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Why “I” became a combatant: A study of memoirs written by Nepali Maoist combatants

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes combatants’ accounts of their engagement with the Communist Party of Nepal, Maoist—CPN (M). We use Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) as a framework and thematic analysis as a method to examine how social relationships and contextual factors contributed to political party identification during the ten-year-long Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Based on the study of autobiographical narratives written by Nepali Maoist combatants, we demonstrate that a) key social and political experiences cumulatively evoked feeling positively inclined to partisan attachment; b) CPN (M) party ideology, which was presented as a cure-all to socio-political difficulties, actuated the predisposed people’s partisan alignment; c) families were largely unsupportive of their members’ intention to take part in the war; and when they participated, the family responded with antagonism; and d) party ideologues of the CPN (M), who met the partisan-leaning individuals as close friends, accelerated and sustained their friends’ motivation to become involved in the armed conflict. Together the findings culminate in a view that engagement with CPN (M) during the insurgency occurred despite resistance from family and increased exponentially because of societal and political experiences, the strong appeal of party ideology, and social network dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Armed conflict; Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist); Nepal; socio-political context

Introduction

Theoretical propositions as well as an increasing body of research have outlined multiple causations while explaining underlying factors of armed conflicts. These explanatory factors seem to acknowledge the agency of three major actors: structural factors, rebellious groups, and individuals. Scholars who find the role of structural factors prominent point to the gap between “expected and actual access to prosperity and power”1 as a major source of people’s affective engagement. This understanding has been asserted by a substantial body of empirical work with its claim of economic reasons2 as a perennial cause of violent conflicts. Similarly, burgeoning literature on ethnicity and violence3 lends support to this claim. In this view, grievance or greed or both dictate individuals’ as well as groups’ decision to take part in armed rebellions.4 Contrarily, researchers who emphasize the role of rebellious groups suggest the greater significance of the collectives’ strategies. They demonstrate, but without denying the contribution of structural factors,5 how the
rebels’ network, indoctrination, and coercion compel individuals to join armed groups. Alternatively, a few scholars, most of whom come from the tradition of partisanship, examine individuals’ agency in the process of political engagement. It is suggested that engagement in political violence is a function of the amount of time exposed to a particular political attitude. Still, others have concluded that willingness to refrain from or engage in collective revolutionary action is related to individuals’ emotions, particularly emotions in the face of external threats.

The line of inquiry related to individuals’ agency brings two interrelated concerns to the foreground for researchers working to unfold the causes of armed conflict. First, do we need to examine how individuals understand their engagement in armed conflict? Second, can we draw insights profitably from partisanship scholarship to inquire about armed conflict? We believe that neither concern deserves outright rejection. Following an argument espoused quite recently regarding an obvious oversight of scholars on partisanship, we extend insights from this domain to examine how individuals understand their position vis-à-vis the context of armed conflict. While using their insights, we do not resort to any study which maintains exclusively that alignment with a political party and its effect on voting behaviour is a partisanship associated with peacetime. Rather, we deploy insights from those studies which espouse that political partisanship can result in engagement in collective action and violence. Given that we intend to examine a case of armed conflict in which the rebellious side was and is a political party, we find our decision to deploy insight selectively from partisanship as well as armed conflict literature justifiable.

A number of studies have already tried to address the causes of insurgency and its expansion in Nepal, the place of interest in the present study. To a large extent, these inquiries have focused on structural factors and the rebels’ role. In the literature of the former category, inequality of various types, such as social, cultural, and economic, and the failure of the Nepalese government to rectify these inequalities have been considered as the prime factors. The latter, on the other hand, has emphasized the importance of rebels’ strategies. Of the many studies, one concludes that the party’s strategy of “revolutionary songs” played a crucial role in attracting people to the party. Another study claims that CPN (M) attained accelerated support by adopting Mao Zedong’s strategy of organizing the party along five lines—mass line, united front, violence, political warfare, and international action. Similarly, a few explanations foreground the role of indoctrination and political education by minimizing the influence of structural variables. It is argued that CPN (M) effectively linked villagers’ dissatisfaction with their daily lives to problems in the political realm for the specific purpose of rebel recruitment.

Our interest here is the combatants’ declared reasons for their involvement, an issue which, as yet, has drawn very limited scholarship. We examine some of the accounts combatants themselves offer as explanations for their engagement by analyzing autobiographical writings of the combatants involved in the ten-year war in Nepal. Studying armed conflict in the Nepalese context, particularly with the focus on alignment with CPN (M), is important mainly because the study can shine a light on the exponential increase in the number of party combatants—rising from a few dozen fighters in 1996—30,000 within the span of ten years—despite numerous adverse conditions for Communists. Our study focuses on individual combatants’ agency and perspectives on their own engagement. We use a mainstream social psychological theory to understand these processes,
namely the addressed self-categorization theory (SCT).\textsuperscript{25} SCT concerns the social-cognitive basis of group membership, and provides an avenue to understand social and psychological outcomes of human interactions.\textsuperscript{26} More particularly, the theory conceptualizes the self at different levels of abstractions—superordinate (human), intermediate (social), and subordinate (personal)—and explains when and why a particular sense of self referred to as a social identity becomes relevant and operative.\textsuperscript{27} The usefulness of SCT to study the psychological basis of political conflict derives from the fact that ideologies occur and arise in particular social contexts and thus their study cannot afford to separate the context or sociology from the person or psychology. This is a fundamental tenet of SCT, which has allowed researchers to adopt the prism of social identity to examine the issues of political ideology and political violence across a range of contexts.\textsuperscript{28}

