

# School leadership during violent conflict: Rethinking education for peace in Nepal and beyond<sup>1</sup>

*Tejendra Pherali*

*UCL Institute of Education*

## **Abstract**

This paper outlines the impact and professional tensions created by the decade-long armed conflict (1996 – 2006) on school leadership in Nepal. Drawing on qualitative interviews and discussions with school heads and teachers (n = 92), the study reveals that the onerous pressure of pupils' safety during crisis ultimately fell upon teachers and school leaders who faced direct violence on school grounds and communities they lived in. It was found that school heads were traumatised by consistent pressures, as manifested in the form of financial extortion, physical threats and abductions by the Maoists while the security forces frequently harassed them as Maoist sympathisers or confederates. Maintaining relational equilibrium with warring parties in order to ensure their personal and school survival was a traumatic experience. Despite the enormity of effects on education during conflict, the post-conflict educational debates largely undermine the voice of those who were at the frontlines during crisis. These findings provide useful insights into 'experiential dimension' of civil conflict at schools in conflict zones and implications for educational programming.

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<sup>1</sup> Publication details:

Pherali, T. (2016) School leadership during violent conflict: rethinking education for peace in Nepal and beyond, *Comparative Education*, DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2016.1219538, Published online: 26 Aug 2016

## Introduction

In recent years, there is a proliferation of literature that deals with interactions between education and armed conflict, which dominates the themes of education as *victim* – that teachers, pupils and educational infrastructure are targets of violent attacks (GCPEA, 2014; UNESCO, 2011), as *perpetrator* – that education is an ideological process of social control and manipulation (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2005), as *liberation* – that education provides critical consciousness and empowers people against oppression (Frerie, 1970; Pherali, 2016) and as *peacebuilder* – that education can help ‘transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches toward cooperative solutions’ (SFCG, 2015). Young people who lack access to quality education are vulnerable to ideological indoctrination and manipulation by extremist or violent political groups. From a humanitarian perspective, the education debate is underpinned by the principles of human right that children’s right to learn must be prioritised even during emergencies. Most importantly, education provides safe spaces for learning and children’s psychosocial development as well as opportunities to receive food and medical attention during crisis (INEE, 2010). Nevertheless, the very reasons that schools provide a sense of normalcy, symbolically representing a functioning state, they become ‘tactical targets’ of the opposing armed groups (van Wessel and van Hirtum, 2013).

The causes of intra-state civil conflicts are contextually specific and the motives of attacks on education relate to the historical, political, religious and ideological positions of conflicting parties. Much of the literature around these themes focuses on either theoretical analysis of the duality of the education and conflict relationship (Davies, 2004; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000) or the anecdotal reporting of assaults on educational infrastructure, teachers and pupils (O’Malley, 2007, 2010; GCPEA, 2014; Save the Children, 2013). There is a research gap in terms of understanding how teachers and school leaders experience and navigate

through, both physical and psychological threats and assaults on schools and trade-off their survival in the contexts of protracted conflict. This paper utilises data from the author's doctoral study that explored the impact of Maoist rebellion on school education in Nepal. Drawing upon violent experiences of teachers, school leaders and pupils during Nepal's Maoist insurgency (1996 – 2006), this paper argues that the disproportionate focus on conventional form of schooling during conflict, without calculating the risk of potential attack from armed groups, may be counter-productive in terms of children's safety, learning and their social and emotional development. The paper also highlights that the onerous pressure of pupils' safety during crisis ultimately falls upon teachers and school leaders who face direct violence on school grounds and communities they live in. Yet, teachers' and school leaders' voice does not feature sufficiently in educational planning in conflict-affected contexts, and the post-war educational reforms often undermine the significance and implications of teachers' traumatic experiences. These findings provide useful insights into teachers' lived experiences in the contexts where armed groups target educational institutions and some critical agendas for post-conflict educational reconstruction are also suggested. This paper will be introduced with some analysis of 'the experiential dimension of conflict, on the ways people live their lives in contests marred by inescapable violence' (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 3). Then, some necessary background of the nexus between education and conflict in Nepal will also be provided. Finally, the key findings of the study will be discussed.

### **Sociopolitical Conflict, Education and Anthropology of Violence**

The underlying causes and object of conflicts, when positioned in the contexts of cultural invasion or unjust socioeconomic conditions, largely contribute to rationalisation of the use of violence. Violence in this situation is a means to liberation from oppression, an acceptable action that defies elitist or alien aggression both in physical and symbolic terms on disenfranchised and indigenous populations. Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony elucidates the idea that violence, force and power are embedded in the social, cultural and

political institutions that legitimise the ideology of the ruling class. The juxtaposition of social practices and hegemonic discourses normalise and reproduce social injustices. To this end, education serves as a vehicle for social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977). However, political movements and violent rebellions contribute to sensitisation of normalised conditions and destabilisation of unequal power structures. In this process, structures of learning and their stakeholders are confronted by competitive dominance from conflicting powers. This is manifested through attacks on education in conflict zones which include occupation or destruction of school buildings, abduction, forced recruitment and killing of teachers and pupils, imposing alternative curricula and in some cases, denial of education entirely.

