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The Politics of Loss in the People's War and Its Aftermath: The Disappeared as Kin, Citizens and Warriors

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The contribution (*yogdan*) they made to the country and the people, that they gave their lives (*pran utsarga garera*) for this contribution, this should be remembered in history (*itihasma kayam garnu parchha*). (President of regional Disappeared Warriors Committee, July 2009)

In the Red Army, people went either to kill or be killed (*marchhau ki marchhau*). But the situation of the people who were taken from their homes whilst they were sleeping, is different. (Kamala,¹ wife of man disappeared by the State, May 2009)

A poster on the wall at the entrance to the district office of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) asked: "Where are these citizens?" Standing out from the red background, graphically depicted as emerging from a burst of light, a huge question mark filled with a mosaic of tiny photographs of people's faces, dominated

¹ All names of relatives of the disappeared in this article are pseudonyms.

the poster. These were faces of people who had been disappeared by the state during the ten-year civil war, referred to by the Maoists as the People's War (1996–2006). The whereabouts of more than 1,300 people, who went missing across Nepal during the war, remain unknown (ICRC 2011). The majority of these people were disappeared by the state security forces, on suspicion or pretense of their involvement with the Maoists. At the end of 2008, CPN-M had composed a list with 1,162 names of people disappeared by the state.² Whilst some of the disappeared had been party members or activists linked with Maoist affiliated organizations; others were only sympathizers, who had no involvement with the party, or were mistakenly accused and disappeared for other reasons.³ The majority of people who disappeared were civilians.

The Maoist party has sought to engage the families of those disappeared by the state, whether or not they or their disappeared relatives had previously been affiliated with the party. For the party, individuals who were disappeared by the state have become incorporated into an abstract collective, as was visibly portrayed in the amassed images in the poster. The disappeared have held symbolic power for the Maoists' revolutionary project and their ongoing struggle with the state in Nepal. To their families, those who disappeared are husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, daughters, sisters, mothers, wives; relatives who continue to be integrated within their family histories, but whose own histories hang suspended. Their absence is unsettling and their ambiguous status continues to disturb family and community life. For these families, the priority is to find information about their relatives' whereabouts and the truth about their fate.

² This figure was quoted by a party member during a program for families of the disappeared in December 2008.

³ See Dixit (2002: 33) on the army's failure to distinguish between "villager, 'left supporter,' 'Maoist supporter' and 'Maoist'" and Hachhethu (2004: 67) on the potential ambiguity of political identities. On false accusations and personal vendettas in disappearance cases see OHCHR's report (2008: 22).

Missing from the poster are those people disappeared by the Maoists, people whose whereabouts remain similarly unknown and whose families also live with unsettled personal loss.⁴ The Maoists have been implicated in between one and three hundred cases of disappearances across Nepal according to the records of human rights agencies.⁵ The experiences of women I met with, whose husbands had been disappeared by the Maoists often resonated strongly with those whose husbands had been disappeared by the state. Their families have also been searching for the truth about their disappeared relatives. It is beyond the scope of this article to give witness to these families' stories in detail. However, it is important to remember that both sides in the conflict were responsible for the violence that has left painful and unresolved legacies in the lives of many families. National and international human rights and humanitarian organizations have played a significant role in raising public awareness about disappearances and have brought relatives of the disappeared together from across the political divide. A more detailed analysis of their engagement with families of the disappeared, which I explore in my wider thesis, is an important parallel to the account which I present here.

This chapter explores the politics of loss in relation to the Maoists' engagement with families of those disappeared by the state. It explores the identities that the Maoists have attributed to these disappeared people and the processes by which their families' attempts to find out about their fate. It has become intertwined with broader political projects. It details how the Maoist movement has called for recognition and compensation from the state. It also documents the doubts and hesitations of families over whether,

⁴ The legal term "enforced disappearance" refers to actions by the state or its agents, thus in formal reports equivalent actions by the Maoists are referred to as "abductions." In Nepali the word *bepatta*, meaning "disappeared" or "lost," is commonly used to describe actions by the Maoists as well as the state. I follow this local usage.

⁵ See Fullard (2008), INSEC (2008), and AF and HRW (2008) for figures of disappearances and abductions.

ultimately, the party will help them to find the truth and seek justice about their individual relatives. In terms of the Maoists' political campaign, it considers how the disappeared have been drawn into the ideology of sacrifice alongside the martyrs. Beyond the political rhetoric, however, it shows how the families' experiences of ongoing loss and the painful repercussions of disappearances resist these reductive readings.

This article raises for further consideration a gendered analysis of the politics of loss, highlighting the contrast between the valorization of motherhood within Maoist campaigns on disappearances and the marginalization of women as wives in their marital families and communities. It draws from interviews with relatives of the disappeared and with party workers, from public speeches, from participant observation of meetings and interactions, and from Maoist party correspondence with families, all of which were collected during my doctoral fieldwork in a Tarai district and in Kathmandu between the end of 2007 and July 2009.

