Death Consciousness and the East

Loss and Bereavement in the Maoist People's War in Nepal

by

Sujeet Karn

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the bereaved family members of the Maoist conflict who lost their loved ones during the struggle.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

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Sujeet Karn
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Chapter 1

Political Violence, Death and Bereavement: References from Maoist People's War in Nepal

Introduction

The philosophical and spiritual debates argue death and life are two phases of the same 'life energy'. Death is a part of life; life processes and death are not two different things. These are two points in a continuum of human life: birth – 'the beginning' and death – 'an end of the physical presence of an individual'. Since death is the ending of the varieties of peripheral engagements, in simple words, death means the ending of a symbol - the individual and its perception. When one dies this is an ending of not only the brain and organs or physical body but psychologically the loss of an identity that is more than a body, thought, reactions, emotions, relationships, memory, attachments, fear, etc. The stream goes on, and the stream is enduring. Death is hence a manifestation of the whole in its continuity and discontinuity – the ending – that is death. This is what a human being is all about.

Death thus remains an ultimate fact, a confirmed reality that is unavoidable in any circumstances. After birth, death is certain, yet unpredictable in its timing. Death appears as a final step in the passage of a life cycle. It occupies a central stage for living beings. Hence, in the human psyche, death in its meaning carries a sense of incongruity, a sense of helplessness prevails in terms of not being able to unpack the meaning of death in a real sense. Therefore, death is a secret event for living beings that is never understood, even if it has to a large extent occupied human beings in their thoughts, behaviours, and practices. The enigma of death has been debated and discussed throughout history, yet, so far, not a single explanation has been agreed upon. When it comes to understanding death, it remains 'the unexplained paradox'. Nevertheless, a simplified understanding equates both life and death as a journey.

This book discusses death and its various facets within an Eastern worldview, especially focusing on Nepali Hindu imaginations and practices while taking the case of political death in Nepal. Particularly "political death", that is death that occurred as a result of Maoists political conflict in Nepal. People in Nepal viewed the death of their family members as an outcome of the Maoists conflict that started in early 1996 and continued until April 2006, costing more than 13,500 lives (HRYB 2008) and a large number of disappearances that remained permanent forever (INSEC 2011). Data suggests that although a majority of the disappearances were resolved and victims were released, in the absence of any complete or definitive list of disappeared, various agencies that worked actively in Nepal's post-war transition and peacebuilding efforts suggest that the unresolved disappearances cases vary somewhere between 600 to 3000 in number[1]. It is understood that those who did not reappear by the year 2008 are probably deceased. The struggle to deliver justice for disappeared victims continues until 2024. The members of the Conflict Victim's Committee (CVC) remain exuberant to exert pressure on the government to provide justice for human rights violations and the deaths that occurred during the Maoist conflict as they are linked to wider developments in the political landscape of the country.

Since the book discusses death and grief arising from political violence in Nepal, throughout this book an attempt is made to analyse death and the process of bereavement in the context of a post-conflict situation. It emphasises the people's engagement with death and their coping mechanisms for grief and loss and how political violence contributes to the meaning of identity, interests, and death and coping. Particularly an attempt is made to examine how the disruption of traditional mechanisms of coping with death and grief due to political violence occurred and how people dealt with the disruptions and continued to make meaning in life after a sudden loss of a loved one.

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[1] The number of disappeared persons in Nepal varies as ICRC records 1127 (Ref. ICRC 2015), society of the Families of Disappeared 1162, Ministry of Home Affairs 600 and INSEC 993.

The Nepali State, Maoists, and Death

Present-day Nepal in the Himalayan basin represents 'an area of interface to two different cultural worlds: '*Indic*'[2] and '*Bodic*'[3] (Gurung 1997, p. 498). The geographical boundary runs North West to South West dividing the boundary based on mountains, and hills and including '*Tarai*'[4] where the Khas (Caucasoids) predominate in the Karnali basin, the Kiranti (Mongoloides also claimed as aboriginal) eastwards and aboriginal Madhesis in the middle. Before 1742 this rugged and remote geography fostered numerous tribal units, chiefdoms, and petty states that were only conceptualized and extended as one Nepali state through conquest over petty states by Prithvi Narayan Shah during 1742 – 1775. The present-day socio-politico and geographical boundaries of Nepal are thus shaped by Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723–75), the ruler of the tiny Gorkha principality in the 18th century (Whelpton 2005; Stiller 1993; Pradhan 1991; Regmi 1972). Eventually, the monarch was placed as the supreme authority and kings were viewed as a manifestation of supreme power while being personified with 'God'. Nepali monarchs simultaneously became the absolute power that generated moral authority and the right to govern Nepal for generations. Over the next few centuries, on the ground, this governing philosophy served the evolving relationships. This is what we know as Nepal today. The Maoists however came as a resistance to this social makeover[5] of which violent death became the influential tool to negotiate socio-political order.

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[2] The word 'Indic' means the people having origin in the Indus Valley Civilization in ancient India.

[3] The word 'Bodic' denotes the people of Tibeto Berman origin.

[4] *'Tarai'* is a geographical region in Nepal mostly consisting of flat agricultural land adjoining India in the South. Geographically, this area is the bread basket of Nepal, where the major economic activities take place.

