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A Close Look at the Relationship Between Poverty and Political Violence in Nepal

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INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Today, one quarter of Nepal's population of twenty-seven million lives on a daily income of less than two dollars. Villages are deprived of an ample water supply, and some areas still lie in ruins from the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency. This paper will seek to understand the role of poverty in the historical and presently unfolding political environment of Nepal. Several factors show direct correlation between insurgent activity and measures of poverty, such as land ownership, level of education, and socioeconomic standing. Nepal has had a volatile and bloody past in the midst of medieval dynasties, an authoritative monarchy, and—more recently—an arguably psychotic royal family; but it is the nation's state of poverty that fuels the violence, specifically the ferocity of the Maoist insurgency. The nation's geography, education system, and economy contribute to the endemic cycle, as they are largely set up in favor of those rebel groups, whom the poor envy and are separated from by way of caste, and to whom literacy is not a foreign concept. Nepal's violent political environment is not a result of its brutal history, but rather its brutal poverty.

Nepal has been an independent kingdom for over 1,500 years. With Kathmandu as its current and historic epicenter for trade, business, politics, and culture, the Nepalese people of the Kathmandu Valley have been practicing a unique tradition of South Asian civilization since the fourth century.¹ Surprisingly, the religious difference—a blend of Buddhism and Hinduism—throughout the country is not what has sparked the discord seen over the last decades. From the fourth to eighteenth centuries, the kingdoms of Lichabi and Malla held the status of overlord, but in the sixteenth century, the Gorkha worked to defeat each dozen of small kingdoms, leading to a united nation by the late eighteenth century. The nation expanded until it came to face the huge empires of Chinese Tibet and British India; then it stopped its expansive efforts, and fixed boundaries were established. By the 1850s, Nepal was in its first dictatorship under the Rana dynasty, from which the country revolted in 1950.² After surviving several *coups*, Nepal was one of the few countries to have a king leading her into the twentieth century.

Despite the establishment of a new constitution in 1990, Nepal has been afflicted with multidimensional violence in the last twenty-four years. Although citizens have attempted to establish legalized political parties, competitive elections, a constitutional monarchy, and a parliamentary democracy, Maoist insurgents sparked the first armed revolt in 1996, just six years after the new

¹ Andrea Matles Savada, *Nepal and Bhutan: Country Studies* 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1993), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

constitution was accepted.³ After domestic killings left nine royal family members dead, parliament fizzled, and King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev took over all parts of the government in 2002.⁴ Maoist actions to instill fear throughout the insurgence resembled that of terrorism—kidnapping children, and killing leaders, civilians, and NGO workers. At the peak of insurgency in 2002, more than seventy of the seventy-five districts in Nepal were directly affected by the violence. During the same year, over 5,000 deaths were tallied, with a ratio of five government security force casualties for every one insurgent casualty. As the acts of violence rose in 2002, the United States Department of State added the Maoists to the terrorist watch list.⁵

Nepal's governmental past is one of instability and consistent change, never providing a basis from which the country can operate effectively. But the omnipresent poverty is what drives such unrest as the Maoist insurgency. People are most likely to join an insurgent movement when they don't have much to leave behind. They can be persuaded to fight for something, even if they don't know what they're fighting for, just because they are not happy with their current situation. Rebel life is appealing to those who cannot see a bright future without the occurrence of change. Geographically, educationally, and economically, Nepal is fighting a battle against a deprived humanity, something that I believe lies at the root of the violence of the last two decades. This paper attempts to explore the relationship between poverty and political violence, particularly by examining the effects of Nepal's geographic, educational, and economic state on the country's people.