The writings that we have selected for the study comprise representative cases of personal narratives by Maoist cadres who had taken part in the ten-year war in Nepal as combatants—Tara Rai, Ganga Bahadur Lama, Samjhana B.K., and Surul Pun Magar.\textsuperscript{29} Given our theoretical position as well as our interest in the CPN (M) cadres’ self-explanations of their involvement in armed struggle, we address three research questions. First, we are interested in the combatants’ views of the importance of party ideology in their initial partisan attachment and subsequent political action. Second, given our self-categorization framework, we examine the perceived role of socio-political context on the combatants’ agency while they made decisions about their engagement with the conflict. Finally, given the role of social relationships in the construction of a sense of self, we are interested in how social relationships were perceived to impact the combatants’ involvement in the conflict.

**Method**

**Historical context**

The history of Communist ideology-guided armed conflict in Nepal dates back to the early 1970s, when a group of young cadres launched an underground guerrilla movement to eliminate what they called “class enemies.” The group beheaded seven local landlords before they were suppressed by the army force, the Royal Nepal Army (RNA; now NA). After these events, Nepali Communists started splitting into groups, and worked mainly underground throughout the Panchayat System, imposed in 1961 by the monarch after suspending a prior democracy that had lasted a decade. In April 1990, an alliance of Communist factions, the United Left Front (ULF), was formed to fight hand in hand with the Nepali Congress (NC) for the restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal. These efforts ended 30 years of the monarch-led, party-less Panchayat System. A group of radical Communists, which had not joined ULF, rejected the Constitution drafted in November 1990. They demanded a Constituent Assembly that would write a new constitution. The group then evolved into the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Center) and decided to adopt the path of protracted People’s War. But, as all the factions did not reach a consensus, the Center worked aboveground partly by forming a political front, the United People’s Front of Nepal (UNPF). The Front contested the 1991 parliamentary election, and won nine seats out of 205. In 1994, a group broke away from the Center and formed the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). A year later, the party decided to
abandon democratic political activities. In February 1996, the party submitted 40-point demands to then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba; these demands included issues related to nationalism, people’s democracy, i.e., a republican state, and economic justice. The government’s inability or unwillingness to address these demands resulted in the initiation of armed conflict.

The Maoists led this armed struggle from February 1996 to November 2006, and the intensity of the combat was a huge surprise to many. The surprise was due to the “unforeseen” increase in people’s involvement in the war. When the party declared war, it had “only 200 very active cadres” and a few simple weapons such as sticks and socket bombs. These limitations had obliged the party to deploy a guerrilla warfare strategy for fighting against the state force. Within five years, however, the party reached a strategic offensive position that pushed the state forces into defensive positions. The combatants then attacked the strongest military frontier of the government, the RNA barracks, in three district headquarters. These attacks were followed by deployment of the RNA and the imposition of a state of emergency to curb CPN (M) activities. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of casualties on the CPN (M) side. According to Nepal’s Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC), total deaths from 2001 to 2005 reached 11,490 whereas in the previous five years total fatalities had been 1,698.

An agreement between the government and CPN (M) was signed to formally end the ten-year war in November 2006. The accord agreed to accept democratic norms and values; restructure the state by resolving problems related to class, ethnicity, gender, and regional differences; and guarantee fundamental rights of people to take part in constituent assembly elections. It was also agreed to manage arms and armies of both the national army and the Maoist group. The party claimed that they had 32,000 People’s Liberation Army members, around 20,000 of whom were verified by the United Nations (UN).

Selection of texts

With the peace accord in 2006, publication of personal narratives increased substantially. It might have been because of the freedom granted by the Nepali Government for printing and publications after the peace agreement. Prior to the agreement, any individual or organization that published content related to the Maoists’ activities was subjected to jurisdiction. The provisions made it impossible for aboveground publication houses to publish the combatants’ experiences. Secret presses run by the CPN (M) party or their supporters, on the other hand, published very limited accounts of experiences and disseminated them to the intended populace. After the peace agreement, the restrictions on publications were lifted, which allowed publishers to bring out the combatants’ experiences. When some of these writings gained a huge success in terms of their sales, a number of publishers ventured to publish personal narratives of the combatants. According to an updated bibliography prepared by Martin Chautari, 51 memoirs written by Maoist cadres involved in violence (the third line according to Mao’s taxonomy) were published within a few years after the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA). Most of these narratives are written in Nepali, the national language of the country. Among these accounts, forty-seven are single-authored texts whereas four are edited volumes. Of the single-authored books, twenty-three recount experiences of combatants who had been involved in face-to-face
encounters with security forces. The remaining books bring out stories of breaking out of custody, the functioning of media during the war, the experience of being in an army camp, descriptions of raids and attacks on army barracks, and acknowledgement of the contributions of dead comrades. Those which render the combatants’ experience are of significance for any scholar trying to understand individuals’ explanations for their engagement as they narrate the combatants’ explanations for joining the rebellion.