HISTORY OF DISAPPEARANCES IN NEPAL

Accounts of disappearances in Nepal extend back to 1951. A number of cases were recorded during the Panchayat regime (INSEC 2008: 3–4; Amnesty International 2003). A commission was established to investigate cases of disappearances during the Panchayat era (1960–1990) at the same time as the better known Mallik commission, which investigated the violence of the 1990 People's Movement for democracy (Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton 1999: 257). Whilst the commission on disappearances is said to have reported at least sixty cases, it did not have the power to name those involved in conducting disappearances. Furthermore, the then government did not pursue action on the evidence of this commission (see INSEC 2008; Timbreza-Valerio, Adhikari and Pokhrel 2008; see also Hayner 2001). Analysts have sharply criticized the government for its failure to pursue justice following such commissions, and have cited the

subsequent loss of faith in the political leaders as the reason for the failure of the new democracy (see Lal 2007).

In February 1996, immediately before the start of the People's War, the forty-point demand issued to the government by the United People's Front included a demand that the whereabouts of three disappeared activists be made public (Hutt 2004: Appendix 1). Operation Kilo Sierra II (May 1998–April 1999), the violent crackdown by police forces on the Maoists across several districts, firmly established the practice of disappearances by state forces and increased sympathy for the Maoists (ICG 2003). It was, however, after the breakdown of peace talks and the deployment of the army in November 2001 that disappearances increased significantly. During this first state of Emergency, between November 2001 and January 2003, more than 500 people went missing.⁶ After more than ten years of war, the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) signed between CPN-M and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) in November 2006 agreed to release information about the condition of the people disappeared by both sides, who by then numbered more than 1,300.⁷ To date, this promise has not been fulfilled, allowing the political culture of impunity to continue and leaving the disturbing possibility of a further violence.

THE SOCIETY OF THE FAMILIES OF THE DISAPPEARED

The *Bepatta Parivar Samaj* or, as it was referred to in English, the Society of the Families of the Disappeared (SOFAD), was set up by families involved with the party in 1999 after seven senior party leaders and activists were disappeared.⁸ However, it was only in 2002 that the society became more active, after four students from the All Nepal National Independent Student Union–Revolutionary (ANNISU–R), the student wing of CPN–M, were arrested and

⁶ According to figures of the missing compiled by ICRC.

⁷ See point 7.3.2 of the CPA.

⁸ These included one central committee member, Dandapani Neupane, and six other senior activists.

disappeared by the police in Kathmandu in April and June 2002. Their families immediately issued a press statement and demanded their release. The father of one of these students, who was a lawyer at the Supreme Court, filed habeas corpus petitions and the families protested outside the court.⁹ He became the first chairperson of SOFAD, but some months later he was forced to go underground and leave Kathmandu because of his role in the party. His wife, Kalpana, took over as chair and it was she, along with the other disappeared students' mothers, who continued the campaigns during the years of the war.

SOFAD was set up to put pressure on state institutions and the government to release or make known the whereabouts and condition of their disappeared relatives. It was not a formally registered organization and remained closely linked with the party structures. Its sole source of funding had been through the party, and party members who had occupied key positions. After the 2008 elections, the newly appointed Constituent Assembly (CA) members of CPN-M gave a proportion of their monthly salary to an umbrella organization for the martyrs, disabled warriors and families of the disappeared. A small number of students and party members associated with SOFAD also gained access to jobs when the party came into government. SOFAD has been important in that it has stood at an interface between the party and the families; and specifically between the party's response to the "disappeared" as a collective and their response to individual kin. It has been a channel for party strategy on engaging with the disappeared, but it has also created a forum for families to gather and find solidarity. For families in Kathmandu particularly, SOFAD's office became an important site for meeting with others who shared their experiences of loss. When it was established, SOFAD was the only association for families of the disappeared in Nepal. However, SOFAD members' personal concerns for their specific relatives have sometimes come

⁹ See Supreme Court's ruling of June 1, 2007 that refers to the cases of these four students along with others.

into tension with the political strategy of the party in relation to the disappeared.

By 2008, SOFAD's office had shifted from a small room in central Kathmandu to a suburb close to the ring road, where they shared one floor of a new building with the recently registered Martyrs' Foundation. I visited this office several times. The room was bare except for a pile of thin floor cushions near the window, a large poster of Chairman Prachanda beside the door and three large boards leaning against the end wall which were covered with A4 posters printed with photographs of people who had disappeared (see Image 1). Several of the posters had been torn or folded at the edges, hinting of how these boards had been used and moved around. Many of the images had been blown up from passport photographs which meant that the faces that stared out were blurred. Under the images were these people's names, mostly typed in a large sharp black font which contrasted in its clarity and precision with the blurred images. This illustrated again how individual images of disappeared people had merged into the collective identity of "the disappeared," upon which various different labels could then be inscribed.

In the following sections, through tracing the history of the development of SOFAD, I outline the shifting strategy of the party towards the disappeared, Emphasizing their identities as kin, as "citizens" and then also as "warriors." I show how these shifts have mirrored changes in the party's wider positioning, aims and strategies in the arena of Nepali politics: from underground insurgent group; to political partner in the interim government; to leading party in the coalition government following success in the April 2008 elections; and then, with Prachanda's resignation as prime minister, back into opposition.

MOTHERS SEARCHING FOR THEIR DISAPPEARED KIN

In July 2009, I met Kalpana in SOFAD's office to learn more about her involvement in the early stages of the family movement. Kalpana's husband had been forced to go underground and she described how

she had felt it was her duty to her country to take up a role in SOFAD after this. At that time it had been difficult for families to raise their voice. The army had come to her home demanding that she hand over her husband and threatening to kill her. She had been alone with her daughter. Yet in the face of these threats and difficulties she and the other mothers chose to continue to campaign. “Who would search if not us?” she had asked. She described the special love a mother feels for her son, describing how one’s child was like one’s “heart” (*mutu*). When her son was taken away she described how her heart had also been taken and she had no longer had “love for life (*jyan*).” After this, she explained, she was no longer afraid to die.