Armed rebellions that are inspired by 'revolutionary' ideologies often mobilise the tactics of political education, trepidation and austere persecution for any defiance to their movement. Rebels engage in mass mobilisation through ideological indoctrination in which, teachers and pupils either voluntarily participate in or forced into their campaign. Girls in particular, face the additional risk of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence during conflict. Demonstration killings and brutal physical attacks serve as a war tactic in cultivating fear and subjugation, which makes violent revolutions ironically disparate in their aims and approaches that the struggle is portrayed as necessary for liberation but the tactics are inherently oppressive and unjustifiable. Schools not only represent social, cultural and political disposition of a society but also serve as a contested political space (Pherali, 2014). This complex positioning of schools often leads to a multitude of ideologically opposing responses to conflict that are supportive, compliant or disapproval of the rebellion. Teachers, school leaders, members of the school management committees and pupils are not mere passive victims of the conflict but also influential political agents in the struggle. Ultimately, at a deep level, the impact of violent conflicts on educational stakeholders is explained by this very nature of the response.

Violent attacks on teachers also stem from their role as ideologically opposing intellectuals. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) present four categories of teachers as intellectuals: 'hegemonic intellectuals' who represent ideologies of the dominant groups and recreate educational environment and social class. This category of teachers is complicit in social reproduction by undermining social, cultural and political inequalities. Rebel attacks on schools, teachers and pupils in this context symbolise subversion of state authority that is represented by the education system. Teachers as 'accommodating intellectuals' accept the system uncritically and refrain from political action by proclaiming professionalism. The third category of teachers is 'critical intellectuals' who, despite their consciousness about social inequalities and injustice, fail to engage or motivate pupils in collective struggle for change. It is the teachers as 'transformative intellectuals' who should have the disposition and skills to inspire pupils to resist hegemony and act proactively to take control of their learning. Teachers as transformative intellectuals possess a capacity to reflect critically and pursue conscious actions to gain social justice (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993, 45-48).

The role of teachers as transformative intellectuals represents symbolic disapproval of the status quo that is maintained by the authoritarian state. Hence, the state aggression on teachers and school leaders has become a recurring phenomenon in conflict-affected countries (O'Malley, 2007; UNESCO, 2011; GCPEA, 2014;). As Sluka (2000, 2) notes, 'state terror is a major and growing world problem' and 'if politically motivated torture and murder are defined as terrorism, then it is in the large authoritarian states, both on the right and left, that these forms of terrorism have massively escalated in recent decades'. The second half of the twentieth century has seen the escalation of the use of state terror as a means to suppress civil resistance, which has resulted in 'a couple of millions of "disappearances" and other politically motivated murders', the re-emergence of torture as a war tactic and cultures of terror around the world (Sluka 2000, 2). Rummel (1994) offers a useful theoretical explanation to the relationship between power and terror that the increase in the arbitrary power of a regime from democratic through authoritarian to totalitarian regime often leads to

increased aggression and practice of terror. Hence, in contemporary civil conflicts, violent and symbolic assaults on schools and teachers also epitomise the elite monopoly and coercion of the powerful state. Teachers and school leaders, whether they are 'hegemonic' who are complicit to elite dominance or resistive to the regime, equally endure the debilitating impact of violence. As Robben and Nordstrom (1995, 3) have pointed out:

Violence is confusing and inconclusive. Wars are emblematic for extremes that people's existential disorientation may reach. Such life-threatening violence demonstrates the paralysis as well as creativity of people coping under duress, a duress for which few are prepared... The everydayness of war is a never-ending stream of worries about the next meal, the next move, and the next assault.

The perpetual state of fear and serendipity of future aspirations caused by protracted wars create a state of dumbness in life and frustrating routine and futility of daily activities (Gounari 2010). The inability to prevent conflict makes people develop alternative ways of coping with it and sustaining the effects of adversities. However, the impact of such violent experiences may be observed in a professional demeanour characterised by indifference, individualism and eroded motivations.

The changing nature of conflicts, especially after 9/11, has posed complex challenges in conceptualising impacts of conflict on education both in societies that deal with everyday violence and others that live in a 'state of terror'. In most conflict situations education is targeted particularly due to the contentious role it plays in fuelling or dampening the causes of violence (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). In practical terms, schools serve as recruitment sites or indoctrination camps for rebels (Watchlist, 2005) and are also used to implement counter-insurgency policy of the state. I will now focus on the lived experiences of school heads and teachers during the armed conflict in Nepal. First, some necessary background to the conflict is provided.

## **The Context of Armed Conflict in Nepal**

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) declared a 'People's War' on 13 February 1996, simultaneously carrying out attacks on police posts, instigating 'planned assaults' on factories and raiding the house of a civilian (The Worker 1996). The 'People's War' was initiated with an aim to overthrow the over two-century old monarchy, its political structure and to establish 'a new socio-economic structure and state' (Bhattarai 2003, 117; Maoist Statements and Documents 2003). By the year 2002, the war spread across the country engulfing 73 out of 75 districts, claiming the deaths of around 8,000 people and causing a huge amount of economic losses (Kumar 2003). Such a rapid expansion of violent conflict is widely attributed to social inequality (Murshed and Gates 2005), political failure or inefficiency of the post-1990's governments in treating the insurgency at its early stage (Bohara, Mitchell and Nepal 2006; Thapa and Sijapati 2004, Thapa 2003), and more importantly the extreme poverty that had shattered the rural people of Nepal (Do and Iyer 2007; Bhattarai 2003; Deraniyagala 2005). While many young people joined the rebellion voluntarily, the Maoists mobilised masses of people primarily in rural areas by employing various tactics including, political education and cultural events, mass demonstration, extensive coercion, assaults and also brutal murder of those who defied their movement.