Given the war had brought individuals with diverse backgrounds together,38 we selected texts to ensure variation in the ethnic, gender, and caste background of the authors. In ethnic terms, the combatants were largely from groups of Tibeto-Nepalese origin, such as Magar, Tamang, and Gurung. Caste-wise, the people of Indo-Nepalese groups such as Kami (ironsmiths), sarki (cobblers), and Damai (tailors) were motivated to take part in the armed struggle. In terms of gender, around 20 percent of the combatants were female. These considerations helped to ensure that the selected texts included the experiences of diverse people. Based on these considerations, we selected Tara Rai’s Chhapamar Yuwatiko Diary [The Diary of a Young Guerrilla Girl],39 Ganga Bahadur Lama’s Dasbarse Janayuddha: Smritika Dovharu [Ten Year People’s War: Marks of Memory],40 Samjhana B.K.’s Yuddabhitraka Sansmaran [Memories of War],41 and Surul Pun Magar’s Aandhisanga Khelda [Playing with Hurricane].42 All of these texts are book-length autobiographical accounts of CPN (M) cadres who have reported at least one case of a combat encounter with the RNA.

These authors come from different ethnic, gender, and caste backgrounds. In terms of ethnic and caste background, Rai comes from an ethnic minority living in the Eastern Development Region of Nepal. The community speaks the Rai language, engages mainly in agriculture, follows the Kirat religion, and celebrates seasonal festivals. Their population, according to the most recent national census, is 2.3 percent of the national total. Lama belongs to an ethnic group from the Central Development Region of the country. The group speaks the Tamang language, engages in agriculture and mountaineering, and follows Buddhism. Their population, according to the national census, is 5.8 percent of the national total. B.K. belongs to a social group of an untouchable caste living in the Western Development Region of Nepal. This group speaks the Nepali language, engages in metal works, and follows Hinduism. Their population is 4.8 percent of the national total according to the census. Lastly, Magar comes from an ethnic community living in the Mid-Western Development Region of the country. This community speaks the Magar language, engages in agriculture, and largely follows Hinduism. Their population is 7.1 percent of the national total according to the census.

These narratives were selected also because they represent different facets of violence after the deployment of the RNA,43 in terms of the frequency and magnitude of the cadres’ involvement in violence. Rai’s narrative represents an account by a female combatant who had a single encounter with the army resulting in physical torture and a profound psychological impact, whereas Lama’s writing represents a case of a male’s encounter in which the level of physical injury was very high. B.K.’s narrative represents a female’s account of multiple encounters and a number of physical injuries as a result of her encounter with the Nepalese army. Magar’s text represents an account of a male combatant who had many encounters and subsequent severe physical injuries.
**Analytic method**

We have deployed inductive Thematic Analysis (TA), a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns through “careful reading and re-reading of the data.” A great advantage of TA is that it provides a means to organize and summarize findings from a large and diverse data corpus. Basically, the approach involves coding, which is capturing the qualitative richness of the phenomenon so as to identify and develop themes from the codes. The data corpus for coding comprises personal narratives of the Maoist combatants who had been involved in combat with the Nepal Army.

Our analysis is based on the text extracts pertaining to the three types of elements in the narratives. The extracts include the sections of the texts that narrate the authors’ understanding of socio-economic and political conditions before CPN (M) declared war, and offer explanations for their motivations for political attachments. These are the sections where the authors have exposed their socio-economic and political background and commented on their position in society. They provide an understanding of who they are because they use “autobiographical reasoning.” These elements were initially identified by the first author. To ensure that all potential elements of the narratives are included, a second reader read through the memoirs and also highlighted “autobiographical reasoning.” Where discrepancies occurred (there were three passages not included by both readers), an inclusive approach was taken and material identified by either reader was included for subsequent analysis. The narratives were then translated from a source language (Nepali) to the target language (English) by the first author so that both authors could engage with the analysis.

**Analysis**

Analysis of the dataset was carried out in six consecutive phases: reading and re-reading of the data, coding interesting features of the data, collating codes into potential themes, checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report. Coding of the translated extracts was done using an inductive thematic approach. This allowed coding categories to be identified directly from the text data.

**Findings**

In our analysis of the dataset, four major themes are identified. As all the themes are related to the research questions, they explain the combatants’ reasons for their engagement with revolution. Among the themes, some are congruent with widely acclaimed findings whereas some appear in contradiction to those findings. Following are the themes consistently occurring in the narratives of the combatants: a) socio-political experience; b) political ideology; c) individual-family relationship; and d) friend and comradely influence. All the themes, except the fourth one, contain subthemes.

**Socio-political context**

The first theme underlines the connection of a broader socio-political context with party identification. We found that social injustice, administrative unfairness, and political
happenings propelled the memoirists to develop a revolutionary thinking which was essential to their identification as combatants. It was also observed that not only national-level events but also international conflicts motivated them in their alignment with the CPN (M). Two subthemes appear in our analysis of the socio-political context: the first relates to social context (subtheme 1) and the second political happenings (subtheme 2).

