

## AJIT BARAL

### Along the kingdom's broken shining path

#### First attempt

William Dalrymple's *The Age of Kali* describes his travels to Tamil territory to meet V. Prabhakaran, the LTTE chief of Tamil Ealam. Reading it in March 2003, I was inspired to journey across the territory of Nepal's Maoist fighters. Since a ceasefire between the Maoists and the government was in effect at the time, I thought it was a good opportunity, so I set off to Libang, the headquarters of Rolpa district. I intended to go to Libang, meet the Maoist contact persons there and make my way deeper into Maoist areas and, if possible, return via Baglung. The Maoist contact office was closed however, and when I asked a journalist and some others about links to the Maoists, they had none. They warned me of the dangers of venturing alone into Maoist areas and advised against it. Three journalists had been arrested a few days earlier for trespassing on Maoist territory. Faced with these unpromising prospects, I returned to Kathmandu.

#### Singati

Two years later I found myself on my way to Dolakha district, the first eastern district where the Maoists had formed a people's government. I was accompanying Adrian Fisk, a British photojournalist who wanted to do a photo story on the Maoists. Chugging for six hours along the winding Araniko Highway, we reached the district headquarters Charikot, a small town perched on a sloping hill, and soon located people who could help us meet the Maoists. They suggested us to go to Singati VDC, a Maoist dominated area four-hour drive away. , with Ghanashyam, a volunteer with a human rights organisation.

The next day we set off for Singati, a small and beautiful village by the Bhotekoshi River, on a bus bursting with people.. When we reached Singati, Ghanashyam left us at a hotel and went to find the Maoists. He soon returned and took me to a Maoist named Prayas who stood near the bridge He wore cotton pants, Chinese slippers and a white sport jacket, under which the tip of a pistol holster poked out. He asked who we were and why we had come. I explained that Adrian was a British photojournalist who wanted to document the Maoist militia's daily activities. Several Maoists crossed the bridge ver; one inquired about me, made a dismissive face and went away. Comrade Prayas said, "Many journalists visit this area; it's nothing new for us." His tone suggested that he had no intention of allowing us to stay with the militia. Adrian came up, eager for news. I asked Prayas if he cared to talk to Adrian, but he hurried off saying that his friends would come to meet us the next morning.

The sun was still too bright for photography, so we waited in a tea shop for the sun to go down. People came and went while we speculated whether any comrades would show up to talk to us in the morning. A woman entered the shop, and she and Adrian struck up a conversation. Her name was Sarita, and she quickly told us her life story. She had fallen in love and married at 15. She had two daughters, aged nine and seven, and was living alone with them, as her husband had been working in Dubai for the last two years. She agreed that Adrian and I could visit her place for tea at five in the afternoon. By now the sun had sunk behind the hills and we went out to take some pictures of the village. Maoist slogans were written all over the walls of the houses: Let's Make the Third Stage of Strategic Offensive Successful; Repeal the Black Law; Down with the Fascist King; Hail the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). Two Maoist flags fluttered on the pillars of the bridge and a red banner welcomed visitors to the people's area. Adrian photographed the flags, the slogans, and a woman grinding millet with a thick cylindrical block of wood. Urchins followed us and villagers looked at us with curiosity.

At five we climbed a flight of stone stairs to Sarita's room. Over tea and biscuits we asked about the situation in the village. She told us that few people from Singati had joined the Maoists but that many from surrounding villages had. She said that the relationship between the villagers and the Maoists was good and that the Maoists didn't do anything to the residents, unless they were large landowners. We learned that although she had been a schoolteacher for a year, she hadn't paid a part of her salary to the Maoists. Sarita had fed the Maoists a few times; in her opinion giving them food was a "small thing that people should overlook for the sake of their broader goals." She approved that "they are fighting for the poor", and said she would have joined them if not for her daughters.