Image 1: Photographs of the disappeared in SOFAD’s Kathmandu office, March 2009.

The mothers of the four students were at the forefront of the families’ protests over the following two years, submitting memorandums to the government, conducting sit-in protests outside the Bhadrakali Army Headquarters, Singha Darbar and Ratna Park, and undertaking hunger strikes to publicize their relatives’ disappearances and demand action from the state. After

the break down of peace talks in August 2003, following the second ceasefire, there was another escalation in the numbers of cases of disappearances particularly in and around the Kathmandu Valley.¹⁰ Increasing numbers of relatives started contacting and joining the mothers at their protests. By the beginning of 2004, SOFAD had opened a small office in Bagh Bazaar and Kalpana estimated that between 300 to 500 family members had already contacted them by this time. Several people who visited the office during the time noted how the walls had been covered in photographs of the disappeared. The office became a place where relatives who were searching for their relatives could find advice, support and solidarity with others. This became particularly important at a time when they could not rely on support from their neighbors and communities, due to fear and suspicion of their family's connection to the Maoists if a relative was disappeared by state security forces.

Families involved in SOFAD believed that, during the time of the emergency, mothers had more security to campaign publicly than other family members, as they were able to emphasize their kinship identities. The respect for the role of the mother and idealization of motherhood within Hindu thought (cf. Bennett 1983) gave social and cultural legitimacy to their actions as mothers campaigning on behalf of sons. This meant that it was more difficult for the security forces to challenge them. In other countries too, mothers have led the search for relatives, and succeeded in carving out public spaces to challenge disappearances, often in highly charged political contexts. The well known Mothers of the Plazo de Mayo in Argentina creatively utilized idioms of motherhood in their campaigning (Bouvard 1994; Robben 2000) as did groups in Guatemala and Chile (Schirmer 1989). In Sri Lanka, the Mother's Front in the south mobilized thousands of women, whose private tears became public displays of grief, and whose anger turned to ritual cursing of those responsible for disappearances (de Alwis 1998; de Mel 2001). De Mel (2001) shows how the identity of these mothers became more

¹⁰ See ICRC data and report on Bhairabnath barracks (OHCHR 2006).

prominent, even when wives and other relatives were also involved in the movement, as indicated clearly in the movement's name: the Mother's Front.¹¹ In Nepal, however, in spite of the role mothers played at the forefront of SOFAD's campaigning in the early stages, relatives of the disappeared have most commonly been identified as "families of the disappeared" by both the Maoists and human rights organizations. Within SOFAD, as well as in conflict victims' associations organized by human rights organizations, and in the growing independent disappeared families' movement, it has been largely men rather than women who have led.

In June–July 2006, a few months after the mass People's Movement (*Jana Andolan II*) succeeded in forcing King Gyanendra to restore democracy, SOFAD staged a nineteen-day sit-in program outside Bhadrakali Army Barracks. Kalpana described how again this had been led by the mothers of the four students who had disappeared in 2002. Several relatives recounted that there was a period of renewed hope at end of the conflict that perhaps the disappeared would be released. This was not to be. Although the mothers continued to be involved in SOFAD, a shift in strategy was underway in the party. As the political situation became more open, the network of families expanded and the identity of the disappeared as "citizens" was increasingly highlighted. This resonated with shifts in public discourse and the media in Nepal at that time.¹²

DEMANDING RIGHTS FOR DISAPPEARED "CITIZENS"

In September 2006, families from across the districts were called to the First National Convention of the Society of the Families of Citizens Disappeared by the State (*Rajyadvara Bepatta Parieko Nagarikka Parivar Aamaj*). The expansion of the family association's name specifically evoked the state's duties towards its citizens and highlighted disappearance as a crime committed by state forces, in

¹¹ She also documents how it was quickly appropriated by political parties, echoing experiences in Nepal.

¹² Thanks to Bhaskar Gautam for this observation.

line with the international legal definition of enforced disappearance. It de-emphasized political identities and emphasized civic identities of the disappeared. In this way, it was also politically performative and strategic. Disappearances were highlighted as a betrayal by the “old regime,” a betrayal which has been perpetuated by the continuing refusal to acknowledge the whereabouts of the disappeared. This was to the political advantage of the Maoists, accentuating the exploitative relationship between the state and citizens that they had been fighting against in the people’s war and supporting their calls for regime change.¹³

On another level, the name change of the society reflected a transition from the personal search for kin at specific army barracks and government offices during the first years of their disappearance, to broader demands for public recognition of the disappeared by the state, for information on their status to be publicized, for prosecution of those responsible and for compensation for their families. Human rights organizations were also politically lobbying for the rights of conflict victims and transitional justice at this time. Emphasizing the identity of the disappeared as “citizens,” resonated with the discourse of human rights and presented possibilities for internationalizing awareness about disappearances. It was a plea to the interim state to acknowledge those people who had been disappeared by the state, but, at the same time, the Maoists remained silent about those people they had abducted.