The first subtheme acknowledges the influence of the immediate social context. We discuss this theme with reference to the following extracts:

Extract 1

Ram said again, “I will call army from Aitabare; just wait and see, you Maoist.”

“I don’t bother whether you bring police or army. Is the army your fathers? Should they come when you wanted? Have you fed them personally?” I retorted in anger.

“We have power in our hand; we will surely bring army,” they left my house speaking loudly enough for the whole village to listen. . . . After they went I waited with the feeling that the army would come. . . . The incident made me more revolutionary. I could sense the degree of kings and lords’ suppression from the deeds of petty vassals like the two . . . I felt that other people in the village like them must be brought in people’s custody. . . . After being a witness to Ram and Laxman’s atrocity, I decided to join people’s war which was aimed to establish rule of the oppressed.

Consider Rai’s substantive communication with Ram and Laxman (the names in disguise with no suggestion of ethnic or caste identity) (extract 1 above), which extends over three pages in the memoir; it points to the exploitative nature of Nepali society and its relationship to identity formation. The nom de guerre for the two people makes clear that Rai did not intend to show the functioning of ethnicity or caste in this instance of oppression. Ram’s threat to fetch a state apparatus like the army to subdue any voice of difference was understood as one of the characteristics of a feudal society. It made Rai think that Nepali society still carried a legacy of unlawful repressive practices even after the restoration of democracy in 1990. The abuse of villagers by people like Ram and Laxman, with the presumed power of the state in their hands, made Rai imagine the magnitude of terror that could prevail in other places where the suppressors were exercising more power due to their entitlements. She felt this suppression was unacceptable and thus decided to “join people’s war which was aimed to establish the rule of oppressed.” The causal link between atrocities meted out to guiltless people even in a democratic system and the decision to partake in the revolution is presented by Rai as something that impelled her to become a combatant in the people’s war.

Magar’s account (extract 2) reiterates the perceived causal connection between social context and political identification more explicitly. Three of the features of Nepali society —structural discrimination, discriminatory governance, and feudal society—are presented as key forces in stimulating feelings of obligation for revolution. Magar perceived Hukam and Maikot as structurally excluded and administratively neglected places. He understood the government as being intentionally unjust to the people in remote areas. Moreover, the predicament of a dumb man and the victimization of ordinary people at the hands of feudal powers presented to him a picture of brutal treatment of the poor in rural areas. Magar could not tolerate the system; instead he developed a revolutionary spirit. In this sense, an unjust and discriminatory context provided the context to activate a sense of himself as a fighter against tyranny:
Extract 2

Rukum is one of the districts which still suffer from caste, region, gender, and class discrimination. Hukam and Maikot are the most remote villages in Rukum. . . . These villages were never paid attention by the government. . . . The incident is of around 1988. I was nine years old then. Uddaman came to Maikot along with two dozen policemen to repress villagers. All the youths escaped to jungle; only old people, women and children stayed in the village. . . . Uddaman charged baton to everyone not sparing even a dumb man; he lost three of his teeth. They snatched away around 15–20 hens and some liquor from our village. . . . Being a witness and victim of Uddaman’s atrocities, feeling of fighting against such tyranny automatically developed in me, I think.

The other subtheme relates to the role of political circumstances. As illustrated in the extracts below, the memoirists’ decision to join CPN (M) was precipitated by political happenings. Magar (extract 3) and B.K. (extract 4) exemplify the influence of national-level politics whereas Lama (extract 5) shows the bearing of an international political event. The theme speaks to the fact that not only the most local context but also the broader geopolitical contexts anchor party identification:

Extract 3

From 1991 to 1994, a massive class struggle took place in Hukam and Maikot. Thereafter, many false cases were filed against general people and the cadres of The United People’s Front of Nepal (known as Janamorcha). A large number of people went missing. . . . During that time, there would hardly be any week when the supporters of Nepali Congress and Janamorcha did not fight. We heard every week, "so and so of this party had his hands and legs smashed, skull fractured; and women also scuffled." There was no question of the happenings in Hukam not affecting people in Maikot.

Magar found the combat between the two economic classes after the end of the King’s direct rule in 1990 significant. Democratic process after 1990 had not proceeded smoothly because of, among other reasons, the perpetual tension between two forces which had fought hand in hand to end the Panchayati system. Unlike the Nepali Congress (NC), which supported a capitalist agenda, the United People’s Front (UPF) had Communist plans. The differences in their visions compelled some of the parties in the UPF to street demonstrations and the shutdown of business and vehicles on the grounds that the decision to end revolution was a conspiracy. When the NC won the first election held after the end of the Panchayati system, physical confrontations between the government supporters and opposition parties became very common. Being a person who had already witnessed the suppression of villagers by Uddaman during the Panchayati system, he found the activities of the NC no different from that of Uddaman. Consequently, Magar found aligning with Janamorcha contextually and subjectively meaningful.