## **Return to Kathmandu**

While we were having tea the next morning two young men and a young woman entered the shop and sat in front of us. We knew they were Maoists, but didn't dare ask. After about twenty minutes, one of the men called me over and introduced himself as Comrade Tashi Sherpa, an area secretary. He asked why we had come. I began telling him our plan and Adrian joined me and started explaining what he wanted to do. Hearing us out, Comrade Tashi left the shop and contacted his superior over a satellite phone. He returned to tell us that the District Committee had no authority to allow journalists into their area. Appearing unhappy denying our request, he suggested we return to Kathmandu and contact the Central Committee for approval. Had we stayed for a day or two to talk with him and his comrades about their lives and their activities, we might have gotten some kind of access, but Adrian saw no point in staying on and so we returned to Charikot.

On the way, a man from the Tarai who worked in the Singati health post struck up a conversation. He told me that the Maoists had stopped work in the 309 MW Upper Tamakoshi Hydro Project. The project, if it had been allowed to proceed, would have black-topped the unpaved road between Dolakha and the project site, cutting travel time by half. The project would have also provided 30 crores to help build schools and health posts in nearby villages. He also talked about injured Maoists who came to the health post for treatment. "I've removed many bullets from those who were hit. One Maoist still has one bullet in his thigh and another in his head. Those bullets were too risky to remove. They come to see me sometimes and say the bullets inside their bodies don't hurt at all."

Back in Kathmandu we wrote a letter to the Maoist Central Committee and received an email reply saying we should return to Dolakha and contact district level leaders. The message said we would have no problem getting access. We didn't want to go back merely to be refused again, so we forwarded our letter and the Central Committee's email to a friend in Dolakha and had him deliver them to the Maoists. They still refused, however, and we decided to visit Pyuthan, a Maoist affected district in the Midwest.

## **Pyuthan**

When we arrived in the village of Bijuwar in Pyuthan, a journalist friend arranged for us to meet some Maoists. The next day we found ourselves talking to a group of five in the side room of a teashop. Two were District Committee Members (DCMs) and two were with the Maoist-affiliated Farmers' Union while the fifth was president of the Woman Teachers' Union and wife of the Minister of Physical Infrastructure of the Magarat Autonomous Region (the Magar state), the Maoists' parallel government in the region. They asked for our opinion of the Maoist movement and we asked about the final stage of their strategic offensive, and about the women in their party. We laughed frequently and the conversation proceeded smoothly. Nevertheless, they had to ask the district secretary to allow us to spend any time with the Maoist militias, and he was away. They assured us that we would have an answer within a few days.

Bhawani Basnet, the Teachers' Union president and a man from the Farmers' Union returned with us in the jeep. We passed through a road that was only an hour's walk from the army barracks in the district headquarters. The army could have come swooping down on us in fifteen minutes if anyone had informed them that Maoists were travelling in our jeep. As the

woman was not an unfamiliar figure, she could easily have been spotted and the army informed. We saw no fear of capture in her eyes even though she sat next to the window. After an hour, we reached our hotel while she and her friend continued a little further.

Three days later, Comrade Basanta, one of the DCMs we had met, called to say we could go and see a gate of theirs recently demolished by the army, but for permission to stay for three or four days we had to wait at least a week more. We could not stay that long and insisted on meeting the District Secretary, Comrade Jhapendra Sharma. Basanta didn't want to disappoint us and asked us to come to Machhi, an hour from Bijuwar, in the afternoon. We went to Machhi but Comrade Jhapendra had just left. We were told he was in a place a little further up; continuing on we found he had missed him there as well. People were pouring into the area, we later learned, to hear a fraud case that had been brought to the People's Court, but we were not allowed to stay.

While returning to Bijuwar, we got to know Comrade Basanta a bit better. He had left college and his family to become a 'whole timer' four years earlier. When we asked whether he regretted his decision to leave college, he gave the standard answer: "Education is secondary when we're fighting for the country." Like Basanta, most of the Maoists were school or college dropouts and rather poorly educated, although they could discuss the doctrine with enthusiasm. We wondered how they would make themselves socially useful should their revolution succeed. We asked Basanta how he would contribute to society once the Maoist goal was achieved. He mentioned other Maoist organisations in other parts of the world and the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement and said, "We will fight for the international communist movement".

