teenager, and he has participated in armed attacks, as in the Beni assault in the recent past where 64 of his comrades were killed. "It was like cinema, the helicopters shooting at us, we shooting at them. I felt pain for long for my dead comrades, but we must carry on." He, like most young Maoists and even non-Maoists who constitute the scaffolding of the struggle, are coherent, measured and politically sharp. "This is just one step forward. We have to raise the pitch beyond Socialism in the next step," he says.

He once lived in the jungle, hungry for eight days, chased by the army. "At that time it seemed difficult, but now I find that experience interesting," he says, and smiles. Suraj's wife, Nischal, 21, also a Maoist, was captured along with four women comrades, kept in army custody for 10 days, tortured and then killed. Will he marry again? His smile hides his pain, "We are married to our ideology of liberation. But we must marry, because, with so many dead, who will carry on the struggle in the next phase?"

Next morning, at the Kaski Karagah, the notorious prison, I find Suraj's memory in thin Avantika's angular smile. Just about 25, she has been arrested three times and has spent six years in jail. She and her young comrades, Asha, Sharmila and Lila are sitting on an indefinite fast demanding the release of all political prisoners. There are 14 girls and 73 male Maoist prisoners in the jail, all of them in their 20s. The boys are also sitting on fast, shouting slogans, demanding a Constituent Assembly. The girls tell their stories of torture, their heads pushed inside water drums, their feet smashed repeatedly, their eyes sleepless with interrogation. They don't tell me everything, they leave out the gory details. What are you fighting for, I ask. "Freedom, equality, justice and democracy for Nepal." Why Maoism? "For Nepal and world revolution."

Young, stoic girls and boys, with red bands strapped on their heads with a red star, not yet killed in a fake encounter, still lucky to be alive, determined prisoners of the revolution, fighters unafraid, politically focused, stunningly committed, smiling as easily as the mountain sunshine outside. I shake their hands, and they hold my hand with warmth and fortitude, and my eyes swell with anger and angst. And unfinished hope, like the unfinished hope of the April revolution. Lal Salaam comrade, I say, and move away. I think of the old, decadent, power-hungry politicians in Kathmandu, and I think of the young idealists and dreamers here and elsewhere, who have put their life at stake chasing the dream. And I am convinced if the young don't find freedom and justice in the first revolution, they must find it in the second and the final tryst with destiny.

Yes, the Second Revolution.

P.S.

* From Tehalka Jun 03 , 2006.