The effect of political context on action and combatant identity formation was seen in B.K.’s narrative (extract 4) as well. Pyauthan, one of the districts in Western Nepal, has been known as a “stronghold of communists.” In such a context, B.K. found herself interested in the dominant political position, namely the Communist party. Later, B.K. was exposed to a different political context, i.e., people’s war, and thus found the activities of CPN (M) most appealing. Finally, she decided to become involved in combat. This implies that the transformed context made her engagement with likeminded people something she sought to access.
Because Pyauthan was a stronghold of communists, I was interested in politics since my childhood; but the feeling that I should be actively involved in politics began after being witness to the activities of People’s war.

The excerpt from Lama (extract 5) exposes the role of a spreading political context. The revolt of 1979, which started with a few hundred students heading to the Pakistani Embassy to lodge a protest letter, grew more intensive after Nepali police blocked the students forcefully. Within a few days, the protest not only became more violent but also escalated throughout the country. This context influenced Lama substantially in the sense that it transformed him from an apolitical adolescent to a politically oriented man. Two characteristics of the revolt—destruction and mass mobilization—appear to have accentuated his journey toward revolution as a meaningful self category:

Extract 5
I was fascinated by politics after the revolt of 1979. The protest led by students was against the decision of Pakistani military government to execute Prime Minister Julfiqar Ali Bhutto with the death penalty. The protest grew more intensive than expected. I was 18 years old then; politics was totally unknown to me. I had never witnessed scenes such as torching government buildings (Royal Nepal Airlines Company, Gorkhapatra Corporation) with fire in any of the mass movements before. . . . I participated in the revolt as I saw many people joining it.

Political ideology
The second theme concerns the political ideology of CPN (M). Our analysis suggested two subthemes: ideological naiveté (subtheme 1) and stereotypical understanding of party ideology (subtheme 2). The first subtheme reveals the memoirists’ initial ignorance regarding the ideological outlook of the party whereas the second subtheme spotlights their limited understanding of party ideology.

Rai’s brief confession in her account, “I didn’t know what their philosophy was; yet I became a communist,” exemplifies the first subtheme. Becoming a Communist generally means embracing the ideology of Communists and participating in their political activities. In Rai’s case, however, we found an absence of any sense of the party ideology. Echoing Rai, Lama (extract 6) confesses a similar position. For him, understanding and embracing the ideology of Communists was not a precondition to becoming a member of the CPN (M). His revelation about other members of the party, particularly of leaders in higher positions of the hierarchy, is even more important: it underscores the nature of even the leaders’ understanding of party ideology:

Extract 6
My inclination to communist party was neither because of an understanding of party ideology nor due to an expertise in political/ideological standpoint of the party. Now, I find it interesting to know from the experience of most of the cadres and leaders that they became active in politics in similar way.

The second subtheme highlights the stereotypical understanding of party ideology. As elsewhere, the Communist-led war in Nepal was claimed as a fight against the oppressor class. In the publications of CPN (M), the people’s war appears as an obligation to end social and economic inequality, geographic disparities, poor governance, and repressive
behavior by the state apparatus. These beliefs manifest in memoirists’ accounts through the repetition of the same line of argument.

The extract below (extract 7) shows how the ideology of CPN (M), which was presented as a cure-all to difficulties, motivated partisan-aligned people to identify with the party. People were given the idea that the party would end every form of exploitation and bring about the reign of the proletariat. “New system,” one of the catchwords of CPN (M), denotes an escape from the existing feudalistic practice. Magar’s wishful thinking against “Uddaman and the police” reveals a reiteration of what the party envisioned in the new system. Similarly, the image of the guerrilla appears in a stereotypically romantic vein; there is no sense of hardship and risk involved in his understanding of the guerrilla. His instant willingness to be a guerrilla shows how this commonplace understanding attracted people like him to engage in the combat:

Extract 7
“A war is going to take place in our land to bring new system,” the chief of our village said. One old man asked, “How can we bring good system for poor when we have no weapons; changing system requires fighting against armed forces like police and army?” The chief replied, “Guerrillas can fight against them. One guerrilla can kill thousands. He can fly from one hill to another.” . . . My heart took a flight, “I would beat both Uddaman and the police if I got a chance to get guerrilla training.”

Rai’s account (extract 8) also shows how this stereotypical understanding influenced her party alignment. She despised the existing system and developed a positive attitude toward Communism because she believed that none of the bad features in the party-less Panchayati system—suppression, discrimination, nepotism, and favoritism—would prevail in “Communism.” This suggests Rai’s stereotypical understanding of Communism. As negative stereotypes are ascribed to the former system and thereby positive characteristics to the Communists, she found aligning with them a better choice:

Extract 8
Because of the prevalence of suppression, discrimination, nepotism and favoritism prevalent during the regime of the time, I developed hatred against the Panchayati system. We were told that such forms of injustice have no space in communism. My interest in communist politics was also because of the absence of bad features in the system. I got involved in war . . . I was driven to political line of the party because of the feeling for the characteristics of communists and the system.

Individual-family relations

The third overarching theme relates to combat, combatants, and family members. It was observed that the memoirists’ family members viewed the Maoists with antagonism and thus they objected to their family members’ pro-combative decisions either openly or indirectly. We identified two subthemes: latent resentment (subtheme 1) and outright objection (subtheme 2).