We wondered whether he feared travelling through the district. "No," he said. "Our intelligence network covers the area and would warn us if they saw any enemy activities." We thought their intelligence must be quite good for them to drive within a 15-minute sprinting distance from the army barracks with a sense of ease and carefree abandon. We weren't sure about quality of the army's intelligence, however. We had been talking openly with the Maoists, fixing dates and places for meeting. Clearly, our phones were not tapped as the army didn't track our movements.

Back in the hotel we were drinking tea when we saw a bespectacled man whom we had seen talking with Bhawani Basnet the day before pass in front of the hotel with his friends and loiter at a crossroads 30 feet away. Half an hour later, we heard gun shots and shutters going down. Heading for the balcony, we saw a group of around forty army men in civilian clothes rushing in with submachine guns in their hands. We asked them what had happened and they shouted at us to go inside. It was a great moment for my photographer friend, but there was too little light to take pictures. He was upset and said, "After so many days of waiting we are in a perfect position to take some good photos and there is no fucking light. Would you believe it?"

We went onto the streets to find out what had happened. The army said they were looking for terrorists, searched a few houses and left as quickly as they had come.

The next day we again asked the District Secretary for permission to spend some time with the Maoist militia. He remained reluctant to give us access, and kept repeating that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and militia were away and extremely busy. We almost felt that was the end of our Maoist-chase. We kept insisting that our aim was to show the world the human side of the Maoists, but the secretary didn't yield to our request. We said it would have been interesting to present the atmosphere of the people gathering in the People's Court to sort out a case the day before. He relented and invited us to attend a Teacher's Union program in Baddanda. "The PLA will guard the program and if you are lucky you can meet them," he said.

About twenty Maoists were in the room listening to our conversation, including three who had narrowly escaped death the previous day. They showed no signs of fear following the shooting incident. One rather sweet looking young fighter, who looked no more than 15, was bragging about the incident. "We saw the army intelligence officer and planned to shoot him, but the army came earlier than we had expected and fired at us. We fled without shooting back only because there were many people on the streets."

As suggested, we left for Baddanda, a Maoist stronghold three hours drive from Khalanga, Pyuthan district headquarters. Comrade Sankalpa and Comrade Gopal were waiting for us when we arrived. Comrade Gopal went up the hill to let his superiors know we had come while we chatted with Comrade Sankalpa, who was in charge of the Tusara VDC on the

Baglung-Gulmi-Pyuthan border. He had been wounded three times during Maoist attacks on the security forces. He had been shot in the leg, and a mortar had thrown him a few meters, injuring his chest. He told us that one of his ribs was still broken and he found it difficult to breathe while doing physical labour. He had therefore been given another responsibility that of expanding the party.

### Comrade Narayan

Comrade Gopal returned four hours later and had a certain Comrade Shyam lead us to a place called Hanspur. There we waited for another hour until Narayan Prasad Adhikari, head of the People's Government of Pyuthan district, arrived wearing combat fatigues and accompanied by an elderly man and three boys. One boy had a handmade pistol and appeared to be Comrade Narayan's bodyguard. Narayan had a serious air about him and gave the impression of being a man not to be messed with. He got down to business quickly, saying that they could not trust any journalist to write favourably about the Maoist movement. He asked if we could furnish proof that we would not criticise the movement. Adrian explained that he wrote for a leading leftwing British newspaper and that they could call the newspaper's editor to enquire about him, but Narayan wouldn't trust him so readily. He said the best he could do was to personally forward our request to the Central Committee.

Narayan then suggested that we could go to see Martyrs' Road, the road where the Maoist Central Committee had directed its members to send journalists to. Before leaving he also arranged for us to attend a cultural program. Sometime later a man came to fetch us and took us to a school twenty minutes away where the meeting was being organised. We saw no PLA on the way, only a fourteen-year-old boy named Toofan and a twenty-year-old girl named Namuna acting as sentries on the top of the hill, both armed with socket bombs strapped around their waists. Neither did we see heavily armed people in the school where the meeting was going on. The few who were armed had only homemade guns. We were quickly led away from the school to a Maoist mess on an open terrace where women prepared food while men ate. We ate, watching men wash their plates.