[5] Zharkevich, I., (2016). In her Chapter, " When Gods Return to their Homeland in the Himalayas', Maoism, Religion, and Change in the Model Village of Thabang, Mid-Western Nepal, in *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal, edited by Gellner, N. D, Hausner, L., S. and Letizia, C.* presents the transitioned religious overview at the time of Maoists movement in the Maoists command area.

Nepali Nation-State in Making

For Nepal, the idea of a 'nation-state' was not visible until 1814, when for the first time the territorial ambition of the Nepalese government came into conflict with the East India Company, which strictly limited the 'Gorkha Empire's' preoccupation with territorial expansion across the Himalayas. The boundaries and structure of the polity were finally sketched by the treaty of Sugauli which eventually became the land-mark to seek for popular legitimacy of Nepal's governmental authority (Regmi 1972) that in turn sought the position of the ruler in terms of systems of ruling.

Later, a more systematic effort was carried out by the Rana rulers to model Nepal as a nation-state. The '*Muluki Ain'* (the Legal code of Nepal) was brought about in 1854. This taxonomy was imposed on top of the pre-existing, local definitions of relative political status and the segmented political hierarchies across the country (Sharma 1977). The first democratic revolution of 1950 put an end to the Rana oligarchy and installed a Monarchical democratic system. However, a democratically elected government lasted for a very brief period and only helped to restore the Shah dynasty, which had been kept away from the centre of power by the Ranas since 1846.

Nepal during 1950 to 1990

King Mahendra took over the reins of power in 1960, dissolving an elected Congress Party[6] government, and installing the Panchayati[7] system (Baral 2012 ed. by Onta and Parajuli). This regime espoused a 'guided democracy' through the Panchayat system that in reality, allowed the king to reserve all powers to himself (Rose 1971; Brown

[6] The Nepali Congress is a centrist political party of Nepal that was founded as the Nepali National Congress in 1947. It continued to dominate Nepali politics until 2006 and is now the second-largest political party in Nepal.

[7] Panchyat denotes a village development unit. The term originates from the word 'pancha' meaning the local leaders who were reputedly above party politics, first used by King Mahendra to implement his philosophy of the Panchyati system to govern the masses.

1996; Baral 2012 ed. by Onta and Parajuli). The project of guided democracy was to spread nationalism with national sentiment. Simultaneously, a certain conception of national identity was born. The identity the King claimed was based on the religious faith of 'Hinduism'. Hence 'Hinduism' was presented as 'the religion' of the Kingdom (Burghart 1996; Toffin 2009). The consolidation of the Nepali state was brought about as a feature of elite ideology imposed upon the locals, first as an administrative fact and finally as a social and cultural reality, by assigning each group to a very precise position in the hierarchy of castes. Historically, caste was recognised as a unique socio-cultural phenomenon of Nepali society, and stratification[8] took place via hierarchically arranged caste rankings. People were granted rights and duties based on kinship and their relations with the central government. Rights over land and trade were not the same for everyone (Burghart 1996; Hofer 1979; Sharma 1977). Belonging to one group or another had both political and economic consequences. Several studies over the last 50 years have shown how various processes of mutual accommodation between regional ethnic systems and the policies of a centralizing state have led to economic inequality and identity politics in Nepal (Rose 1971; Regmi 1978; Seddon 1993; De Sales 1998; Kumar 2000, Bhattachan 2000; Gaige 2009 2nd ed.; Lawoti 2010; Hangen 2010).

To build a national identity, which was the principal aim and philosophy of the 'Panchayati System', the Nepali language was imposed from the beginning of primary school, at the expense of other languages[9],

[8] The '*Muluki Ain'* of 1854 (Legal code of Nepal) tried to comprehend the pluralistic cultures of Nepal into a single scheme of the Hindu caste universe. These caste hierarchies were classified into five categories in the following order of precedence: 1) Wearers of holy cord *(Tagadhari)*, 2) Non-enslavable alcohol-drinkers *(Namahsine Matwali)*, 3) Enslavable alcohol-drinkers *(Mahsine Matwali)*, 4) Impure but touchable castes *(Chhoi chhito halnya naparne)*, 5) Impure and untouchable castes *(Chhoi chhito halnya parne* or *Ma ju pim).* The scheme was biased in favour of the dominant Bahun, Thakuri, and Chhetri hill castes. However, in the recent past, these categorizations have been contested within Nepali society. Sharma (2004) in 'The State and Society in Nepal and Gurung (2003) in 'Trident and Thunderbolt: cultural dynamics in Nepalese politics' discuss the caste dynamics in detail.

[9] The number of languages/dialects reported increased from 31 in 1991 to 106 in 2001. The 2001 census records an additional 22 Rai, 17 ethnic, and 12 other lan-

which was seen as oppressive (De Sales 2003). Lawoti (2007) argues that the bias of state institutions in favour of the Khas-Nepali language has put non-Khas-Nepali-native speakers in a disadvantaged position. There was little done to ensure the protection of minority rights against the tyranny of the majority. Internal migration of the hill caste groups from the hills to the tarai also contributed to establishing the Nepali language as the country's lingua franca, and so, seen as a powerful means of national integration. The superimposition of caste, differential privileges, inability to accommodate minority cultures (language), and the top-down approach to establishing democratic systems failed to unify people into a common 'Nepali' identity and instead gave rise to group and ethnic identities. As a result, the consolidation of Nepali people in the Nepal state remained contested.