After the general elections of April 2008 and the establishment of the CA under the leadership of a coalition government headed by CPN-M in August 2008, SOFAD’s public activities decreased. Eight central committee members of SOFAD became CA members. Their responsibilities and duties to the party as serving CA members left less time for SOFAD. Some of the relatives felt that political loyalties

¹³ Verdery has noted the effectiveness of dead bodies as political symbols that can accumulate symbolic capital for political transformation and Sant Cassia has suggested that “absent or hidden dead bodies” are even more effective in this regard (Sant Cassia 2005 citing Verdery 1999: 33).

to the party in these newly aligned positions meant they were less able to represent and work for the interests of the families of the disappeared. Nevertheless, whilst the public activities of SOFAD decreased, the leadership maintained access to the heart of the party and were able to secure an audience with Prachanda whilst he was prime minister without difficulty. SOFAD's campaigning for the disappeared as "citizens," also linked to the debate about compensation and entitlements from the state. The party used their political power whilst in government to push through the process of relief payments to the families.¹⁴ Within a year, however, another national convention of the families of those disappeared by the state was organized, at which the identity ascribed to the disappeared shifted in emphasis once again.

FROM "CITIZEN" TO "WARRIOR": THE NATIONAL CONVENTION, MAY 2009

By May 2009, UCPN-M¹⁵ had led the coalition government for ten months with Prachanda as Prime Minister. On 4 May, he dramatically resigned in reaction to the dispute over the Chief of Army Staff, General Rookmangud Katawal's ouster. General Katawal had been in charge of the Royal Nepal Army's western division during a period which had witnessed a large number of disappearances in that region. On May 9, a large rally was held for the families of the disappeared in Kathmandu. In the movement's spirit of continuous regeneration, this was declared the first convention of the Society of the Families of Warriors Disappeared by the State, the newly renamed family association. This demonstrated a shift in party strategy to draw the disappeared into the narrative of war sacrifice alongside the martyrs, to acknowledge their contribution in building "new Nepal" and to more fully incorporate their relatives within the ongoing movement.

¹⁴ During the interim government compensation, payments had been given to victims who had been targeted by Maoist violence, but no similar payments had been given to victims of the state.

¹⁵ CPN-M joined with CPN (Unity Centre-Masal) in January 2009 to become the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M).

The families had marched in a rally from Ratna Park, winding through the streets of central Kathmandu into the historic square at Basantapur, which was more usually filled with temple worshipers, market stalls and tourists. The tiered platforms around the temples on the south and west sides of the square filled with crowds. At the northern edge of the square a large stage had been set up with an awning and chairs for the guests. A podium draped with the UCPN-M's red flag with a bold hammer and sickle stood at one side for the speeches.

Following a welcome by the chair of SOFAD, the wife of a comrade who had disappeared was asked to speak. In an emotive speech, she declared that families would continue searching until their last breath for the whereabouts of the disappeared to be made public. Her speech was the only one to be given by a family member that day. All the speeches that followed were delivered by senior representatives of the UCPN-M party and its affiliated organizations, culminating with a speech by Prachanda himself. These speeches repeatedly spoke of the need to recognize the disappeared warriors' sacrifice. The sacrifice of the disappeared was attributed with power and strength which it was claimed had already been demonstrated by the achievement of the movement so far in establishing a new republic. Some of the speeches attributed to the disappeared an almost mystical power, echoing Lecomte-Tilouine's (2006) analysis of the generative power of the martyrs within the Maoists' ideology:

We have to internalize (atmasat garnuparchha) [the disappeared people's] emotions (*bhavana*), their objectives (*uddeshya*), their goals (*dhyeya*). Their intention (*abhishta*) is also to save this nation from the entanglement of foreign interference (*bideshika hastakshepko changul*). (YCL Central Vice-Coordinator)

The message was that taking on the "emotion" and intentions of the disappeared would provide strength and direction for the future of the movement. In their absence, the disappeared provide

a powerful voice through which the Maoists can articulate their political rhetoric. Invoking the “dreams” of the disappeared, the president of the party’s Dalit organization took up the theme that their struggle had not yet finished, declaring:

In order to fulfill the dreams of the great martyrs and disappeared warriors, we again have to sacrifice (*tyag/balidan*), to be ready to do more. Only then will we be able to build a new Nepal.

His words pointed to the troubling way in which the sacrifice of the disappeared is invoked to foster further political mobilization and sacrifice, continuing the cycle of violence. Within the Maoists’ ideology, however, it was not only the disappeared, but their relatives who were seen as a source of “energy” for the movement. The general secretary of the Trade Union Organization addressed the convention: “Dear relatives, this revolution needs your energy (*urja*); you have to provide more strength (*sahas*) to the revolution.”

In the programs’ closing speech, Prachanda wove into one the movement of the disappeared warriors, the current political movement to restore “civilian supremacy” following his resignation, and the movement of the families to find the whereabouts of the disappeared:

The movement is not only the movement of disappeared warriors, this is the movement of the citizens. Until the disappeared warriors are publicized, we do not accept that civilian supremacy (*nagarik sarvochchata*) is established.

Along the back of the stage hung two large banners with row upon row of images of the disappeared. Relatives often carried placards pasted with photographs of their disappeared relatives during protests, but in the rally that day their placards had contained only slogans. The images of their relatives were symbolically on

stage with the party. The party's amassing, reconfiguring, displaying and redistributing the disappeared people's photographs is about recognizing and also about claiming the disappeared.