When we returned after dinner, the cultural troupe members had already created a stage and were making themselves up and dressing while we talked with Comrade Narayan and a crowd of cadres. With the other comrades surrounding him, Narayan asked Adrian about the British involvement in the Iraq war and Tony Blair's reelection. Adrian said that most British people opposed the war and that Blair won only because Britain lacked a strong opposition party and the electorate voted for the lesser of two evils. He then asked about the functioning of the People's Court. Narayan said that when a case was brought to the Court, the Court would investigate it and then put the results of the investigation before the people so that they could reach a verdict. The guilty party would perform labour as punishment.

Adrian asked whether there were any countries that inspired him. "There is no communist country in the world today that we want to model ourselves on. The Maoist party of Nepal is the torch bearer of the international communist movement," he replied, and continued, "China is no longer a communist country. It has fallen prey to the capitalist/imperialist design". Adrian's next question was how the Maoists would counter the influence of capitalist/imperialist countries once their movement succeeded. Narayan told him that Prachanda Path would prevent capitalist and imperialist countries from influencing Nepal. When Adrian asked how, he ignored the question, and Adrian continued, asking when the revolution would be successful? "I am not a fortuneteller, and Communists don't make such forecasts," was the reply. Comrade Narayan ended any further discussion by saying that Adrian was asking only technical rather than ideological questions.

We then went to watch the cultural program, a mix of song and dance that urged the masses to join the party and fight against the "killer king". The music was punctuated by written speeches that extolled the saga of the people's liberation army, the party for attempting to abolish untouchability and promoting women's emancipation. The speakers denied the government claim that 148 Maoists had been killed in the attack in Khara, Rukum district, and criticised the "Goebbels-style propaganda" launched by the government and the revisionist communist parties.

When Adrian tried to capture images of the women performers backstage changing their make up and costumes after each song and dance, he was prevented from taking any photos because Comrade Narayan said Maoist ideology considered photographs of young women applying make-up obscene. Despite their attempts to encourage boys and girls to mingle freely, the Maoists maintain strict discipline regarding sexual relations. The secretary of Pyuthan district, in fact, had issued a statement about the expulsion of seven Maoists for allegedly having premarital sex a few days before we arrived in Pyuthan.

## Holeri

The next morning we left for Gorahi, the Dang district headquarters, intending to continue from there to Holeri, Rolpa. When we reached Gorahi we learned that the last bus to Holeri had just left, but that it probably hadn't gone past the army checkpoint in front of the barracks, the same barracks the Maoists had destroyed just two days after the end of the ceasefire on 19 Jan 2007. We rushed up the road, arriving as the passengers were filing out of the bus to be frisked by soldiers and then walked two hundred meters further up to the other end of the checkpoint. The bus was packed, so we climbed onto the roof and sat on a sack of chaff with our legs dangling over the side. The bus spluttered and grunted as it snaked its way up the hill on the unpaved and narrow road; a foot off the rut and we would have hurtled into the ravine deep below. I felt jittery, but since only one bus had crashed in the ten years of the road's history, we had every statistical reason to feel safe.

We arrived at Holeri in the early evening. After tea and some biscuits we walked past a police post shattered by the Maoists on 12 July 2001. We were accompanied by a tenth grader and a primary school teacher, both of whom had been with us on the bus roof. We walked and talked about the general situation in the villages as the setting sun lit the sky golden yellow. The teacher, who was ideologically close to the Unified Marxist Leninist Party, seemed to resent the Maoists' activities. He told us that a few months earlier the Maoists had discovered that one man from his village was in the armed police force. Threatening his parents to get him to leave the police, they took control of their land and house when they failed to succeed. We asked whether village life had improved as the Maoists claimed. He disagreed adamantly, saying it had gotten worse, and went on to tell us how. "In the hills", he said, "people can't feed their families for twelve months, even if they work in the fields all year long. They have to migrate to the cities seasonally. Now the Maoists charge all seasonal migrants a thousand rupee tax and also charge thirty thousand to anyone going to work overseas. I've been paying them a day's salary every month for the last few years, and last month they demanded a month's salary. If they keep up this extortion, I'll have to stop teaching and head elsewhere."