In addition, monarchical institutions gave marginalised groups very limited opportunities of participating in the decision-making process at the national level, except for those few trusted individuals and families who were able to do *'chakari'* (to gain favour through bribes, as false praise). The prevailing family network priorities within the high caste and the culture of *'afno- manche'* (one's own people) further contributed to retaining broader alliances of the privileged caste and their domination within the power structure of the country (Bista 1991). This has repeatedly led to the discomfort of other marginalized groups, compelling them to frame their own separate identities (Macfarlane 1993) based on historical and cultural roots. Resistance to the monarchy prevailed and the 1990 'People's Movement' (Jan Andolan I) was spread for the restoration of democracy, bringing together liberals and communists, both of which were banned under the Panchayati regime. This was the beginning of mass politics for which fifty years of profound social change had prepared the country (Hachhethu 2000, 2003; Baral 2000; De Sales 2000; Burghart 1993).

Since the time of the unification of Nepal, the rulers of Nepal had tried to develop Nepal as a homogeneous, monolithic, and unitary state, in

guages/dialects. These languages are classified into hill caste groups, hill ethnics, and tarai caste groups (Gurung 2003, p. 5-8).

the state-designed schema of national integration in which religion was a central guiding force. The idea of sacralization of the polity took the central stage. This only assisted a few from the hill-high caste Brahmin-Chhetri and Newar groups to remain in a privileged position in society as they had control over the religious texts and the local cultural practices that were derived from them. Other groups, for instance, Madhesi[10], Janajati[11], and Dalits[12] were generally left marginalized. In this sense, until today the state of Nepal has not emerged as a nation; it is still divided by socio-cultural cleavages and lack of political will to objectively promote national integration. Thus, culturally varied groups and their daily life experiences appeared in conflict with the dominant elites. This was seen as an accretion of the underlying structural deformities that were introduced and continuously maintained by the hill-high caste Brahmin-Chhetri and Newar. However, this was reflected logically as the agents of movement diffusion (Gurung 2003; Anderson 1983). One would thus argue that the concept of the formation of the nation-state had a hidden agenda of not incorporating the Nepali masses into mainstream development and polity but of constructing a discourse that would dissolve future possibilities of any mass movements that might challenge the prevailing power structures.

The Making of Maoists and Death Consciousness

It has long been argued that modern states are expected to provide human security, along with 'positive political goods' such as an independent judicial system to adjudicate disputes, enforce the rule of law, and protect the fundamental civil and political rights; a functioning educational and healthcare system; an efficient transportation infrastructure, food security, and other conditions necessary for the development of their people. The absence of all or any of these could leave a

[10] People who live in Tarai land are called Madhesi; they consist of various castes and ethnicities.

[11] Janajati denotes different minority groups having lived originally in Nepal from ancient times.

[12] Dalits are the lowest caste group in the hierarchy of the caste system. This group of people has always been marginal in terms of social and economic status.

nation in a volatile condition conducive to rebellion and conflict (Rotberg 2003). Thus, to understand death and dying due to political violence, here, it is necessary to place these deaths in the context of larger socio-political processes.

Although the 1950s movement for democratic polity gave some hope for positive change in Nepal, nevertheless it was not translated into reality. Although, after capturing power in 1960, King Mahendra tried to modernise the Nepali state in a guided form, it mainly retained many of the features and functioning mechanisms of the old state. The trend continued even after the 1990s People's Movement and unfortunately, the situation did not change drastically for the people who lived in the remote hinterlands of Nepal who constituted a majority of the population. It is in this context that the Maoist people's movement seems to have been conceived in the remote hinterlands of Nepal (Nickson 2003; Kumar 2000; Mikesell 1999; Burghart 1993; Hoftun 1993; Adhikari 2014).

While the communist ideology has prevailed in the region since 1947 when a Nepal Communist Movement was first formed in Calcutta under the leadership of Puspa Lal Shrestha and later transformed into the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), the rise of Maoism as an alternative political ideology came late in Nepal, dating from 1971. Initially, it began with the influence of the teachings of Mao Tse-Tung and the experience of Charu Mazumdar, the early architect of the Naxalite Movement in India. Influenced by Naxalites of the neighbouring border town, young activists in Jhapa, in the Eastern Tarai, formed the Koshi Regional Committee of the CPN, later known as the 'All Nepal Revolutionary Coordination Committee' (ML). These young activists, for the first time, launched an underground guerrilla movement to wage a people's war, popularly known as the 'Jhapa uprising'. The Jhapa uprising was one of the first of its kind when Nepali communists adopted armed struggle as a revolutionary strategy against the existing establishment and ruling elites. However, the movement was brought to a quick end by a violent counterinsurgency campaign by the police, which led to the deaths of many of the cadres of the All-Nepal Revolutionary Coordination Committee (ANRCC). The members of the same group later

reworked their strategy to launch a people's movement that could at the opportune moment be altered into an armed revolt. Today's top leaders of the Maoists come from the same school (ANRCC) that was initially organised by Mohan Bikram Singh and Nirmal Lama (Cailmail 2009; Karki and Seddon 2003, Nickson 2003; Thapa 2002; Maharjan 2000).