GEOGRAPHY AND POVERTY

Landlocked Nepal contains some of the world's most diverse geography, with land ranging from flat plains just under 200 feet above sea level to mountains over 29,029 feet tall. In Nepal, insurgents and rebels are provided with vast, uncharted territory to run to when hiding from the government. These geographical factors make organizing and conducting an insurgency less costly and provide stable base camps for the Maoist armies.⁶ The geographical variation between the number of deaths that occurred between 1996 and 2006 supports the positive relationship between rural areas and war involvement: with three times as

³ A. K. Bohara, "Opportunity, Democracy, and the Exchange Of Political Violence: A Subnational Analysis of Conflict in Nepal," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2014): 108. JSTOR.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶ Q.-T. Do, and L. Iyer, "Geography, Poverty and Conflict in Nepal," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 6, (2010): 735. JSTOR.

many deaths occurring in the east as in the west.⁷ By defining poverty as a measure of accessibility to everyday materials, necessities, and foodstuffs, one can deduce that the more rural regions of Nepal are often the poorest.

Historically, the marginalized peoples and families of the lower castes did not own land, as they did not have the means or the social capability to experience ownership.⁸ The caste system still lingers subtly today and, combined with the cultural doctrine of land inheritance, solidifies the fact that the groups with power are unchanging; indubitably provoking insurgent activity from those without land. Such a culturally embedded tradition raises the question: can the limited power of the rural communities ever be redistributed or will land ownership never become an opportunity for those Nepalese peoples? This “landless” stigma further contributes to the volatility of the nation’s unadorned, as land is to power as money is to power. Especially in a nation state where 85 percent of the population lives in rural areas, land ownership is crucial to gaining a higher socioeconomic status, maintaining a healthy standard of living, and having a productive agricultural employment.⁹ The lack of land ownership causes a lack of pride, connection, and community that makes the idea of joining the insurgency seem more appealing for the landless.

There are several theories as to how poverty, geography, and insurgency relate to each other in a psychological and logistical perspective. First, the “opportunity cost view” holds to the idea that the opportunity cost of war is less in poorer areas due to low costs of recruiting rebels.¹⁰ Insurgent groups do not have to do much to get people who are not content with their lives to join them. The “weak state” hypothesis states that the poorer the state, the weaker the state, and therefore the less able to counter an insurgent movement—a largely accepted view. And lastly, the “grievance” hypothesis asserts that the more poverty-stricken areas will have more grievances against the government, making them more willing to go fight and less willing to maintain hope in their own country’s authorities. Essentially, it is most likely that opposition groups will form in the least-developed areas of a country, as opportunity cost, strength of state, and grievances hold the most power and influence in these rural areas. It is through these avenues that poverty plays a large role in the eruption of violence in a given area, especially in the non-city states.

⁷ Ibid., 737.

⁸ Karen Macours, “Increasing Inequality and Civil Conflict in Nepal,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 63 (2010): 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Do and Iyer, “Geography, Poverty, and Conflict in Nepal,” 737.

EDUCATION AND POVERTY

The Maoists abducted over 7,787 people in May of 2004, and a large bulk of those abductions took place in masses at schools, with teachers, children, and parents taken.¹¹ Stark empirical data such as this demonstrates the insurgents' high capacity for violence and the strong influence the party had on civilians. The large degree of school-age abductions reflects the rebels seizing an opportunity to take advantage of economies of scale—large groups with little power and in small quarters. With such an unstable education system, it is historically evident that the safety of schools had not been a priority. Of course, it is natural to argue that such abductions were inevitable due to the size and power of the insurgency at that point, but the lack of security still hindered their chances of finding safety in chaos. The abduction of students and teachers was in a sense ironic because interviews with returned abductees revealed that, despite the chaos of each abduction and the fear the Party instilled, the students had been treated nicely, only led away by being taught the Maoist beliefs and positions through teachings called indoctrination sessions.¹² The Maoists, too, understood the power that lies within education.