When we questioned him whether the road the Maoists were building was beneficial to common people, he had an interesting answer. "The road itself is good and can bring development, but they are going about it in the wrong way. Donor agencies help build roads in this country, like the one we are on. The Maoists force villagers to build roads. Each household must contribute ten days' labour or pay a fine of Rs 1,800. Nor can we decide when to work on the road. This is the cultivation season and people can't afford to take time from their crops for road-building, but you can't argue with them. It's more autocratic than during Panchayat times," he concluded. "Even then we didn't contribute more than three days' labour to build roads."

An hour's walk brought us to Dahaban VDC, where we shared a room in a hotel with a senior Maoist leader named Kiran and his wife. The wind was blowing hard; the pine forests below swishing and the flags on the Maoist gate flapping furiously. Inside, we were talking. Comrade Kiran asked where we were going. "To see the road," we said. His next inquired whether we had written permission. We said we didn't and mentioned our meeting with Comrade Narayan and his request that we go see Martyrs' Road. "In that case", he said "you can see the road and photograph it, but you can't see or photograph the interesting things that are happening on the road. The PLA provides security for the workers; sometimes cultural programs are held. You might even meet Baburam Bhattarai."

This was a very alluring prospect, and Adrian was seething with anger; he kept ranting about the Maoist obsession with secrecy. "It's just my bad luck," he said, "three weeks ago a



Japanese photojournalist came here without prior permission and went to the school where the Maoists had a programme.. The army came on a helicopter and shot at people indiscriminately. He got great pictures of the helicopter hovering overhead, and people running for cover. The windshield of his jeep shattered and the bullet lodged in the driver's seat. He left in 48 hours! Can you believe it?"

The next day we woke up early and walked down through the pine forests with three men who were returning from Dang. The sun hadn't yet appeared from behind the hills and the pine needles on the ground were fortunately damp and soggy so we didn't slip. We asked the youngest man whether he liked what the Maoists were doing and while he answered that they are doing good things, his tone was anything but certain. Further along, we encountered about fifty PLA soldiers walking in groups of four or five. Some were carrying submachine guns that appeared to have been seized from the security forces, judging by their number tags, while others were armed only with socket bombs strapped around their waists.

Comrade Kiran had ordered us not to photograph anything on the way, which put me on guard. I wasn't sure if I could talk with the guerillas marching past, but Adrian summoned the courage to ask one—who was a bit ahead of his group—where they were coming from. He told us that they had been in Dang, and elaborated on why: "The government is saying we were pushed back into the remote hinterlands after the Khara attack. So we went to Dang to play psychological warfare." Three comrades walking behind hurried down; one who was listening to something on an earphone glared at him and, with a slight jerk of his head, signaled him to keep marching.

We rested at the base of the hill by a small rivulet while our three companions brushed their teeth and washed their faces. Comrade Kiran and his wife walked down as we were resting. The others continued on as they still had a long way to go, but we waited for our friends to catch their breath. We were now on the road the Maoists were building, and Kiran said, "This is where we started the road. It's about 92 kilometers long and nearly half finished in only six months." Nevertheless he told us the road would take three years to complete, both because no work can be done during the rainy season and because, "the enemy," meaning the Royal Nepal Army, "will disrupt the work from time to time". On the way, he told us about the trenches and tunnels being built in preparation for a possible foreign attack, how the PLA guards the road workers from enemy attacks, and about the work of his agriculture department. He also talked about the mobile hospitals where ordinary people flock for treatment. But when we mentioned the couple we had met who walked seven hours from Rolpa to the hospital in Bijuwar, Pyuthan to get treatment for their daughter he said, "Maybe they are class enemies". We had seen their dirty and tattered clothes, however, and knew they were not.