THE IDEA OF THE "DISAPPEARED WARRIOR"

A critical shift had taken place at the convention: the disappeared had been publicly recognized as "warriors" (*yoddha*) as well as "citizens" (*nagarik*).¹⁶ In light of UCPN-M's failure to pressurize the state to reveal the whereabouts of the disappeared during their time in government, and their unsuccessful attempt to push through legislation to criminalize disappearances and set up a Disappearances Commission, this was one action UCPN-M could take. Drawing from their own ideological resources, they aligned the disappeared warriors with the martyrs who had sacrificed their lives for the nation, and they publicly honored the relatives of the disappeared. In an interview a few weeks later, the newly re-elected president elucidated this: "First we said '*nagarik*'—this is symbolic and we chose this carefully. Now we are saying '*yoddha*'—fighter/warrior, because this gives the sense of their role in the people's war and that has brought change." What was not articulated in the speeches, but lay behind the words that drew the disappeared alongside the martyrs, was the recognition within the party that the disappeared cannot return. Institutionalizing the sacrifice of the disappeared, as the party had promised, would symbolically locate them in history and in the memory of the state. Entwined with these promises was an appeal to the families for their support and loyalty at a time of political crisis.

At a meeting of families of the disappeared in another district in December 2008, a Maoist leader had revealed the process of alignment of the disappeared with the martyrs, and incorporation within a lineage of those who have sacrificed for the nation:

¹⁶ Whilst in the society's name "warrior" replaced "citizen," in the speeches it became clear that this was an additional designation rather than a replacement.

The Martyrs' Trust is for all the leaders of the revolution (*kranti ka nayak*) who have been sacrificed in the war, from the war of Nalapani until now, all who in the Madhes movement, in the People's War, in the mass movement from 2007 v.s., 2017 v.s., 2036 v.s., all who sacrificed and disappeared and all who have been injured or disabled.¹⁷

The aims of the Martyrs' Foundation were: to institutionalize their sacrifice; to provide health and education for their families; to keep the families socially and politically informed; to unite them to lobby for the disappeared; and to institutionalize the rights of the injured, disabled and martyrs. At the same meeting, addressing both families and human rights activists, the Maoist leader spoke strongly against those who called the disappeared "innocent":

For these warriors, you don't have the right to say, "I did not know," "He had not done anything," "He was innocent." These great warriors (*mahan yoddhaharu*) were not ordinary people (*samanya vyaktiharu*), understand this. You may feel that, they were fathers, mothers, wives or husbands, but they are also the assets of the nation (*rashtraka nidhi*). They are an institution for all of us. [...] They were warriors who were fighting to change this world, to change Nepal, to throw out the feudal authority, to institute the CA, to bring about the people's democracy (*janavad*) and communism (*samyavad*).

His insistence on conferring political agency to the disappeared reinforces the Maoist vision of the people united with the Maoists fighting to establish a new state. His anger marked clear lines of difference in the competing claims over the families, between the party and the human rights organizations. Families were conferred

¹⁷ Nalapani refers to the 1814–1816 war with the British East India Company and the Madhes movement to violence in the Tarai in 2007/2008 over ethnic/regional identity claims. Dates refer to the Vikram Samvat Calendar.

with honor by the party, but at the same time they were being asked to put their trust in the party. The shift from identifying the disappeared as “citizens” to identifying them as “warriors” re-prioritized relations with the party and the collective over their individual relations as citizens with the state, and as kin with their families. In so doing, it also appears to shift attention from the families’ pursuit of truth and justice for individual relatives, for which identification of “innocence” and victimhood are important, to the broader collective goals of the revolution.

For some relatives who were linked to the party, the recognition of their relatives as warriors was appealing. A district leader of SOFAD, whose two sons had disappeared, spoke about the pride (*gaurav*) relatives felt and the honor (*ijjat*) that he had been given, both by the party and his local community, because his sons were “disappeared warriors.” The respect and honor that self-sacrifice confers on the person martyred or disappeared, extends to their family members to be able to say:

I gave birth to a disappeared warrior, makes the mother proud.
The father is also proud. His brothers are able to say that, I
have a brother who was a warrior. He fought and this is what
happened. We are a warrior’s family.

He added: “Without sacrificing something you cannot get something else. Our sons have sacrificed for the country.” His words illustrated the power of the party’s rhetoric and conviction for those who were integrated into the Maoist movement, and showed that some people have adopted this language. Yet, his appreciation that his sons had been recognized as warriors did not lessen his conviction that families had to organize to fight for justice:

But we also have to make ourselves strong [...] because
tomorrow anything could happen. This is the important thing,
to empower our organization. Anything could happen to the
party, but we cannot stop fighting for justice.

In conversations and interviews with other party members, complex narratives wove between the party line and personal experience. Another Maoist leader, who had also lost two sons, emphasized that the pain of living with the uncertain absence of his son who had disappeared, was very different from the loss of his son who they knew had been killed and is a martyr. He explained that, on a personal level, it was more difficult to cope with the uncertainties and ambiguities of disappearance, even though the political rhetoric of sacrifice was drawing a comparison with the martyrs.