The first subtheme demonstrates the perceived deterrence by families toward their family members’ participation in the people’s war. Lama’s wife exemplifies the case (extract 9). She wished that her husband would not engage in the war but could not demand his withdrawal in a straightforward way. He was so adamant that her requests
would not change his decision. This shows the latent resentment of family toward the combatants:

*Extract 9*
Neither my parents nor the neighbors had known about my involvement in the people’s war. There was no talking about the issue with the family. My wife, however, had known about my involvement in politics. After I went underground, familial and economic situation worsened. All the works messed up… . My wife had well known that returning politically engaged people into normal life was as hard as chewing iron flakes. She was obliged to let me do politics suppressing her oppositions.

The above extract (extract 9) is important also from the perspective of a second subtheme as it hints at limited discussion within the family about combat. Lama had not informed his family about his “involvement in people’s war” because he knew that the information would invite disagreement with his parents. The following extract (extract 10) from B.K. articulates the theme more prominently. B.K. wished to align with the Maoists, but her mother objected to this, which is clear from the verbal cues used by her mother. She used cues to indicate that pro-Maoist activism was shameful, gender specific, and anti-traditional. Clearly, the cues were used to object on multiple fronts so that her daughter would not show any further interest:

*Extract 10*
I said to my mother, “Mother, Maoist party is very good, right? Should I also do politics?” I had only said this much, when my mother said irately, “What are you talking; neither your father nor your brother did it. Being a daughter, do you want to shame yourself? If you do, I won’t call you my daughter. Do you recall how much your brother has advised you? He has been hankering after a job so as to educate you. My daughter, don’t talk like this, everyone will disown you.”

The mother’s repugnance, however, did not work—B.K. left home to join her friends who were waiting in “another village.” Two distinct places—another village and my home—appear in the account below, showing outright objection of the family members (extract 11). “My home” exists as a binary opposite to “another village”; the former was the place she had abandoned without leaving any information with her mother. When the mother knew that her daughter was in “another village,” she pleaded for her return. The mother’s engagement in admonishing, questioning, and pleading for her to disaffiliate from the CPN (M) were symptomatic of the family’s profound objection to B.K.’s engagement with the party:

*Extract 11*
The message of our staying in another village happened to reach my home. Then, my mother arrived to our place to persuade me to return home. She tried a lot to take me back home. With tears in her eyes, she pleaded to return me home, but I denied her.

**Friendship and comradery**

The fourth overarching theme examines the function of friendship during partisan alignment: we observed that inter-personal processes oriented and motivated the predisposed people to partisanship. As apparent in our extracts, the memoirists had certain friends who provided emotional support, sympathized with daily predicaments, and showed
readiness to help during difficult times. Lama’s narration (extract 12) exemplifies the role of friends’ empathy in his early engagement with the party:

Extract 12

My friends would meet me regularly and hand over books on Marxism. I was, however, not interested in these books. To tell the truth, I would buy books from them but would throw them in the corner without reading. . . . Friends were involved in politics. So, I gradually grew emotional and increased my involvement in politics. So, yes, I dived into politics because of good companionship with some people. . . . Unlike other friends, Sharma and Gautam, would ask me if I had any problem and always showed readiness to help me.

The extract dichotomizes “Sharma and Gautam,” and “other friends” to spotlight the role of close friends. Two important features of the friends—empathy and frequency of readiness to help—are noteworthy here. It is with these qualities that the friends created an affiliative influence\(^\text{59}\) that persuaded Lama to involve himself in politics. Lama’s initial apathetic response to books on Marxism in the light of changed alignment sheds more light on the significance of friendship. His interaction with them, the extract shows, transformed him from a politically agnostic individual into a strongly affiliated person in party politics. Similarly, B.K.’s memoir (extract 13) also explicates the role of friends:

Extract 13

I had huge interest to go on to higher study so as to represent Dalits which was a backward and oppressed caste. But, my interaction with friends who had Maoist ideology envisioned my dreams fulfilled through war; and I thought that revolution was a higher than ideal than familial or social life.

B.K. had two options related to her career choice, one pertaining to her Dalit family’s aspirations and the other relating to the dreams envisioned by friends. With no second thought, she opted for the revolution after meeting the friends who had partisan attachment with the CPN (M). Had friends not been influential, revolution would not have appeared more important than being an exemplary case for her “backward and oppressed caste.”

Rai’s account (extract 14) also substantiates the theme of the role of friends. Through her narrative, we know that a friend’s presence at the time of a series of rejections from her family played a crucial role. The extract demonstrates how meeting “a friend one day” became a decisive moment for political engagement. Her reference to an “uncertain stage” denotes a time when her family was offering her a cold environment. In pursuit of familial affection, Rai had gone to her maternal uncle’s house, only to face indifference. It was then that she decided to take a “journey of significance and risk.” Importantly, that the decision was taken after meeting a friend highlights the proactive role of friends in political identification:

Extract 14

In the uncertain stage of my journey, I returned to my maternal uncle’s house; but, it didn’t look as familiar as before. Grandmother had died; it can be because of that the place did not feel to me as before. Meantime, I met a friend one day in Premjung School; she was affiliated to a sister organization of CPN (M). The meeting initiated my journey of significance and risk.
Discussion

The study of CPN (M) combatants’ narratives answered our research questions related to the party cadres’ understanding on the role of ideology, the effect of social relationships, and the influence of socio-political context. It showed their partisan attachment dynamically related to friendship, societal happenings, party ideology, and family. We found the first three factors played an instigating and accelerating role in the process of political socialization. The role of family, however, was observed to be proscribing: the combatants engaged with the party often despite resistance from family members.