The royal massacre in June 2001 eliminated the entire family of King Birendra and led to Prince Gyanendra's accession to the throne. When the newly crowned King Gyanendra embraced tough measures to crush the insurgency by declaring a state of emergency, it rather 'exacerbated the political instability and allowed the conflict to spiral out of control' (Shields and Rappleye 2008, 91). King Gyanendra's coup in February 2005 expelled parliamentary parties and imposed a direct rule, which led to the formation of a seven-party political alliance<sup>i</sup> (SPA) against the royal regime. However, the public support for the resistance against royal takeover was insignificant as the people were hugely disenchanted by continual failure of civilian governments to deliver good governance. But the relationship between the King and parliamentary parties deteriorated to an extent that Nepali Congress,

a prominent political party abandoned its longstanding support for the constitutional monarchy, which would later have a historic repercussion in abolishing the 240 year old monarchy.

As the rebels' military strength gradually increased, the 'People's War' was coming to a stage of power equilibrium and the military solution to insurgency was deemed no longer viable. In this context, a new political covenant was forged between the seven political parties and the rebelling CPN-M which then led to a new political roadmap through a twelve-point agreement. This political alliance reinvigorated people's movement against the royal coup, eventually reinstating the parliament and removing the king from power. At the cost of over 17,000 lives and colossal damage of social and cultural fabrics of Nepali society, the decade-long violent conflict was formally ended after the *Comprehensive Peace Accord* (CPA) was signed between the government and CPN-M in November 2006. Despite nine years of political upheavals, a new progressive constitution was promulgated on 20 September 2015, which redefines Nepal's social, political and cultural identity. The new constitution has guaranteed federalism and recognises Nepal as a multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious and multicultural society. In educational terms, the task ahead in reconstructing education to realign with the new vision of Nepali state is enormous. The decade-long war and subsequent political tensions in the country have had serious impact on children's learning as well as on the education system, which require an urgent attention.

### **Schools during the Conflict**

Schools remained at the forefront of the Maoist rebellion in which rebels extensively mobilised young people to expand their political and military influence. Education was also complicit in creating conditions for armed struggle by failing to promote equity in access, quality and outcomes across castes, gender and ethnic divisions. Even though public education was available to all, it largely served the traditionally privileged social groups primarily, hill-based high caste males from three dominant castes including, Brahmin,



Chhettri and Newars. For example, over 80 percent of the leadership positions of key social and political domains such as bureaucracy, judiciary, security institutions, media, and voluntary organisations have been monopolised by these social groups who represent around one third of the national population (Neupane, 2000). The 'unequal distribution' of educational benefits contributed to perpetuate the existing social order which led to discontent among social groups who were systematically denied the possibility of upward social mobility. In higher education, particularly girls and children from suppressed low castes and neglected ethnic groups such as Dalits, Madheshi and indigenous nationalities are hugely underrepresented (Bhatta et al, 2008). Schools have been complicit in discrimination against children from marginalised communities. Teachers and school leaders, most of whom represent higher caste backgrounds, neglect children from Dalit, Madheshi and indigenous communities or have very low educational expectations on them (Bhatta et al, 2008). For children from marginalised social groups, the education system failed to nurture their academic potential and disregarded their continued underachievement and dropout from school. Bourdieu (1977) describes this as 'symbolic violence' which is 'gentle', 'invisible' and often goes unrecognised but is more powerful than physical violence. It imposes and legitimises the discriminatory social structure. This nuanced but 'toxic' role of education was never challenged seriously throughout the educational development for over half a century.

Education in Nepal has been at the epicentre of civil conflict both as a problematic institution that failed to promote social justice as well as the major battleground during the war ( Pherali 2011; Caddell, 2006; Vaux et al, 2006). During conflict, pupils and teachers were frequently abducted by the Maoist rebels in order to engage them in 'revolutionary training programs' (Pyakurel 2006, 55) or were forcibly recruited into the Maoist militia (Watchlist 2005). The Maoists imposed mandatory donations on teachers across the country and schools were frequently forced to close down (Simkhada 2006, 64). Private schools were particularly threatened (Caddell, 2006) and the student wing of the CPN-M demanded closure of all

private schools, accusing them of being merely commercial ventures rather than serving for the broader social good.