## Comrade Surya

After two more hours of walking we reached Nuwagaon VDC. Quite a few Maoists had gathered and Comrade Kiran *lal salaamed* each one by raising his fist and gave them all strong and jerky handshakes. We waited for tea while he went to a nearby shop to draft a letter to his superior, Comrade Surya, a regional bureau member of the Maoist base area that falls under the Mid-command. Letter drafted, he asked a comrade to take us and the letter to Comrade Surya, who was overseeing road construction in Triveni VDC. Forty-five minutes later we were talking with Surya in the attic of a shop. An avuncular figure with bleached skin and salt and pepper hair, he had a small black bag slung across his shoulders, and a red bordered white scarf around his neck. One of his toes was poking out of his Goldstars, the Maoist trademark shoes. After the initial pleasantries, he plied Adrian with questions, the same he had been asked by Comrade Narayan—about the war in Iraq, the British people's reaction to the war, Tony Blair's re-election and the like. Adrian did his best to prove he was not an agent of imperialism; he severely criticised the United States, strongly opposed the war in Iraq as, he added, did most British people. He told the comrade that he had participated in anti-globalisation demonstrations, and that Blair had won because Britain had no strong opposition party.

He had not read the *Communist Manifesto*, however, and I thought he was finished when Comrade Surya asked whether he was ideologically nearer to scientific socialism or

imaginary socialism. Adrian candidly asked him what these were. Surya took great pains to explain that scientific socialism was firmly rooted in praxis and that it believed that dialectical materialism and the very contradictions in the mode of production were the vehicles of change, while imaginary socialism was utopian and idealist in nature. Adrian's answer was non-committal: "I don't believe that either of the systems is absolutely good; I believe in a system that takes a bit from both."

Comrade Surya sprinkled his sentences with so much jargon that I found it difficult to translate what he was saying. I also wanted to see the road and leave quickly. To end the conversation, I asked the man who had led us there whether lunch was ready. We had rice, buffalo, lentils and vegetable curry and quickly set off with a comrade who was carrying a plastic sack with something inside—possibly gelatin—to pass on to someone else on the way up. People were starting to pour into the road after their three-hour lunch break. In fifteen minutes it was full of people, all of them working. Some were in lines passing along large stones while others were breaking them up, making sidewalls to support the road and digging narrow holes in big rocks to fill them with gelatin. The road was being built on rocky hills and was different from the one-lane roads the government generally builds in such places. It was quite wide; in places three vehicles could easily drive through at one time. What we saw was very impressive. I was glad we had come.

We were told that ten thousand people were working on the road at one time; from what we saw, there could well have been that many people on different stretches of the 92 kilometers the road covered. The Maoists had ordered every household to send one person to help with road-building or else pay a fine of Rs 1,800. People walked for as many as four days from neighbouring districts like Rukum, Salyan, and Baglung to work on the road because they could not pay Rs. 1,800. Not only the strong and healthy had come, but also children, old people and women with babies. The number of children and old folks working on the road was fairly high. Our visit coincided with the cultivation season so most households had sent the person least likely to help with farm labour to work on the road. As a sixty-year-old man from Salyan told us, "Our sons have stayed home to work our fields when the rain comes."

The labourers themselves had to make arrangements for their food. One man showed us the blisters on his back from carrying a sack of rice. On the other hand, people did not give the impression of being forced to work. We did not see many people relaxing or shirking, even though the Maoists were not watching them closely. The workers seemed anxious about the government security forces, however. One sidled up to me to ask, "Would the army shoot at us from a helicopter if they came?"

When we returned to Comrade Surya, he asked how we liked the road. "Very much," Adrian said. "We could sense the people's unity. They appeared to be working for a cause they believe in." Surya must have been pleased. The Maoists considered the Martyrs' Road as one of the three achievements of their movement (the others being the PLA and Prachanda Path). But was the road really an achievement? No. With more imagination and no coercion, it could indeed have been an achievement, a truly people's road, though.

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