THE DISCOURSE OF SACRIFICE

The discourse of sacrifice and martyrdom in Maoist ideology in Nepal has been explored in detail by other scholars. Lecomte-Tilouine has considered the symbolic power of sacrifice and, in particular, its “generative capacity”: “sacrifice aims at creating a better world on earth through its generative power of multiplication, which will help to realize the ‘dream of the martyrs’” (2006: 52).¹⁸ She has noted that the status of martyr has been conferred by the party on all those killed by the state irrespective of their association with the party (2006: 62), which mirrors the party’s policy in relation to the disappeared. She describes how the “family of martyrs” includes not only those who have died, but all the party’s comrades (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006: 57). Through self-sacrifice, martyrs become part of this family, which is a source of power for the revolutionary movement. Zharkevich observes how youths narrated their attraction to, and involvement in, the Maoist movement through discourses of sacrifice, and explores how this links to ideas of moral personhood and an “ideological commitment and dedication to a certain vision of the future” (2009: 90).

In her study of revolutionary rhetoric within Maoist songs and iconography, de Sales explores how the blood of the martyrs, offered in self-sacrifice, ritually unites and gives power to the movement:

¹⁸ Kwon (2006) has noted similar ideas about fallen revolutionaries having regenerative power for the future in Vietnam.

By giving their lives the martyrs create unity among the people who remember them and worship them. In becoming one kin the powerless gain power over the enemy. (de Sales 2003: 21)

These are powerful idioms of kinship and affinity between the martyrs and the living cadres. It is through the martyrs' blood that life giving power flows: "soaked with the blood of the martyrs, the soil germinates, power grows" (de Sales 2003: 20). She notes that this echoes the standard Hindu sacrifice in which "the ritual is supposed to generate more life by taking life," however, the important difference in the Maoist revision is that the martyr becomes the sacrifice and offers his/her life rather than the life of another (de Sales 2003; see also Lecomte-Tilouine 2006). The very name of the cultural association involved in producing these songs that de Sales has analyzed, combines these metaphors: *Raktim Parivar*. These metaphors of kinship help explain the tension between living kin of the disappeared and the party regarding the discourse of sacrifice.

Lecomte-Tilouine (2010) has documented how the martyrs are absorbed into an anonymous collective, where individual identities are no longer important, and noted that only the "living martyrs" have opportunity to maintain their individual identities. Biographies of these living martyrs with their accounts of the war are now emerging in the Nepali press.¹⁹ In her discussion of war poetry, Lecomte-Tilouine describes a "strategy of depersonalisation" which allows emotional bonds to be widened to include "the whole revolutionary family" and "encourages the individual not to consider the loss of a close relation in a personal way, but to re-situate the loss within a wider context" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006: 56). The party suggests to families and friends that continuing with the work of the movement is a "sign of homage." As well as the martyrs' blood, the sorrow of families is viewed as another force, a source of "energy (*urja*), anger

¹⁹ These were described in a presentation by Michael Hutt at the British Nepal Academic Council Study Day at the University of Cambridge, April 20–21, 2011.

and the determination to take revenge” (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006: 57). Within this ideology, the party actively seeks to further the revolution by acquiring the families’ pain and the sacrifice of their disappeared relatives. A “letter of honor and remembrance” from the party, written on the fourteenth anniversary of the Peoples’ War and Martyrs’ Week of 2065 v.s., was shown to me by a relative who received it. It stated: “We have no other option than to use our pain and suffering against the class enemy and unite for the revolution with added responsibility.” The following sections of this article turn to the experiences of families at the district level, in particular to wives of the disappeared, and describe how personal experiences of loss resist incorporation into the ideology of collective sacrifice.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE DISTRICT

The district had seen a particularly high number of disappearances. A high proportion had been civilians and the majority had been disappeared by the security forces. Of the families I knew, few of their disappeared relatives had been full time party members. Both party representatives and human rights workers whom I interviewed agreed that in the district the majority of those who disappeared were not party members, although some had been involved with local level activities and others may have been sympathizers. They were not those who had committed to self-sacrifice for the movement like the full time members of the Maoist’s armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army (see Lecomte-Tilouine 2010). Relatives described how the disappeared had been taken from their homes and the flow of their everyday lives—a husband taken from a field where he had been ploughing, other husbands taken from the beds where they had been sleeping, a father taken from the road as he had been cycling home from work. Painful memories of their relatives’ disappearances and their persistent absence echoed in these spaces of the everyday and continue to disturb family life because their relatives’ status and whereabouts remain uncertain.

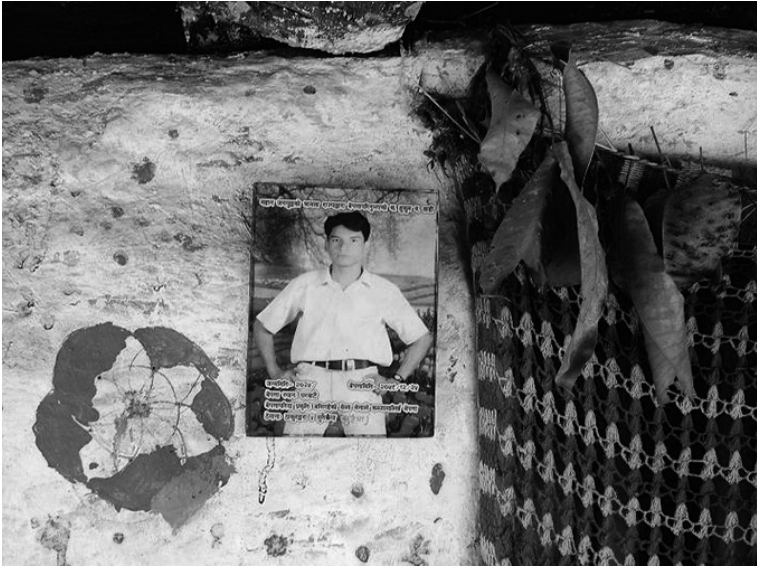


Image 2: Photograph of a disappeared man given by CPN-M hanging at the doorway of a family home (Photo by the author).