However, a major political change did not occur until 1990, when the National People's Movement (Jana Andolan I) reached a point of popularity where it could no longer be ignored and finally a constitutional Multi-Party Democracy with Ceremonial Monarchy was established in April 1990. It would be appropriate here to point out that the mass movement that brought the desired political change was equally supported by the underground communists who came from the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), Fourth Convention, and later split into various groups such as the Communist Party of Nepal (Mashal), Ma- Le, Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre- Ekta Kendra) and Janabadi Morcha (People's Front). In some ways, the indirect support of these groups of communists allowed them to see themselves as contenders in party politics who wished to become a major political group in Nepali politics. These underground communists saw themselves as instrumental in creating the political crisis that led to the events of the April 1990 uprising. However, they were cornered by the dominant political groups including the Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal Marxist/ Leninist (CPN-M/L), and further marginalised in the new political order. Even the left front, a major left alliance, found itself in a distinct minority in the interim government. Thus, its demand for the constituent assembly and to draft a national constitution, which was originally talked about as early as 1951, was again rejected. In reaction, the United National People's Movement, a group of underground communists including the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre- Ekta Kendra) rejected the new constitution, considering it an inadequate basis for a genuine democracy. They continued to demand a constituent assembly, to draw a new democratic constitution and eventually, the formation of a People's Republic (Karki and Seddon 2003).

The CPN (Maoist) headed by Prachanda (Puspa Kamal Dahal) boy-

cotted the 1994 election and the CPN (Unity Centre) was divided further into the CPN (Unity Centre) led by Niranjan Govinda Vidya and the CPN (Unity Centre) led by Babu Ram Bhattarai. The Electoral Commission refused to recognise the latter. This seems to have been the turning point for the Maoists. At this point, the CPN (Unity Centre) led by Babu Ram Bhattarai repudiated all political engagements within a constitutional framework and started preparing for a People's War. The CPN (Maoist), already underground, and CPN (Unity Centre) resisted joining multiparty politics, taking advantage of the situation to shape their ideology while criticising the parliamentary democratic system. This finally led to the Maoist People's War to bring about radical change through armed struggle (Karki and Seddon 2003; Nickson 2003). Field research carried out by Karki in March 2001, in Rolpa and Rukum suggests that initially after the rejection of parliamentary politics, Maoist workers were harassed substantially, which further pushed the Maoists to organize themselves for an armed struggle. In arrogance, instead of negotiating with the groups and bringing back the rebels to parliamentary politics, the state power pushed Maoists further into the jungles. According to Karki and Seddon (2003), the ruthless Operation Romeo became a discourse to challenge state power and served as a crucial factor behind the Maoists' eventual commitment to launching a People's War. De Sales (2003) notes a similar dissent raised by the Magars of Kham Country, where the Maoists were initially able to establish themselves.

Finally, in January 1996, the United People's Front of Nepal (CPN Unity Centre and CPN Maoist) presented a 40-point demand to resolve the hostility and insisted that if no progress was made towards fulfilment of their demands by 17th February 1996, they would have no choice but to resort to armed struggle against the existing state. The government, instead of responding positively, further cracked down and hence a full-fledged Maoist People's War started in the hinterlands of Nepal. Certainly, democratic inclusion and exclusion have always been central to political discourse in Nepal. As discussed, historically, policies and practices only favoured a few elites, leaving a majority of people, including Madhesi, Janajati, and Dalits disadvantaged and

their agendas for development ignored. The Maoist People's War was thus, one may conclude, an outcome of the imbalances on the political and socio-economic fronts which led to an armed class struggle in a neo-Marxist fashion, leaving many dead, many more bereaved and a minority to rule the majority.

Death during the Maoist Conflict

Coming back to the disastrous impact of armed conflict and death, one may suggest that violent death is not a new phenomenon within the history of Nepal's power structure. As discussed earlier, the foundation of Nepal itself is historically grounded in the skills of war-making. For instance, one may recall continuous assaults made by Prithvi Narayan Shah to conquer small kingdoms to unify Nepal, or King Mahendra's crackdown on political cadres in the 1960s to sustain his power. This strategy has long existed and is observed by the rival groups in the backyards of power structures. However, while the earlier instances occurred within the boundaries of power regimes, later instances prepared a conducive ground for death to capture the public imagination in Nepali society.

In the beginning, this had little impact in terms of transforming death in the public imagination and remained limited to the negotiations of power among the ruling elites. The history of armed struggle in Nepali politics thus primarily dates back to the years of 1960s when democratic intelligentsia launched armed protests to establish democratic governance in Nepal against the autocratic monarchical regime. For the first time, formal executions took place to suppress the democratic movement initiated by the then Nepali Congress, a leading centrist political party in Nepal in 1962. The army was mobilized against the people in Bharatpur in inner 'Tarai' in response to those who were involved in an armed struggle in which four people were recorded as dead, killed by army personnel.