The theme related to friendship provided an explanation for the combatants’ decision to align voluntarily with the CPN (M). We observed that the party cadres, mostly the individual motivators, played a decisive role to exert influence and effectuate motivation either by making themselves available at the crucial juncture of people’s lives (extract 14) or by maintaining sustained interaction (extracts 12 and 13). This observation explicates the proposed causal connection between friendship and party identification, and also lends support to the idea of an important functioning of peer groups in adolescent political socialization. Certain ideologues of the party, through close contact with the non-partisans, sympathized over their daily predicaments, and showed a readiness to help during their difficult times. A number of characteristics of non-partisans were suggestive in the memoirs: they were in need of solace due to financial problems (extract 9), or anxiety due to an uncertain future (extract 14), or social injustice (extract 8). Their counterpart, on the other hand, appeared promising (extract 7) and dedicated to a political cause (extract 12); and thus, they could convince the combatants. These friends communicated in dyad, fostered intimacy to establish trust, and finally reinforced and maintained commiseration during times of misfortune. These intentions, however, were later superseded by ideological motives and political identification. In its entirety, it can be claimed that the force of friendship was irresistible because one friend strategically offered what the other needed.

With regard to the role of social circumstances, our reading showed that the prevailing social context and political happenings provided a scaffold for feelings leading to revolution. This theme is in line with the proposition that states that social contextual factors influence self-definitions and identity concerns. We noted that not only local and national-level political events (extract 3) but also international conflicts (extract 5) necessitated and activated non-partisans’ compliance with the CPN (M). At the national level, structural discrimination in various manifestations such as the prevalence of a feudal tradition in society (extract 1), an unfair state apparatus (extract 3), and enforcement of discriminatory practices (extracts 2 and 8) were seen as distal causes of political engagement. Regarding the role of ethnic discrimination, particularly, a very sparse presence of the codes related to ethnicity suggested that it was not a prominent factor to motivate the memoirists. We observed the memoirists referring to ethnicity as one of the discriminatory phenomena in a long list of other discriminations (extract 2) caused by the Nepalese government’s failure to intervene positively. This observation resembles the CPN (M) party’s understanding of the Nepali state as discriminatory, which the party argued was the major reason to initiate armed struggle. The compatibility of our theme with the Maoists’ justification to initiate war implies that the combatants were well informed about the party’s assessment of Nepali society. Largely, the theme lends support to the argument...
that associates oppressive and static social contexts with the growth of revolutionary organizations. For the predisposed partisans, family members were largely unsupportive of their decision to align with the CPN (M). Families not only opposed any proposition to join the party but also attempted to withhold support when they knew about their involvement. There are instances such as a mother reprimanding a daughter (extract 10), parents being uninformed about their children’s involvement in Maoist politics, and a wife reluctantly accepting her husband’s decision (extract 9). These instances indicate little or no positive influence of family in their members’ partisan attachment. Our finding, in general, questions the age-old claim of party identification as a natural condition transmitted from parents to children within families. Particularly, this theme contradicts the long recognized claim of family members’ influence on their children’s engagement with combat but echoes the report of parental non-influence among Northern Irish children regarding ethno-national group identity. Such a discrepancy with the finding from the study of Northern Irish children could be due to the fact that our research concerned partisan alignment with a revolutionary party during an armed struggle.

Regarding the role of party ideology, our finding suggested that the mainstream ideology propounded by the party was not perceived by the combatants as the deciding factor for party identification if the term ideology is understood strictly in the sense of mainstream doctrine forwarded by the CPN (M). This lends support to the assertion of very limited or no role of ideology during party identification. But, if its use is understood in the sense of a localized and contextualized set of ideas derived from ideology (not necessarily in compliance with the ideology), our conclusion does not deny the link of ideology with partisan alignment. We observed substantial discrepancies between the ideology expounded by the party officially and the ideology presented to the combatants. No uniformity was found even in the combatants’ understanding of party ideology. An exception, however, is that the party’s ideology was expounded to general people in very limited and orthodox ways. It might be because of the promises contained in these limited ideas that the combatants believed that the party would bring a “new system” through guerrilla warfare (extract 7), and the system would be inherently good (extract 8). In a sense, the combatants believed that Communism would provide the working poor with access to a multitude of political, economic, and social resources that they were previously deprived of. Such an understanding with no exercise of critical inquiry might have been due to widespread illiteracy in the areas that the party ideologues targeted for communication.