It was reported that more than 79 schools, one university and 13 district education offices were destroyed by the Maoists between the period of January 2002 and December 2006 (INSEC 2007), of which 32 suffered bomb explosions and at least 3 schools were caught in the crossfire between the rebels and security forces (Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre 2006). On the other hand, security personnel arrested, tortured and even killed teachers and school children suspected of being Maoist activists or sympathisers (Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre 2006; Sharma and Khadka 2006; Amnesty International 2005). The practice of these extra-judicial actions by the state was justified through the broad agenda of 'combating terrorism' and the state terror was the most 'cost-effective' response to 'resistance to elite domination' (Sulka 2000, 31). The emergence of a new Maoist state in the outskirts meant that teachers were forced to follow the Maoist curricula as opposed to the national curriculum. For example, Maoists banned the teaching of Sanskrit and teachers and school heads were assaulted or murdered for non-compliance. On the other hand, security forces targeted teachers accusing them of being Maoist sympathisers. The total number of teachers killed by the Maoists and the state reached 145 whereas, 331 pupils were murdered during the ten year period of violent conflict (INSEC 2007). The number of children abducted and tortured by the conflicting parties was reported to be several thousands.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a phenomenological hermeneutic approach (Moustakas 1994) to understanding storied lived experiences of school heads and teachers. The issue of validity in stories entails complexity in understanding the difference between actual experiences and the stories participants share with the researcher (Polkinghorne 2007). The narratives embody distortion of experiences in the process of 'creating a self' as the participants unfold

their experiences with the researcher (Riessman 1993, 11). Yet, the object of narrative research is to extract, analyse and interpret the 'narrative truth' with an assumption that 'the stories are constructed around core facts or life events that allow a wide periphery for freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these 'remembered facts' (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998, 8).

During the fieldwork, I spent between three and four days with each of the research participants, chatting, dining and strolling together around the village prior to carrying out formal research interviews. Informal conversations with local people in tea shops and community rest places provided insights into the research setting and the socio-political backgrounds of the research participants. Hence, this approach made the research a semi-ethnographic inquiry.

The research was carried out in eight schools, which were selected across the national geopolitical regions<sup>ii</sup> of Nepal. Three of them were privately managed independent schools, which were particularly targeted by the Maoists. The interviews were recorded and translated into English as they were transcribed. The recordings were listened and re-listened in order to deepen the understanding of cultural nuances of Nepali language. The data was analysed in both languages capturing the themes about diverse experiences of school heads and teachers.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***The State of Fear and Psychological Trauma***

Schools remained at the centre of attention for both conflicting parties for a number of promising benefits they provided to the armed struggle. For example, schools offered a considerable mass of inquisitive young people, who could be persuaded more easily than adults and trained to take part in the movement. Secondly, gaining support of school teachers would mean that their social influence on the rural populations could be exploited in favour of the rebellion and expanding their support base. The increasing influence of the

Maoists in rural areas, particularly on schools, provoked increased surveillance of security forces on schools. As a result, security incursions on school premises and unlawful arrests of teachers, school heads and students became pervasive. Schoolteachers were continuously harassed and threatened with physical harm unless they adopted the policy enforced by the Maoists while the security forces arrested and tortured them, accusing them of colluding with the rebels. Parajuli (2006) reported one of the many unfortunate incidents at school that occurred during the conflict as:

Two years ago, Maoists came to Jumla's Tribhuban Secondary School and abducted the Principal and two teachers. The Principal was later killed in the forest and the two teachers let go with the warning not to speak against the movement. Once released, the teachers were interrogated by the army, and then the police took the two into custody and beat them up. (Parajuli, 2006)

The heads were traumatised but equally ensnared in their moral responsibility to protect teachers and pupils from violent attack while maintaining learning and teaching at school. One head teacher lamented:

During the conflict, I lived in a state of terror all the time. I would not know who would summon me and where they [Maoists or security forces] would ask me to go or something else. Life was completely uncertain. (A head teacher in Udaypur)

The news of 'disappearance', 'abduction', 'arrests', 'torture' and 'murder' of school teachers and students often became the front page headlines on the national dailies. Teachers and pupils were often terrorised by the frequent clashes between Maoists and security forces or violent attacks on civilians in the surrounding communities (Pettigrew 2003). The 'culture of terror', as explained by anthropologists such as Green (1995) and Suárez-Orozco (1987), becomes widespread as the violent incidents become ubiquitous around the communities. Frequent encounters with violence, either in person or obliquely through the media, gets people 'to accommodate themselves with terror or fear' but the 'low intensity panic remains

in the shadow of waking consciousness' (Green 1995, 109). Hence, living in the state of terror causes considerable psychological and psychosomatic damage.

School premises were frequently used by rebels to hold mass meetings and for sanctuary. The military aerial attacks often made no discrimination between venues or people attending the programmes, which often resulted in civilian casualties. The most distressing experience of the school heads was their inability to prevent the abuse of their school premises and abduction of teachers and pupils. Their everyday life was caught in the pervasive state of terror, which eroded their capacity to manage teachers and respond to parents and education authorities. Their psychological and emotional wellbeing deteriorated significantly. Consequently, the social intimacy between school and community gradually deteriorated and educational quality and pupils' aspirations became insignificant in a bid to cope and survive during conflict. As Gounari (2010, 184) notes, 'increased fear can be linked to reliance to the individual and the disappearing social provisions and solidarity'. Green's (1995) notion of 'routinization of terror' also illuminates the way it impacts on social relations. She explains that 'routinization of terror is what fuels its power' and allows people to live in a chronic state of fear with a façade of normalcy at the same time that terror permeates and shreds the social fabrics (Green 1995, 108). The head teachers frequently mentioned how the experience of violent incidents caused them psychological trauma during conflict.