Oral history suggests that the armed struggle that started at the begin-

ning of 1962 probably killed around 200 people in different districts and border towns of Nepal, in contrast to the report of the Human Rights Year Book (1994), which reports the killing of only 27 people. The struggle continued in the 1970s and 1980s to establish democracy in Nepal, costing the lives of a few hundred people, but did not get much attention. It seems that, since then, the killing of politically active people continued. At times, it was crafted in the name of maintaining law and order, while at other times key political activists were killed who shared a particular political ambition. Hence, death appearing out of political conflict which had its seeds five decades earlier, continued and expanded to capture public imagination during the days of Maoist conflict.

The Maoist conflict known as the Maoist People's War, which formally began in 1996, was brought to an end by a peace accord signed between the Communist Party of Nepal, Maoists {CPN(M)} and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) in 2006. This technically brought an end to the violent conflict. A full-fledged armed conflict started on February 13, 1996, when members of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists (CPN-M) attacked a police post in the Rolpa district of Western Nepal. It is also argued that the genesis of an armed insurgency in the districts of Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot was attributed to several factors, including poverty and general underdevelopment of the area, grievances against the 1991 democratic government, the heavy crackdown on CPN-M activists during 1992, 1993 and 1994, and a long-standing presence of Communist activists in the area (HRYB 1996; Sharma 2003; De sales 2003; Karki and Seddon 2003; Cailmail 2009; Adhikari 2014; Hachhethu 2015; Adhikari 2015).

From the beginning of 1998, the Maoists started intensifying and extending their activities by attacking police posts in the remote areas of Rolpa. The government launched a major crackdown, called the Kilo Sierra 2 operation, which led to a massive increase in confrontation. The clash between the police and the Maoists intensified and resulted in a sudden rise in injuries and deaths due to the continued conflict. In a period of one year from April 1998 to May 1999, the number of deaths due to con-

flict increased to 596, of which 457 were a result of police actions (Karki and Seddon 2003). Over the next decade, the Maoist insurgents targeted government officials, police personnel, army depots, and banks, and succeeded in controlling large areas of the countryside. Data from various sources suggest that around 13,347 people died during the Maoists uprising. Among them, 8338 people were killed by the state security forces and 4970 by the Maoists. A record 4,603 people were killed in 2002 of which 3266 deaths were perpetrated by the state security agency actors and 1337 by the Maoists. This included 452 children and 1016 women. In addition, around 500 individuals lost their lives after the Madhes armed struggle which continued just after the April 2006 mass uprising (Human Right Year Book, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 22 May 2008; Reuters AlertNet, 20 Nov 2006). On top, an estimation given by the Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC) in Nepal suggests that 17,963 disappearances took place as well from the start of the conflict (INSEC 2011) of which a majority of the cases of the disappearances were resolved and victims were released, but a large number of disappearances remained permanent.

In addition, data suggests that nearly 5000 people were killed in the Western Region, the epicenter of the Maoists conflict, while casualties were much lower, around 1600, in the Far Western Region and the rest dispersed in the Mid-Western, Central and Eastern regions (Do and Iyer 2009, HRYB 2006). The death-related data prepared by Do and Iyer (2009) suggests that conflict-related deaths were significantly higher in poorer districts and in geographical locations that favoured insurgents, such as mountains and forests.

The fact remained that a large number of people were killed, ranging from villagers to left supporters[13], Maoists, government officials, police and army personnel, and other political party supporters, and innocent people who did not comply with the political philosophy of the Maoists as well as the Nepali state. Reports also suggest deaths occurring dur-

[13] These are the people who supported communist ideology strictly and ritualistically.

ing patrols or encounters, whether real or fake and a majority of killings took place during offensives by Maoists on police and army positions. Nevertheless, in all cases, killings were either labeled as Maoist if perpetrated by the security forces or a feudal, reactionary if perpetrated by the Maoists. Many killed for being Maoists were local villagers and peasants with no ideological background as class revolutionaries. They were, most of the time, pulled in as supporters through coercion and blackmail. In times of uncertainty, some eventually turned Maoist, because they did not have much choice in the remote villages in the absence of a state administration and did not have a sense of security.

Deliberate and Unlawful Killings

Unlawful killings, including extra-judicial executions by the police, were also widespread during the launch of the intensified security mobilization operation after May 1998. The incidence of unlawful killing shot up dramatically with the state of emergency imposed in November 2001 and reached its peak in 2002.

The members of the Maoists also perpetrated many deaths including members of other political parties, particularly the Nepali Congress, and other civilians. According to the Maoists, these civilians were killed because of their involvement in specific acts such as corruption or collaborating with the police or at times were seen as feudal and reactionary. Death of some also occurred when individuals defied warnings given, while a few were killed without any apparent reason. Apart from the death taking place unlawfully, killing in custody, death due to severe torture, and death by deliberately implanted landmines also occurred.