Conclusions

Four clear conclusions can be drawn from our study. The first is that key socio-political experiences—structural discrimination, administrative unfairness, national political movements, and international political activities—provided the combatants with reasons to foster their interest in engagement with the revolution. The role of ethnicity, in particular, was not the prime reason for people’s partisan attachment with the Maoists. Rather, discriminations on many fronts—economic, geographical, administrative, gender, and religious, among others—cumulatively contributed to the people’s support for the Maoists. The second is that the party ideology of the CPN (M) in its stereotypical form attracted them to the revolutionary cause as combatants. The
theme also spotlights an initial naiveté amongst the combatants about the party ideology. The third is that families attempted to stop their members from becoming combatants. The theme points out strained and sometimes even antagonistic relationships between families and combatants. The fourth is that friends motivated and accelerated individuals’ partisan engagement. This theme highlights the significance of peers in self-categorization as combatants. Perhaps more importantly, we can conclude that friendship was one of the most effective strategies of the CPN (M) to motivate individuals during the war.

Taken together, the four themes provide an overview of the combatants’ understanding of their engagement in the conflict. The combatants’ partisan inclination, which is an initial stage in partisan attachment, started with key social and political experiences. The presence of CPN (M) ideologues, who presented themselves as friends during their inclination phase, actuated stronger partisanship with the party. At the stage, i.e., when they were disposed to selectively presented ideology, their feeling for participation in the war was bolstered. Finally, the partisans decided to engage in the war despite their family members’ resentment and objections. It can be concluded that the combatants’ identification with the CPN (M) and the subsequent decision to involve themselves in war was due to the positive utilization of social context, political ideology, and friendship networks.

The finding of this study has of course some limitations. Because we did not study the narratives that relate to cases of forceful recruitment, our conclusion has not addressed the role of coercion. This factor has been pointed out as one of the major strategies of the CPN (M) to recruit combatants. Similarly, due to the sampling of the narratives, our study incorporated only one narrative of a combatant who had a family member involved in armed struggle. To examine the narratives of second-generation guerrilla combatants was beyond the scope of the current project but is without doubt an important avenue for further research.

Indeed, our conclusions open up a number of questions. Some questions ensue from the theme of the ideological naiveté of the Maoist combatants. If people were ready to take part in armed struggle with a very limited or only stereotypical understanding of party ideology, what elements of the stereotypes enticed them? Importantly, as this theme contradicts the CPN (M) leaders’ argument, can we claim that the leaders’ understanding of their cadres was limited? The next question emanates from family-friend dynamics. Has the nature of family influence been misunderstood in the study of revolutionaries and combatants in Nepali society and in the international literature more widely? It seems entirely plausible that families concerned about the safety and well-being of their members would be very conflicted about a loved one’s engagement with political violence. Further research should examine how family and political identity might intersect as opposing forces in such situations.

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Notes

5. Structural factors include the issues of inequalities in socio-economic spheres and unfair governance.
8. The term was originally defined as the sense of personal attachment which the individual feels towards the [party] of his/her choice. In this study, we use a substantial body of literature on partisanship to explicate the themes emerging from the data extracts. To understand the nature of initial inquiry on partisanship, see Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, The American Voter (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960).


13. Ibid.


15. In this paper, the term *armed conflict* does not overlap other nomenclatures—Maoist insurgency, rebellion, People’s War—so as to maintain original use of the term by different scholars.


19. Thapa and Sijapati (see note 16 above).

20. Mass line is aimed at constructing a counter-state by mobilizing people who had grievances against the government or other social agents; united front targeted to ally with groups sharing a common interest to strengthen mass line; violence focused on armed insurgency to fight against state forces; political warfare involved negotiations with the state to undermine the enemy; and international action included engagement with other state or non-state actors to apply pressure on the state.


23. Eck (see note 21 above).

24. Lawati (see note 14 above).

29. The selected narratives present a heterogeneous context and diverse experiences. Rai recounts how she joined the Maoists, what she did during her camp stay, what experience she underwent at the hands of security forces, and why she became disillusioned with the Maoists. Lama offers an account of how and why he joined the Maoists, what he did during the insurgency, and what type of experiences he underwent. B.K. narrates her reasons for joining a Maoist battalion, what she did during raids on police and army posts, how she felt when she witnessed her friends wounded and dying, and why she was worried about cracks in the unity of party leaders. Magar presents numerous accounts of raids carried out by Maoist combatants, hardship inside army barracks and jails, and his feelings about being inside a cantonment after the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) in November 2006.
30. Lawati (see note 14 above).
36. The Nepalese government promulgated the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Control and Punishment) Act after the Maoists’ attack on Nepal Army posts. The rights to freedom of thought and expression and the right to information were suspended.
38. During the war, the CPN (M) had evoked the issues of ethnic discrimination, and formed ethnicity based fronts to organize them for fighting against the government. Altogether, they had seven ethnic fronts.
40. Gangabahadur Lama, *Dasbarse Janayuddha: Smritika Dovharu* [Ten Year People’s War: Marks of Memory] (Kathmandu, Nepal: Jagaran Book House, 2065 B.S. [2008 A.D.]).
43. The Royal Nepal Army (RNA), a state force formed for national security, was deployed for the first time after the Maoist insurgency started. This led to a massive escalation in the number of deaths on the CPN (M) side.
50. Braun and Clarke (see note 44 above). The paper follows the method of thematic analysis illustrated by Braun and Clarke.
55. Hogg and Terry (see note 25 above).
58. Human Rights Server (see note 33 above).
59. Pinner (see note 54 above).

64. Campbell et al. (see note 8 above).


69. Eck (see note 21 above).