The security forces arrested me despite their knowledge that I did not have any involvement and I was working with the district security chief when Holeri [a small town in mid-West] was attacked. Yet, they accused me of colluding with the Maoists in carrying out that attack. (A Headteacher in Rolpa )

One of them was sporadically showing his gun on his waist to intimidate me. Then, another rebel put his gun on my head, I was so numb and I thought that was it. After I was released, I fell ill for several days. (A Headteacher in Sankhuwasabha)

After the massacre in my school, all the eleven dead bodies of the children including those of the Maoists were lying in front the school building. I did not know what to do. I was so scared

but went to inform the District Education Office about the incident. I was too scared to return home so, I went to Mahendranagar [a bigger town away from the school] for a few weeks.

When the situation cooled down a bit then only I returned. (A Headteacher in Doti)

The head teachers were traumatised by both what Zur (1994) calls 'visible' and 'invisible' violence. The 'visible' violence was manifested through military arrests, abductions, physical assaults or even 'public executions' of educational staff who were frequently accused of spying or collusion. On 16 January 2002, Muktinath Adhikari, the head teacher of Pandini Sanskrit Secondary School at Duradanda, Lamjung district was abducted by Maoists while he was teaching at school. His hands were tied behind his back on a tree, where he was shot in the stomach and died on the spot (Amnesty International 2002). Another head teacher Harka Raj Rai was also abducted from Chisapani High School at Kaule village, Khotang district on the same day and murdered by the Maoist affiliated Khumbuwan Liberation Front (Amnesty International 2002). The everyday news of attack on and abduction of teachers and school children maintained the prevalence of 'invisible' violence. Anonymous phone calls and letters, demanding mandatory donations to the 'People's War' (Pherali, 2011) continuously caused distress and uncertainty of their life. During interviews, teachers reported that their professional enthusiasm and intellectual ability to engage in teaching and learning substantially diminished. As Gounari (2010, 184) argues:

Fear generates an uncritical acceptance of anything and makes people deterministic and cynical about the future. Horror of violence prevents us from thinking and therefore it is used to paralyze thinking. It mobilizes feelings of fear, but one would have difficulty connecting the feeling with a theory that is able to explain its underlying cause.

The head teachers' role increasingly became more like a political broker struggling to protect their teachers, students and themselves from the serendipity of the ongoing insurgency and its brutal encroachment on the school system. Schools often received letters from Maoists, requesting teachers' participation in political education programmes. These requests were mandatory and head teachers were obliged to send representatives from their school. As the

attendance in these programmes was life threatening, nominating individuals for this task was morally painful for head teachers. School heads often faced the catch twenty-two situation as dishonouring the Maoist 'orders' would invite attacks on schools but attending their programmes would equally comprise the risk of being caught in the crossfire or facing arrests and torture by the security forces.

Alongside its ideological apparatus, the Maoist rebellion mobilised 'fear' as a controlling mechanism. The insurgents turned merciless on anti-Maoist elements and imposed the discourse of 'revolution' and 'great People's War' on all domains of society including, education. School children were used for 'spying' (Watchlist 2005) and teachers' freedom to interpret and critically discuss ideas about democracy, social values, history and culture were severely constrained. Teachers in all districts mentioned that they were fearful about being labelled as Maoist sympathisers or anti-revolutionists based on teaching or discussing these subjects. A head teacher in Sankhuwasabha lamented that armed soldiers regularly walked around his school and eavesdropped on teachers' lessons. Educational activities were under strict surveillance by the state whereas rebels systematically targeted schools for representing hegemonic ideology, curricula and ethos of dominant social groups. The teaching of Sanskrit, a language that symbolically epitomised Brahmin male domination was banned in schools. The biographies of royals who were viewed as the 'chiefs' of feudalism and historical oppressors were also prohibited in the school curriculum. Teachers reported that school children in their districts were forced to tear out the portraits of the monarchs from their textbooks and in many places, the students affiliated to the Maoist student wing *All Nepal National Free Students Union (Revolutionary)* burnt down the books. A head teacher in Southern district of Kapilvastu described:

During the exams, the CPN-M led groups of students entered the school and set fire to the exam papers as a protest to boycott Sanskrit from the school curriculum and subsequently vandalised the school offices and then exploded a grenade in my office. It was a horrifying incident. (A Head Teacher in Kapilvastu)

Rebel aggression on schools would subsequently follow the police and military involvement, resulting in widespread arrests of students as Maoist suspects. The damaging effects of these incidents would permeate not simply the school system but the entire community.