Political Death and Meaning Making - A New Phenomenon

The massive political deaths that took place during the Maoist movement in Nepal in its modern conception is a new phenomenon that has disrupted existing social and familial value systems in Nepal. Violence

and loss have created vulnerability in the family, particularly when the deceased was a breadwinner and the head of the family. All the same, these characteristics are to some extent similar to those found in places of civil or political conflict around the world (Robben 1995). Hence, political death is not new but it was certainly new in its characteristics in the case of Nepal. Death has particularly fractured the pre-existing collective community bonding leading towards a further fragmentation of the society. A bereaved individual was seen as isolated within the community, which was not the case before when death and bereavement were shared collectively in the community. Different types of conflict including those with ideological, personal, and social bases have led to many deaths, of which a large number involved direct state intervention while others were disguised in form. These deaths took place in larger numbers than ever before. Formally or informally, whatever way we may frame it, these deaths were extended beyond the walls of power structures and moved to the societal and family level in extreme forms which finally disrupted the traditional mechanisms of coping with death and bereavement. This as a result led to the extreme politicization of the society that seems to be a new phenomenon and death a by-product of the emerging polarised phenomenon of politics.

The interesting question that one may ask here, which is of considerable importance, is how death became political in the context of Nepal when conventional understanding views death as a natural fact and the political as a construct. What I call political death is the semantics and the characteristics of politics that appear to be imposed on death due to political and social differences. Hence, this book elaborates on the patterns of death that have occurred due to a political reason that directly or indirectly disrupted the existing social fabric of society, subsequently dismantling the traditional mechanisms of coping with death and bereavement.

Several questions can be raised to understand political violence and death in post-conflict Nepal; for instance, what are the typologies of death such as political death or death of general public/political cadre or both? How does this relate to who dies – men/women, poor/rich,

high/low class, high-/low caste? Whose deaths are of social importance and how does the context of these deaths in terms of place/ space/ and time shape this importance? How were these deaths negotiated in a larger societal context, in terms of social status and place in society? Was it only a death or something more in terms of the causes and consequences of the death? How did families respond to conflict-induced death and negotiate their social status in a post-conflict situation? And how did death in a family contribute to the social identity of the bereaved and how did they correspond to such situations? This book therefore seeks to answer some of these questions and presumes to contribute to understanding the meaning of death in conflict situations and serve as an important endeavour in the field of death studies.

The case of Nepal suggests that the violence was present in the form of continuous terror (akin to such events as the current war in Philistine and Ukraine, or Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria, or the violent practices of the brutal regime of apartheid, and unlike sudden violent episodes such as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and was both mobilized and targeted towards certain groups of people, adversely affecting the lives of the people, breaking up the cultural and social interconnectedness of the society and family (Chung et. al. 2020; Tiwari 2010; Baral 2006; Kattel 2003; Nepal 2003; Lal 2003; Bhattachan 2000). Yet, despite the severe disruption of lives and bereavement, everyday life seems to have regained normalcy, at least superficially. Nevertheless, the process in which the bereaved transform themselves while navigating through grief has been a matter of concern and remains uncertain. Over the last fifty years, the questions about how people suffer and return to normalcy after such overwhelming experiences have been debated and discussed; yet the processes remain continuously contested (Robben 2004; Walter 2012, 2017).

The thinking of systematic and scientific study of death and bereavement is about 'investigative activity' that is capable of discovering the world of the families who had lost their close kin due to political violence. Given the nature and the complexity in which to draw meaning

out of death and loss, the tools of qualitative design, especially multisite ethnography a mode of inquiry was used intending to engage in discussions about death and identity in Nepali society (Bryman and Burgess 1999; Creswell 1998; Seale 1999; Crotty 2003). The methodological approach of multisite ethnography was particularly informed by anthropological insight to explore the meaning of death and bereavement within a culturally structured framework[14].

About the Book

In this book the case of Nepal is analysed, with an emphasis on the disruption of the traditional ritual patterns and people's engagement with death and their coping mechanisms for grief and loss, adding a new dimension to the contested discussions of death and dying. Discussion is grounded in an anthropologically informed context in which the centrality of ritual in societal accommodations of death is emphasised as a key feature. The meaning of political death and dying is constructed socially and coping with grief is done in religious and cultural perspectives while engaging the reflections of the bereaved members. This book thus seeks to elaborate the discussion beyond individual grief and bereavement processes to understand death as a variable in social change and transformation. In addition, the relationship between political death and the social identity of the bereaved is looked at in a social setting.

Throughout the world, the death of a family member is seen as inducing the vulnerability of the bereaved, and bereavement patterns are seen as a natural response to grief. Literature from several studies on families living in contexts of conflict, whether be it civil or ethnic in developing countries, or gang 'warfare' or violence within large cities, suggests that the effects of such conflicts have often been extreme (Cheney 2005). Conflict also compels countless others to live with material and emotional deprivation, including loss of the structures that give meaning to

[14] The detail methodological discussion is presented in the chapter titled "Politics of Violence and Death; Some Methodological Issues."

social and cultural life, and disruption of social networks and primary relationships that support family's physical, emotional, moral, cognitive, and social development (Maguire and Shirlow 2004). This gives currency to the developing understanding that people eventually do cope with death and grief even though it is politically motivated, unexpected, and sudden in nature. This book thus attempts to discuss the patterns of coping and association of the bereaved persons, who have lost their loved one due to political violence. It further explores how competing political ideologies are influential in breaking off the patterns of coping and association. It explores and emphasises the sociocultural and spiritual ways of handling suffering and grief. To take the discussion further, perspectives are drawn from philosophy, sociology, and anthropology of death in the context of bereavement approaches in the family. Moreover, in the context of Nepal, perspectives from the anthropology of death are emphasised since in the Nepali social world death rituals constitute a central feature and provide a cultural framework to handle loss and grief.