As does its neighbor India, Nepal has a deeply intrinsic caste system—often formed by geography—made up of mountainous terrain dwellers, high-caste hill dwellers, and lower ethnic groups known as Dalits and Magars.¹³ The war did in fact lessen the significance of the caste system, and therefore cause shifts in resource distribution, opportunity, and power. However, with over 100 ethnic communities, many Nepalese citizens see the government's recent action to enforce Nepali as the national language as threatening: an act of assertive power and symbolism of domination by the state. Others still deem the national language as an effort to unify each ethnic group, promote nationalism, and suppress such diversity.¹⁴ Education in Nepal is key to changing the remaining social stigma associated with non-Nepali-speaking communities. With the largest percentage of school dropouts belonging to historically low-caste citizens, and the largest portion of Maoist activists coming from the young, indigenous, and low-caste peoples, the debate on whether to keep or to repeal Nepali as the national language is becoming more and more controversial.¹⁵ Does it make sense to move toward nationalism and instill a prideful country? Or is repealing the decision and in turn honoring those who are offended a more practical solution?

¹¹ Macours, "Increasing Inequality and Civil Conflict in Nepal," 10.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Tejendra Pherali and Dean Garratt, "Post-conflict Identity Crisis in Nepal: Implications for Educational Reforms," *International Journal of Educational Development* 34, no. 1, (2014): 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

Women's education is essential to promote further equality and economic progress in Nepal. Although many women are becoming more educated today, it is important to note the historic and current abuse, neglect, rape, and trafficking of woman that still takes place throughout Nepal and its neighbors. Interestingly enough, the Maoist insurgency arguably sparked increased women's involvement across the country, as an estimated 30 percent to 40 percent of rebels were women.¹⁶ This is a statistic that the Maoists pride themselves in, but it also prompts the question: why were women so motivated to join? Similar to their male counterparts, women inevitably saw the prospect of wealth and a life outside cultural confines as appealing. But perhaps even more so, women saw the insurgency as an opportunity to mitigate the gender gap, to decrease gender discrimination, exploitation, and prejudice. Women's educational opportunities are decreasing due to the post-war economy, where the lack of jobs hinders university-age persons from having a positive outlook on education, and therefore causes a shortage of social capital. In their eyes, as well as the eyes of reformers, the government's future is too unforeseeable to know if educational reconstruction will pay off.¹⁷ Despite the failures of Nepal's current system, educational efforts are pressing forward with a new theme: a new Nepal.

Political participation relies on knowledge of the subject. Without an education to provide the basis from which one can draw individual opinions and conclusions, those individuals do not have the capacity to take informed action and be politically involved in the community. Therefore, in areas where education is scarce and money is not a common device, there will be less opportunity for people to become politically involved—not only due to lack of knowledge, but also due to lack of time and resources. The lower classes do not have the liberty of taking time for political participation, and because of that they have less social capital. In the research of Bohara, Mitchell, and Nepal, social capital and political participation were continually found to be the two largest players in the relationship between violence and insurgence in each district.¹⁸ The lack of economic opportunity also hinders a person's ability to participate in politics, but how did socioeconomic factors contribute to the insurgency? How do they still contribute to chaos in the government today?

Economic State and Poverty

Ironically, the general economic state of Nepal gradually improved in the years of civil unrest from 1995–2003. It is, however, important to observe that during this time, rebel recruitment increased, perhaps directly relating to a larger difference in socioeconomic welfare.¹⁹ As the economy improved, it did not

¹⁶ Macours, "Increasing Inequality and Civil Conflict in Nepal," 21.

¹⁷ Pherali and Garratt, "Post-conflict Identity Crisis in Nepal," 48.

¹⁸ Bohara, "Opportunity, Democracy, and the Exchange Of Political Violence," 124.

¹⁹ Macours, "Increasing Inequality and Civil Conflict in Nepal," 2.

translate to an increase in Nepal's universal well-being, but instead made the well-off wealthier and the poor poorer. The increase in productivity in turn made the gap between the two classes larger, therefore enticing more of the negative sentiment and grievance that sparks violent conflict. Throughout the insurgency, the greatest Maoist expansion took place in the areas where people had most recently been deprived of more land, necessities, and foodstuffs as a result of the greater inequality formed between the classes. According to Macours's hypothesis on inequality, the most salient support for insurgency comes from those who are most historically marginalized and do not feel as though they are benefitting from the economic growth like those around them are.²⁰