In searching for their relatives, some families had turned to the party for support and others had been approached by the party and invited to participate in protest rallies and programs. A small number of relatives and district officers of SOFAD had been sent as representatives to the May 2009 convention in Kathmandu, after which there had been a follow up meeting in the district that more of the family members had attended. Outside of Kathmandu, SOFAD had been less clearly distinguished from the rest of the party structures, and formal programs and meetings were infrequent. Interactions of families in the district were more often with local party workers. During the distribution of relief payments in the spring of 2009, many of the relatives had been assisted by party workers to complete the bureaucratic paper work. A much smaller number had received practical support from the party including: small amounts of land for those who were left particularly vulnerable economically; labor support during busy agricultural seasons; and

scholarships for “orphans” of the disappeared in the schools newly established by the Martyrs’ Foundation.

In the district, the party had reprinted photographs of the disappeared on a simple lacquered board and given these to their families. During our conversations, women sometimes showed me these images of their husbands. Superimposed in red lettering across the top were the words: “Disappeared during the People’s War by state forces.” In a context where people often had very few photographs and even fewer that were framed or printed on board, these were valued by families. Nevertheless, the format with inscriptions which symbolically claimed their relatives for the party was not always appreciated (see Image 2). Sometimes these photographs were on display, but often they were kept in the inner rooms of the house. One woman who I came to know had asked if I could reprint a photograph of her husband from the small passport photograph she had, without the party’s inscription. Although relatives were willing to accept support and to join protest programs organized by the party for the disappeared, none of those I met in the district, with the exception of a man who was a full time party member, had adopted the party’s discourse of sacrifice in speaking about their loss.

There had been considerable activity of human rights and humanitarian organizations in the district since the time of the insurgency. These organizations had urged the families to join together as victims from both sides of the conflict to demand their rights to truth, justice and reparations from the state and not to forget their loss. They had provided training on human rights, transitional justice and international law, and some relatives were invited to meetings in Kathmandu and a few had traveled as representatives internationally. Most families had some level of involvement in the local victims’ association. This engagement with human rights discourse, and these organizations’ institutional resources and networks, presented relatives with a strong parallel discourse for their loss, that emphasized victimhood and rights rather than sacrifice and honor. There has been little connection

between the work of these organizations and the Maoist party, although the Maoist party has made strategic use of rights discourse in certain forums. Whilst human rights discourse had influenced families narratives of loss more than Maoist discourse, many of the families continued to accept support from both the party and human rights organizations. Relatives were eager to accept any assistance that may help them to find information about their relatives and to make their current living circumstances a little easier.

WIVES OF THE DISAPPEARED: LIVING WITH ONGOING VIOLENCE AND PAIN

Kamala's words at the start of this chapter made a clear distinction between those who had chosen to "kill or be killed" for the Maoist movement, and those people who were "taken from their homes whilst they were sleeping." In account after account, wives recalled painful memories of their husbands being taken from amidst their everyday lives: it is the violent rupture of disappearances and the after effects in the everyday that continue to mark their daily experiences of loss. The lack of meaning or explanation leaves a lingering sense of doubt over their relatives' fate. Kamala explained:

Until now I feel that my husband will come back. I don't like it when people say that the army killed him. It is our right to know what happened, where our person is. If he had been killed I could tell the children that he has died, but now I can't say if he is alive or dead.

Her husbands' disappearance left the family in a position of economic hardship, and she was particularly distressed about the effects on her children:

Three years ago, for two months my son had to go and work carrying stones. There was no money for him to study. [...] It was difficult to see a child working in the sun like that. He got

dark and thin. It really distressed me (*pir lagyo*). If his father had been here he would not have had to do this work.

Participating in programs and protests organized by the party and human rights organizations also had a toll on family life. On one occasion she had come back from a program in Kathmandu later than expected, to find her children eating husks because the rice was finished. For many married women, their children and the household's livelihood were their immediate priority. Kamala explained: "Whatever happens to me I want my children to study. Whatever pain I have, I do not want my children to have."

Women have faced particular difficulties, because the ambiguity of their husband's status throws their own status into an ambiguous position. Socially, they are suspended between the status of a wife with an absent husband and the status of a widow. These women have been blamed for the misfortune in the family and sometimes even for the husband's disappearance. Disputes with in-laws were common and several wives of the disappeared had split from their in-laws households since the disappearance of their husbands. These disturbances within the family affected younger wives in particular. One young wife, Tara, whose husband had been abducted by the party, accused of being a traitor, had received violent threats from her father-in-law and brother-in-law since her husband was taken and faced a dilemma about whether to leave. She was anxious that if she left she would have to leave her young son and daughter in their grandparents' home. They had refused to pay any expenses for these children since her husband's disappearance and she had had to request money from her maternal home. The People's War has brought some changes in gender relations, but it appears not to have altered the traditional suspicion within patriarchal communities towards the women who marry into the home (cf. Bennett 1983).