The author contends that if death is politically motivated then it is necessary to contextualise death as a means to social change in a social setting. Therefore, the post-conflict political context sets the ground in which death and bereavement in Nepal are presented. Throughout this book, the discussion is presented to understand the meaning of death and bereavement in Nepali society in general and political death due to political differences in particular, by taking bereaved members in the family as cases of study in the post-conflict context. Subsequently, it is argued that treating political death as an important social variable would lead to understanding death in its totality which accommodates the social identity of the bereaved in it. How political death is presented for social change and thus constructs family and societal relations and norms to identify the individual self in the larger society is analysed while offering an opportunity to understand political death and dying and its contribution to reframing the structure of social identities and social and personal realities in the Nepali State.

Experiences from around the world also indicate that individuals and

families when go through the experiences of war and civil conflict, death produces a certain set of reactions. Death breaks relationships in a way that necessitates a reconstruction of lives and a change in the everyday understandings that guide interaction. The families who suffer loss either grieve continuously or surprisingly grieve little and do their best to forget and at times transcend grief to self-actualization. While taking examples from the collective view of remembering the war veterans in various wars, ranging from the First World War, and Second World War to the Vietnam War and the Rwandan genocide, Walter argues that the historical development of grief and mourning in the twentieth century is focused on the questions of continuing versus breaking bounds with the dead. Walter (2012; 2017) and Seals (1998) suggest that war produces fictive kinship groups and tend to construct a collective memory while they are unable to balance when it comes to death and bereaving loss. The questions about how people suffer and return to normalcy after such overwhelming experiences have been debated and discussed, yet the processes remain continuously contested (Robben 2004; Walter 2012; Kristiansen et. al. 2018; Noakes 2020).

Particularly, anthropological literature from around the world suggests that political violence has been mobilised and targeted on lives and interconnections to break communities. Yet, about the families and lives altogether severely disrupted, individuals do get engaged in coping to manage everyday life (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1996). Nordstrom and Robben (1995) suggest 'violence as a socially and culturally constructed manifestation of a deconstitutive dimension of human existence' (p.6). They argue that when such a situation arises and violence takes place, it may not have a fixed form to relate to. The answers to the questions of how people learn to engage vary from context to context.

In most of the cases, death rituals allow people to cope with trauma. In Nepal, too, bereaved families go through a set of rituals over a period of time to cope with death. But when death occurs without any prior notice and with an attached political notion, it is contested. Most often family members were not aware of the situation that had led to death and hence pushed into a vulnerable situation. They lived in fear and

uncertainty, destruction, hopelessness, and situations of violence (Robben 1995, Adhikari 2014).

Data from the study on which this book is based suggests that such deaths have not been accepted normally among family members. This kind of death looks for social and political reasons to cope and deal with. Hence, Nepal provides an interesting case to examine what political death could mean. How do families and individuals in Nepali society cope with and respond to death when it is politically inflicted? In addition, what political death might mean for family values? How did the family's disrupted cultural elements impact coping? The conflicting values were contested in the wake of the stigma attached to political death and how it is renegotiated and balanced are some of the important questions addressed and answered in this book.

Moreover, these deaths have been argued as cultural trauma and seen in contrast to the existing social values of peace and nonviolence. Political death has pushed out the families from the existing culture. The sudden emergence of a new culture of violence persisted with conflicting values. In this proposed book some of these issues are discussed in length while drawing upon a yearlong multi-sited ethnography in Nepal. While interrogating and exploring violent death and grieving, an effort is made to present a fresh insight to understand Nepali society in its most transitory phase of modern history.

To summarise, Chapter One, **Political Violence, Death and Bereavement: References from Maoist People's War in Nepal** outlines the background for the book and introduces various chapters in brief. The framework, rationale for the book, and major findings are summarized. The discussion elaborates beyond individual grief and bereavement processes to understand death as a variable in social change. It argues on the absoluteness of death and how people respond to questions that arise in the ways in which the bereaved make sense of death and bereavement.

The Second Chapter, titled **Death Consciousness in the East: Meanings and Perceptions**, presents historical and theoretical perspectives

in which death and bereavement in post-conflict Nepal must be discussed. A brief layout of the broader socio-economic and political picture of Nepal is presented to place the study of death and bereavement within a contemporary Nepali perspective. The meaning of political death and dying is constructed socially. In addition, the relationship between political death and the social identity of the bereaved is looked at in a social setting.

The Third Chapter **Researching Political Violence and Death: Some Methodological Issues** provides the framework in which the study was conducted. The chapter points out the complexities that remain to explore political violence-induced death. A justification for employing a qualitative methodology, particularly multi-sited ethnography used to collect the data was presented. The challenges and complications of being in the field are discussed in detail.