The role of remittances proves to increase prospects for violence in a migratory and competitive climate. In a study conducted by the World Bank in 2006, remittances from external relatives increased from 3 percent of the GDP in 1995 to over 15 percent at the close of 2003. The same study showed a positive relationship between remittances and inequality as inequality was the worst in areas that received the most remittances.²¹ While part of the world has a positive view of remittances, the construction is actually harming households in several ways. When an adult member of the household leaves, it causes a disruption in the family's life—often preventing the children from attending school since they must fill that family member's role at home. The lower the income, the less ability a household has to invest in human capital—causing the household to rely more on the children's household production.²² There are, of course, positive arguments in support of the continuation of remittances. But, the Nepal Living Standards Survey of 2006 concluded that of 3,373 households, 22.5 percent receive remittances while only 10 percent of households send them. Remittances have recently become a topic of study for the United Nations due to the substantive relationship between remittances and women's equality—proving a determining factor for one of the UN Millennium Development Goals for 2015, which aims to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.²³ Whether argued to be positive or negative, remittances play a key role in Nepal's economy, and their internal usage will continue as a crucial element to the country's future.

Current Situation

Headlines and international news items featuring Nepal are primarily focused on the one item that has the country in a gridlock: a new constitution. The country has been waiting on this document ever since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006. Prior to the delay, it appeared as though all parties were

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 12.

²² Cynthia Bansak and Brian Chezum, "How Do Remittances Affect Human Capital Formation of School-Age Boys and Girls?" *American Economic Review* 99, no. 2, (2009): 146. JSTOR.

²³ Ibid., 148.

enthusiastic for truth, reconciliation, justice, and restitution, but after prolonging the delivery, new loopholes in the agreement have arisen, such as from the young and highly threatening Young Communist League militia.²⁴ If the delivery had been done in a timely manner, it would have sealed the peace process that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement started. Although no substantial measures have been taken in the field of education since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006, the country is recognizing the public's demand for a more equal schooling system.²⁵ The transitional era has manifested in the courage of citizens to stand up for direct and diverse representation—the result of a short-lived but attempted democracy. One prewar fact, however, remains: members of marginalized groups are more likely to put ethnic identity before national identity.²⁶ This reality is in large part due to the numerous factions that exist, as well as the political challenges that must be faced even after the Constituent Assembly elections in November of 2013.²⁷

Because of the combined majority of The Nepal Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML), there has been greater fear of a Maoist re-emergence as both they and the ethnic minorities challenge the majority opposition. Although the first insurgency internally affected Nepal, analysts predict that another insurgency would put some externalities at risk, such as India's states both in the center and the eastern parts of the country. Despite a greater distribution of power among the parties, the elections placed primarily Kathmandu-based parties into power, causing further tension with the minority groups as their regions—and therefore their agendas, needs, and wants—will be largely ignored. Because the majority of seats went to the NC, the CPN-UML and other ethnic parties were essentially defeated. Left-winged extremists have been taken over by right-wing forces—those who are pro-India, pro-parliamentary system, and pro-traditional ideologies. The left side, however, strives for a directly elected presidential system: one person, one vote. While the Communist Party of Nepal is steadily diminishing in power, efforts will still be made to compromise a draft in order to appease the two sides.²⁸ At this time, it is too much of a risk to prevent the former rebels from having an influence, as they continue to have mobile forces and deep intrinsic volatility as a group. Since a presidential system could allow too much room for Maoist authoritarianism, one proposed idea has been a “French system,” where there is a directly elected (ceremonial) president and a legislatively elected prime minister.

²⁴ Andrew Hall, “Nepal: An Incomplete Peace,” *Asian Affairs* 42, no. 3, (2011): 403. EBSCOhost.

²⁵ Pherali and Garratt, “Post-conflict Identity Crisis in Nepal,” 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁷ “NEPAL: New Government Confronts Daunting Agenda,” *Oxford Analytica Ltd.* (2013): 1. ProQuest.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

Several potential compromises have been presented in an effort to unify the nation, but the people have one major concern: they do not want any more gridlock, government stalemate, or policy paralysis—three factors that are difficult for every nation to ignore. Although the elections are clearly indicative of the nation’s desire for a strong, anti-Maoist and anti-monarchy government, inclusivity is key to drafting a new constitution—one that will prevent war, provide a system of aid, and serve as the basis of the Nepalese government for years to come.