### ***Teachers, Politics and State Oppression***

*All Nepal Teachers Organization (ANTO)*, the CPN-M affiliated teachers' union resisted the government's flagship education policy on educational decentralisation which was being supported by the World Bank. Maoists were opposed to government attempts to 'disengage from the direct financing and supervision of the country's public schools' (Carney and Bista 2009, 197). Teachers' and university students' unions often declared strike and forcibly closed down educational institutions to undermine the government control over the education system. Elsewhere, Nepal's teaching force is blamed as being 'highly politicized' by both the Ministry of Education and international donor agencies (MOES 2001; World Bank 2001). However, there is an unhelpful tendency to blame teachers for the broader systemic failure in the education system. Teachers' involvement in politics needs to be located in the historical backdrop of political movements in Nepal (see Pherali 2014). Carney and Bista (2009, 205) indicate that the broader social and economic conditions of the schools and 'the lack of living wage and intolerable working conditions' of the teachers are often inadequately considered when teachers' accountability is debated. During focus group discussions, teachers in Udaypur highlighted that they have always played a critical role in Nepal's struggle for democracy and social change. Their role as 'transformative intellectuals' was evidently reflected both in their direct participation in social and political movements against unjust regimes as well as resistance to privatisation of education. Hence, the donor-induced discourse that despises teachers as political activists (e.g. World Bank 2001) fails to explain the critical question about teachers' historical role in promoting social justice and their struggle against neoliberal reforms in education.

Yet, the progressive agendas of the Maoists, relating to social equality, political inclusion and grassroots empowerment successfully attracted many teachers to join the rebellion. Most



importantly, the Maoist leadership that consisted of former teachers mobilised moral, intellectual and financial support from teachers to expand the influence of rebellion. The general perception of intimacy between teachers and progressive agendas fuelled security forces' suspicion on teachers as Maoist sympathisers. By 2005, the state authority's influence had shrunk within the district headquarters while over three quarters of the country was controlled by the Maoists. The only means of survival as a teacher in rural areas was by extending unconditional support to the 'People's War'. A head teacher in Rolpa mentioned how the district security chief responded to head teachers who asked him to provide security from rebels:

In response to our demand for security to enable us to work in rural schools, the security chief frankly replied: 'We cannot secure your lives. You are the representative of the state in the rural villages. If you realise that you cannot secure your life in the village, migrate to the district headquarters for your safety and security. Otherwise, you take necessary measures in your discretion to survive and run the schools. Please do not go to the areas that are susceptible to crossfire and battles. Please do not expect anything from us.' (A Head teacher in Rolpa)

This situation reveals the total failure of the state authorities in their capacity and willingness to protect teachers during conflict. The educational community was abandoned helplessly to face violent incursions on schools while children's right to education and wellbeing fell in serious jeopardy.

The declaration of the state of emergency in November 2001 suspended all civil rights, declaring Maoists as terrorists and concentrating powers in the Royal Nepalese Army. The military deployment across the country resulted in reduced mobility of people around the village (Pettigrew 2003) and substantially increased military hostilities in schools. The school heads who had managed to protect their schools by complying with the Maoist demands (e.g. attending their political programmes, paying donations and allowing their political training at schools, and in some cases, agreeing to temporarily store ammunitions and food

stuff for the rebels etc.) were now arrested and tortured for their 'collusion' against the state. The head teachers' cooperation with rebels, which was a survival strategy in rebel-controlled areas, was now criminalised by the military state that was only accountable to the autocratic monarchy. Several teachers in the interview revealed that they were often abused and harassed by security forces at checkpoints on the way to and from school. As Rummel (1994) argued, the increased state violence on civilian populations can only be explained by the arbitrary power which was seized by declaring the state of emergency. He notes that 'the more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it will make war on others and murder its foreign and domestic subjects' (Rummel 1994, 1).

### ***'Terror' of Mandatory Donation***

*'Chanda aatanka'* (the terror of mandatory donations) was reported to be the most widespread form of 'terror' that engulfed school teachers during the conflict. The mandatory donation, as it implies, would also dictate the amount one had to pay, leaving little or no room for negotiation. The Maoist donation campaign also led to the escalation of state surveillance on teachers' everyday life. Security forces would view it as financing terrorism irrespective of the conditions under which such donations were made. A head teacher in the Western Terai lamented:

They [Maoists] demanded [money] from me but there was some negotiation and finally they came to a compromise. I was able to reduce the amount they had initially demanded. They started visiting my home regularly and threatened to kill me. I simply could not take any chance by not paying them. (A head teacher in Kapilvastu)

Schools would receive letters indicating the details of donations including, the amount and deadline for payment. The analysis of these letters reveals that the messages were often written in an extremely intimidating tone and made death threats to the head teacher. This caused psychological distress and drastically paralysed their ability to manage the school

affairs. A letter below which was sent to a head teacher in Sankhuwasabha exemplifies such a gruesome tone:

Dear [Name supplied] Sir,

We received your letter. Are you always drunk? You have been told several times previously that you could send the money to the letter bearer unless you could come yourself. Do you really feel like living in a safe place? Why do you give trouble to our people? Is your intention to trick us? Now, you will be solely liable for all the money from teachers in your school since 2002, in addition to your liability of NRS 50,000. You will not be excused if it does not happen after this letter. Why do you force us to be cruel? ... there are rumours that you collected the money and embezzled in funds. What is going on? You better explain.