Drawing upon analysis, the Fourth Chapter, **Locating Death in Post-Conflict Nepal** discusses the meaning of death in detail. The analysis highlights how the meanings of death are constructed in various cases. How they are interconnected with one another in some visible or invisible form, concluding that death was not only a sense of acceptance or rejection but also seen as a transcendental approach and a means to self-actualisation. Furthermore, the meaning of death appears to overlap within categories and extends beyond the limits of categories to give a pragmatic outlook to life. Drawing upon narratives from the field, a typology of death is presented and discussed in the light of the Maoist People's War which was used as a tactic to achieve political goals. The typology of death is further discussed and contrasted against the perspectives of death developed in the West.

Chapter Five discusses how deceased commemorated death under the heading **Commemorating Violent Death: Rituals and Practice**s. This chapter argues death through the lens of cultural and ritual imagination and unpacks the complicated cases that contributed to prolonged grief. Rituals appeared important in death commemoration but were challenging to incorporate and had implications. The death ritual was

recognised as a social issue and a political problem. How death as a social and political problem intersects to conflate identity issues is discussed in detail. It further explores how competing political ideologies are influential in breaking off the patterns of coping and association.

In Chapter Six grief and bereavement patterns are explored and put into perspective. Under the title **Bereavement and Coping with Violent Death and Grief** various types of bereavement patterns are discussed in categories. A framework for coping with violent political death is developed. It notes that handling grief and the ways of bereavement were significant when death was put to the test with the concept of living. The meaning of living was important. This was particularly envisaged within the concept of *dukkha,* a model of grief. The concepts of everyday living encouraged family members to recreate their worldviews. *Dukkha's* model of coping with grief is developed in parallel to the modern Western bereavement perspectives. Moreover, it also explores and emphasises the sociocultural and spiritual ways of handling suffering.

Finally, Chapter Seven concludes the book by indicating a **Framework for Discussing Political Death in Nepal and Beyond**. This chapter concludes the book while suggesting that it is necessary to understand death in its complexities if life is to be lived in its totality. Understanding and exploring the meaning of death and grieving from a micro and macro perspective are an important part of it. It argues that if death is to be visualized through political violence that occurred in Nepal, coping is not only possible through psycho-social or/and cultural and spiritual perspectives as has been argued by Western academics, but it also has to be located within everyday living and livelihood options.

Chapter 2

Death Consciousness in the East: Meanings and Perceptions

Introduction

Conceptualizing death is very daunting at first. Death is an unavoidable fact, an established reality; after birth, death is certain, yet unpredictable in its timing. Death appears at the edge of a life cycle, yet it occupies a central stage for living beings. Hence, in the human psyche, death in its meaning carries a sense of ambivalence. Death is a mystery that is never understood, even if it has to a large extent occupied human beings in their thoughts, behaviours, and practices. The mystery of death has been debated and discussed throughout history, yet so far, there is not one unified meaning that has been agreed upon within academia and among ordinary human beings. However, a simplified understanding equates both life and death as a journey. Consequently, in Eastern exploration what we call death is merely an episode in a recurring story that has begun before and continues afterward (Bloch 1988), although this can be contested. The obvious fact is that the meaning of death has long been discussed extensively in various academic streams including religion and philosophy, yet, it remains the only crisis of human existence and therefore remains important to understand, explore, and research.

This chapter conceptualises the meaning of death as it is discussed in various academic contexts. The core discussions are based on the meanings drawn from various streams including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, spirituality, etc. The purpose is to understand the long-held views regarding the meaning of death as discussed across the globe. This in turn would help to formulate the meaning of death arising out of an ethnographic analysis of death in the context of post-conflict Nepal. Discussions are specifically directed first toward the conceptualization of death and anthropological and philosophical understanding using

available literature on Eastern worldviews, particularly in Nepal. Secondly, discussions also seek to explore existing relationships in which death is grasped in a broader sense. This primarily relates to rituals and practices that in turn strengthen as well as help in sustaining the meaning of death. Furthermore, anthropological debate on death and bereavement is reflected within a socio-cultural framework that contains ritual performance that includes performing rituals just before death, at the time of death, and after death for a certain period. Hence ritual serves as an important tool that consolidates the social and emotional ties of the bereaved in the community. Finally, the linkages in which the processes of grief and bereavement are perceived and experienced are discussed, which eventually add to the meaning of death and death rituals universally, as well as in the post-conflict Nepali society.

Furthermore, while conceptualising death, the question arises whether we can at all understand death in its real sense or whether we can try to understand the various forms of death and its meanings about people who lose a kinsman, or woman close to them. The meanings of death for individuals differ based on one's orientation. Individual orientations are dependent on an individual's experiences and perception of philosophy and religion, science and technology, arts, culture, politics, and society (Raj 2013: van den Hoek 2014). Throughout human history, people have tried to explore 'its causes, its purposes, its timing, its place, its consequences and its endless intractable mysteries' (Cobb 2009, p. 34). Thus far, rather than clearing up the cloud surrounding the meaning of death, an individual finds himself/herself caught in an endless process of contemplation. Moreover, in late modernity, the reflexive outlook of a person has led to reframing the re-enchanted knowledge to seek transcendence (Lee 2008). This has led to more perspectives and dimensions of thought than ever before.

To put it ingenuously, an individual's death limits his or her living. It is this gratitude for being born at the one end, and the fear of death at the other that shapes an individual's personality to lead a meaningful life. At the outset, the meaning of death in this dual sense remains an area for conflict that needs to be managed again and again to live a