The lack of political progress threatens the public’s view, and after taking so long to establish some public faith in the system, citizens could easily question their politicians’ legitimacy.²⁹ With that being said, much progress was made between 2006 and 2011: “fair” elections held in 2008; 4,000 Maoist army members discharged in 2010; the region declared landmine-free in 2011; and strides made toward healthier child-bearing situations and fewer infant deaths.³⁰ However, more viable problems remain. Given the nation’s past levels of economic productivity and the amount of young adults and education-seekers migrating out of the country, Nepal is underperforming.

It does, however, have a large backing from the United Nations and other contributors, so why is Nepal still struggling? One problem has been the lack of an accurate election outcome prediction. Much to the surprise of the public and the rest of the world, the Maoist party won the majority of votes in the country’s first election and therefore took over with their own ruling leaders. After a failed attempt at stepping in as prime minister, former Maoist party leader Prachanda resigned and was replaced by Madhav Nepal, a more widely accepted and supported leader.³¹ Since then, the forming of the constitution has remained in a stalemate due to several factors, including human rights violation conviction and the size and strength of the Nepalese Army.³² The main issue is that the parties are too far apart ideologically to reach any sort of compromise.

Much of Nepal’s future lies in the hands of the newly elected Prime Minister, Sushil Koirala. After two months of general elections and a complete political deadlock, the country elected the head of the centrist Nepali Congress Party, who received 405 votes of support and 148 votes of opposition. Although the country has had six heads of governments since its 2008 transition from a constitutional monarchy to a federal republic, there is hope that Koirala will carry out his promise to form a new constitution in the next year as he has the support of the communist UML party. There is, however, discontent among the young because Koirala is the fourth family member to become prime minister—arguably

²⁹ Hall, “Nepal: An Incomplete Peace,” 404.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 405.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 407.

³² *Ibid.*, 410.

marring the change Nepal is striving for in a modern identity. It is important to note that this election was the first time the Maoists and former rebels were defeated in the polls since the end of the insurgency. Although they are currently refusing to participate in drafting the charter, political analysts argue Koirala's biggest challenge will be to win the Maoist's support in the draft, as they have dominated the government throughout the last century and are still capable of re-eruption.

Although the nation has received UN Millennium Development Goals Committee (MDG) Awards for improvements in the maternal health field, politicians are currently more focused on the balance of power and all issues aside from the ones that are arguably the source of current public mistrust: injustice, inequality, poverty, and lack of opportunity.³³ Poverty is a key component to chaos, turning people toward the radical ideologies that cause actions like the People's War of insurgency. In order for the future to hold a peaceful democracy, Maoists will have to dismantle armies, weapons, and leadership.³⁴ As of February 28, 2014, Nepal has adopted a fast-track model attempting to increase the productivity of the Constituent Assembly.³⁵ One month has passed since the first meeting of the CA on January 22, 2014, where the parties promised to have a written constitution within one year of forming committees. The new model aims to create a more efficient system, decreasing the number of committees from fourteen to five, writing new procedures, and calling for a first draft to be ready to revise within the next six months. Once the draft is complete, the committees will have eleven months to finalize the constitution, which must be approved by the soon-to-be established cross-party committee, whose goal is to prepare a report on related and potential constitutional issues. Nepali scholars are in agreement on one thing: the real importance of the new constitution is not about the government it puts into place, but rather about the symbolism—a new beginning for Nepal.

CONCLUSION

Mass poverty has prohibited the production of social capital in Nepal for decades, decreasing means for a good education and increasing the chances of political violence erupting. In conjunction with the studies of Do and Iyer, my research supports the idea that the reduction of poverty would likely lessen the chance of conflict at any given point. A reduction in poverty would cause the opportunity cost of recruiting rebels to be larger, and a higher quality of life could

³³ *Ibid.*, 412–13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 416.