The party had invited some women to participate in a district program for relatives of the martyrs and disappeared in which they were given respect. Janaki described being given garlands and

tika and being told: "Don't feel pain because we will not forget the martyrs' dream. We will not spoil the blood they gave for us. We will continue their fight." They were encouraged to share their problems with the party. Janaki's response as she recounted this was:

that's OK, but it depends on what they do. ... Until now the party continues to give us respect, but I do not believe as strongly now. [The party] says, "The person has gone not just for one individual, he's gone for the whole world."

This appeal to see the disappeared as having made a sacrifice for the greater good, attempts to draw relatives away from the personal dimensions of their loss. However, for wives, loss directly affects their own social positions and permeates their everyday experiences.

It was the help that the party had given Janaki in showing her how to search for her husband that she most appreciated:

I didn't know how to find out about my husband. It is good that someone can show us the path. The party provided transport, food and lodging.²⁰ I have to do these things to search for my husband even if it is painful.

She spoke of being part of a hunger strike program in Kathmandu and of going without food for seven days. These women had themselves taken on suffering in their campaigns to find their relatives. However, their motivations are personal, based on their relations with the disappeared; they do interpret their suffering as part of the party's political campaign.

As a counter to the process by which the party is aligning the disappeared with the martyrs, Janaki clarified the differences in experiences of wives of the disappeared compared with the widows of the martyrs:

²⁰ She was referring to when they went to a protest rally in Kathmandu.

They give respect in the same way to the disappeared and the martyrs, but there is a difference with the martyrs. It is already confirmed that the person has died. For the disappeared, we don't know this yet. The wives of the martyrs don't wear *sindur* or bangles, whereas the disappeared wives do wear these.

[...]

We do not know if they are dead or alive. If they are alive what condition are they in? For the [relatives of the] disappeared it is like a wound and whenever people are asking it is like hitting the wound. But if we don't tell the doctor about our wound, how can the doctor give treatment for our pain? How can they do an investigation? Like a doctor would treat my wound, my treatment would be to find out the truth: to be shown the person alive, or to be given the dead body. Or if they can say he has already been killed. That would be the treatment.

Her illustration describes vividly the pain of living with the uncertainty and the ambiguity of the loss of the disappeared. She explains that it is an ever-present pain: a wound that will not heal. This pain is felt again whenever people ask her about her husband's disappearance. Even though it is so painful, she continues to talk with those who ask because she hopes that they will be able to help "treat" the pain, and to help her and the other families to find truth.²¹ Her words cut through the layers of rhetoric about sacrifice, to the primary concern of all the wives I knew: to discover the personal and particular truth about their own relative's disappearance.

CONCLUSION

Maoist rhetoric about the disappeared seeks to appropriate personal loss for their political campaign, reinterpreting disappearances as sacrifice. For the Maoists, "the disappeared" have become a powerful political symbol: the disappeared as "citizens" were a means to

²¹ This raises an ethical challenge to the researcher no less than to the Maoists or human rights organizations.

challenge the old state and the disappeared as “warriors” have held ritual power for generating the new state. In contrast, personal pain and experiences of loss stand as a quiet testimony to the ongoing impacts of political violence in family life. It is the ambiguous status of the disappeared that has enabled their identities to be appropriated and manipulated for political ends. However, it is also this ambiguity that holds open the ties with their families and ultimately resists their detachment from families and incorporation by the party into the “family of martyrs.” Whilst there is a possibility that the disappeared person might still be alive or that their body might be retrieved and returned, families will continue to pursue truth and justice for their specific relatives.

The role of mothers at the forefront of the movement during the earlier stages of SOFAD’s activities illustrates how gender was strategically employed to challenge the authorities and create a public platform to protest disappearances. The position of wives, however, stands in contrast to this, and the particular social, legal and economic difficulties they face have been largely ignored. Whilst it has sought women’s participation, the movement has largely neglected the ongoing violence wives have faced as a direct result of their husbands’ disappearances, and has failed to take account of the indirect impacts that involvement in campaigning activities can have for women. They live daily with the personal consequences of loss. The political narrative of sacrifice cannot subsume these experiences of loss or a families’ need for specific truth about their relative and the possibility to pursue justice.

In the aftermath of the war there have been a series of promises from political leaders that the whereabouts of the disappeared will be made public. The landmark Supreme Court ruling of June 2007 required the government to create legislation to criminalize disappearances and establish an investigative commission on disappearances between 1996 and 2006. To date this legislation has not been passed. These delays have created doubt about the commitment of all the political parties and their political will to

follow through on promises to provide the families with truth and justice (see Farasat and Hayner 2009).

For women such as Kamala, memorializing their relatives' sacrifice is not enough; each requires concrete information about her relative's whereabouts and the return of a body, alive or dead. Her words expressed the families' frustration and also pointed to the larger issues at stake for the new state:

During the Emergency people died. But they have to make this information public. We are all people, from both sides. But the people who have reached the top are not telling us. Now we do not trust any parties.

The question of trust is critical to the future state in Nepal and to rebuilding relationships with citizens. Relatives of the disappeared continue to struggle against the same historic practices of injustice that sparked the People's War.²² At this juncture, there is still an opportunity for political leaders to address the culture of impunity and to follow the Supreme Court ruling to investigate disappearances. Then it may be possible for families to find some relief for their pain.

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²² My thanks to Bijay Chhetri for our discussion on this point.

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