³⁵ "Nepal to Adopt Fast-Track Model to Promulgate New Constitution Within 11 Months," *Global Times*, January 1, 2014.

mean people register fewer grievances against the government.³⁶ Historically, a more stable government may have likely made a way for more stability in the lives of Nepalese people, but it is the state of poverty that has fed the Maoist insurgency and still feeds political chaos today. It can be argued that the brutality of the past governments is what caused the lack of resources, happiness, and stability, but what would these things be without Nepal's culture and inherent traditions? It is a combination of the three that created the original turmoil throughout the country, but poverty is the fuel. It is the wood to the fiery tensions that run so deep, with so much volatility throughout Nepali society, and it is what enticed citizens to join the insurgency in the first place.

Geography, particularly in rural areas, was found to be a recurring trend in the insurgence: the hillier the terrain, the more Maoist killings that occurred in that area. Most unidentifiable armies that were found in the mountains throughout the insurgency claimed Maoist membership.³⁷ The harder your life is—not having little necessities readily available, prolonged hard laborious work, trekking for four hours to get water for your family—the more appealing seems the life of a rebel. It is easier to leave that which you do not wish to hold onto. Before, during, and even after the insurgency, Nepal's landscape proved to be essential to Maoist take-over and resulting success in the government. The opportunity cost, weak state, and grievance hypotheses support the notions that poverty-stricken areas are more susceptible to insurgent action and that the war was fueled by an unhappy population desperate for more resources to live. In each study conducted and each source that I studied, geography was listed as a key factor in the extreme nature of the Maoist insurgency, again supporting the correlation between rural areas and levels of poverty throughout the country.

From an economic perspective, education is essential to fulfill an expanding job market. For the last thirty-three years, the best job opportunities have been in the most literate districts of Nepal.³⁸ Increased political participation leaves less room for insurgent outbreak, as it is a form of social capital. Whether it be through foreign investments or social, local capital, a nation's investment is essential to its economic future; Nepal lacks proper leadership in this area as China and India so relentlessly try to take advantage of its weak and indefinable state. Emphasis is placed on the fact that greater political participation directly decreases violent political action, and the key to promoting greater political participation is increasing a person's ability to participate, by way of time, knowledge, and increasing income—the reduction of poverty. One key step to increasing community involvement is to diminish the remains of the caste system, a tradition that still hinders the ability of people—women and men alike—to

³⁶ Do and Iyer, "Geography, Poverty, and Conflict in Nepal," 745.

³⁷ Bohara, "Opportunity, Democracy, and the Exchange Of Political Violence," 117.

³⁸ Bansak and Chezum, "How Do Remittances Affect Human Capital Formation," 147.

succeed. It is noted that such deeply embedded cultural traditions can often be nearly impossible to reform, but that is something that will occur over time as the next generations move forward. Lately, the topic of a national language has been the most controversial throughout the nation and surrounding area, where over ninety-two local and ethnic languages are spoken. The ultimate goal is for citizens not to see the national language as a threat, but as an effort toward unification, nationalism, and individual pride.

In conducting research on Nepal's past, present, and future state—economically, politically, and socially—I found that poverty carries terrifying portent, a problem that is so noticeably intrinsically and extrinsically at work in the world today. The reduction of poverty in Nepal is essential to reduce probability of another insurgence and to promote cooperation and compromise throughout the drafting of a new constitution. Both my research and the research of Nepali scholars shows that a democratic system is most beneficial for the evolving country, promoting the compromise that must take place between the left and the right, between the Maoists and the NC party, as well as the Communist Party and those of Marxist-Leninist persuasion in order for stability and growth to ensue. In a country where over 100 ethnicities make up one entity, unification of those parties may only be possible through democracy—a system of governing that would enable higher social equality and increased political participation to take shape. And, in a nation where such harsh economic circumstance make the life of a rebel seem appealing, it is crucial to take measures to reduce the level of poverty, eventually closing the largely divisive and defining socioeconomic gap. Solving the issues of national pride, historical sentiment, and caste discrimination is no easy task, but the future of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is bright.

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