*Area In-charge,*

CPN-M

(A letter sent to a School Head)

Head teachers were responsible for dealing with the donation requests and had no choice but to take risks by working clandestinely to fulfil rebel demands. The teaching workforce, although portrayed as a victim of conflict, was rather a contentious entity which was fragmented through their covert political affiliation with the conflicting parties. Some teachers were sympathetic to the cause of 'revolution' and voluntarily extended their financial contributions in support of the 'People's War' while others unwillingly heeded rebel demands in exchange of their own physical wellbeing. Head teachers were continuously involved in secretive dealings with the Maoists; negotiating with their teachers and parents and; publicly maintaining neutrality in order to protect their schools from attack.

The privately owned schools had to either pay high amount of donations to the Maoists in order to survive or face a permanent closure. The issue of private education as a Maoist target has been explored elsewhere (Watchlist 2005; Caddell 2006) but rather interestingly, it was found that private schools faced enormous pressure from the parents who either questioned school principals for not meeting Maoist demands thereby inviting threats on

their children's lives or strongly opposed the idea of financing Maoist insurgency with the money which had been paid for their children's education. Either way, the school leadership was caught in the middle of these dual tensions.

### ***Relational Disequilibrium: An Excruciating Misery***

As the entire country became a war zone, the ordinary population was trapped inside the violent confrontations between the rebels and state forces. The military deployment during the emergency period created the high risk of fatal skirmishes in villages, endangering civilian lives and their properties. School premises were strategic locations for both the warring parties in providing space for a stay during their mobilisation. For Maoist rebels, schools were prolific sites for political education and expanding their support-base across young students and teachers. Head teachers often engaged in negotiating these mandatory requests that, whether heeded or confronted would equally put them at risks. The two head teachers revealed:

The army and the armed police would frequently visit the school and enquire about the Maoist activities [in the village] or the information about the rebel hideout. We could not possibly give information as the Maoists would kill us after the army has left. Mostly, we would not know any information but the army would use force to make us report on Maoists whether we know anything or not. (A head teacher in Kapilvastu)

I was frequently forced to provide food and shelter for the Maoist rebels. My house is located near the military barracks and the soldiers would also visit my house repeatedly. I was caught in the middle and my life during the conflict became like 'hell'. (A head teacher in Sankhuwasabha)

The state authority neither provided security to schools nor did it tolerate schools' self-negotiated peace with rebels which would allow them to continue teaching and learning. In rural areas, head teachers mentioned that maintaining equilibrium of relationship between the Maoists and security forces was painfully stressful. As the head teachers from Doti and Kapilvastu mentioned:

I had to allow the Maoists to perform their cultural programme in my school on the one hand and cooperate with the security forces in their search for rebels on the other. (A head teacher in Doti)

Armed forces entered my school and arrested one of my students. I had to cooperate with the armed soldiers despite the fact that what they were doing was wrong. Later, I received pressure from the Maoists to facilitate the release of this student. I went to the military camp to hold several negotiations. (A head teacher in Kapilvastu)

In many districts, the head teachers' relationship with the education authorities also collapsed. Head teachers faced contesting authorities, old but crumbling state and emerging 'new state'. The only way to survive was by maintaining relational equilibrium between the two. Elsewhere, Makkawi (2002, 51) analyses similar complexities of living in the conditions of protracted crisis in which Palestinian teachers in Israel continuously struggle to balance the pressure from the Jewish state and 'cultural and national expectations of their own community and students without putting their jobs in jeopardy'. However, in some cases in Nepal, the inefficiency of state bureaucracy was redressed by the fear created by the Maoists. An educational officer shares such an experience as:

When the conflict was at its peak, I was working in the remote district of Dolpa. What I observed in that period was that the fear of Maoists improved teachers' absenteeism and punctuality in their duties. The Maoists had circulated a warning to the teachers in the district that they would be physically punished unless they performed their professional duties with integrity. This approach worked really effectively and I felt that fear was perhaps necessary in maintaining discipline. (An educational officer in Kathmandu district)

However, teachers in all focus group discussions agreed that the fear of persecution worked at one level but it was rather transitory and the teachers' low performance was rather underpinned by broader structural problems in the education system which involved issues such as fragmented education policy, dysfunctional assessment system, lack of educational resources and inadequate teachers' salary. Teachers' professional motivation and passion

for educating children cannot be achieved amidst fear and physical threats; it would rather debilitate their morale and turn them indifferent to their profession.

### ***Politicisation of the Educational System***

One of the major impacts of the decade-long political violence on education is plummeting education quality in public schools and increasing politicisation of educational governance (Pherali, 2013). The strength of affiliation to a political party has become a key determining factor in appointments of teachers, selection of school committee members and head teachers. More broadly, the state affairs including, educational governance is marred by corruption and rent-seeking. Party-based political activism by teachers and involvement of school children in mass demonstrations became the prominent feature of new post-war politics resulting in notable deterioration in effectiveness of school leadership and management of educational affairs. An excerpt from the researcher's diary indicates the uniquely political role that school children have begun to play in communities:

This is my third day in Rolpa district. As usual, I went to my research school in the first hours. When I reached the school, pupils from class six to ten had marched out from school to the town centre and teachers were chatting in the staff room. When I asked teachers about the empty classrooms, they explained that children were voluntarily taking part in a 'political cause' and the teachers had no authority to stop them from marching out. Suddenly, around 200 children, aged between 10 and 16 years appeared up on the main road demonstrating and chanting slogans against an NGO that worked for education and welfare of children in the district. The programme manager of the NGO was accused of abusing his position and spreading his party's political ideology among the youth in exchange of the support he provided through the NGO. The children blamed that he would only take the programmes to the school if the children supported the political party of his affiliation. As the protest was likely to be tensed, the district administration deployed police to safeguard the NGO office from possible vandalism by the young protestors who demanded dismissal of the programme manager and closure of its programmes in the district. The furious children blocked the road for several hours by burning tyres and confronting with the police. Finally, the protesters were

invited by the district administration officer to hold negotiations and assured that the matter would be thoroughly investigated. Finally, the children withdrew their strikes and went back to school as their leaders engaged in negotiations. (Research diary excerpt from Rolpa district)

School children are not merely vulnerable entities that are waiting to be educated in schools; they are rather active political agents who embark upon positive social actions and resistance to prejudice and discrimination. However, young pupils in post-conflict Nepal are also manipulated by trivial and selfish political motivations that undermine the real opportunity for learners to critically engage with social issues that impact upon their lives. Ironically, despite teachers' contributions to grassroots movements, their profession has rarely been honoured as transformatory and their role as 'critical pedagogues' has been ignored (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993). The growing influence of party politics on schools has resulted in teachers' solidarity in broader political struggles while fuelling systemic disconnect between their professional responsibility and children's learning.

The poor quality education in public schools, as proven by continuous underperformance of students in national exams, is largely perceived to be the outcome of teachers' professional negligence. The revolutionary justification that systemic change in education is subject to broader social and political reforms and hence, the professional duty is subsidiary to the obligation for mass liberation from oppression, seems to have morally collapsed due to declining quality and widespread frustration towards public education.

Teachers argue that their explicit membership with political parties is a means to gain support against their dismissal or unwanted redeployment. Head teachers have now become merely the *de jure* in-charge and are increasingly powerless in making decisions about school affairs especially, in managing teachers. In many schools, head teachers' role is often undermined by fellow teachers, parents and school committee members who are ideologically affiliated with national or regional political parties. Public schools which are meant to be serving the poorest children and marginalised communities have regrettably become spaces for political scuffle (Pherali, 2013).

## **Conclusion: Addressing the effects of conflict on school governance**

Schools are essentially complex ideological and political battlegrounds that offer both opportunities and threats to conflicting groups. Either way, educational spheres are likely to come under attack during violent conflict and the global campaigns for protection of schools during crises are far removed from the grassroots reality and the roles teachers, head teachers and pupils play during conflict. The major problem is that the international community has repeatedly failed to hold armed groups and armed forces accountable for their indiscriminate attack on education. Last year, more than 200 schoolgirls were abducted from Chibok, Northern Nigeria by Boko Haram militants who disapprove modern education as a cultural invasion on their Islamic beliefs whereas, Israeli drones attacked UN schools in Gaza in August 2014, claiming ten lives and dozens wounded. The ensuing pressure of attack on pupils and schools is at most on school leaders and teachers whose voice does not always feature in the debates about planning or rebuilding education in emergencies. While children are understandably at the centre of concerns in crisis, the traumatic experiences of teachers and school heads are equally important for reinvisioning an effective educational provision.

Given the risks of physical attack on teachers and pupils during conflict, it is important to rethink about the notion of education in the current standing in which children and teachers travel to schools to learn and teach. The traditional approach to mass schooling needs to be revisited and innovative and contextually diverse models of educational provisions are required in conflict-affected contexts. The modern obsession about schools as the only places of learning requires rethinking. Learning does not stop irrespective of children's attendance at school and in crisis situations, children learn the most essential skills at home or communities where they live in rather than in formal school classrooms.

In addition, the increasing corporatisation of education and the economic logic of schooling in low-income fragile contexts undermine the inherent nature of education as a political



process, which essentially limits our understanding of the causes of attack on schools. This micro level analysis of lived experiences of Nepali teachers during conflict provides ‘the reality of life on the front lines’ (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, 5) which encourages educational practitioners to critically appreciate social and political dimensions that underpin the process of schooling.

The violent experiences of school leaders and the impact of decade-long conflict on school education discussed above have significant implications for envisioning school leadership in post-conflict Nepal and elsewhere. As a by-product of long-standing political tensions and involvement of the educational sector in political activism, schools become excessively politicised resulting in plummeting educational standards. Unless, the deeply rooted impacts of conflict on teachers and school leaders are appropriately addressed, the quality of education will continue to suffer even in post-conflict period.

Nevertheless, there is an immense opportunity for transformatory reforms in the curricula and pedagogy as the teaching workforce is politically conscious and has been immersed in critical debates about social inequalities and inclusive democracy. Yet, teachers’ professionalism has declined due to incoherence between their political actions in society and their professional and pedagogical responsibilities. There is a misconception and perhaps, the lack of articulation of their professional role as critical and transformatory intellectuals. There is also a real opportunity for progressive teacher development and systemic change in education that recognises the potential of ‘critical pedagogy’ (Giroux 2001) for Nepal’s peace, democratisation and social development.

The array of violent experiences endured by schools poses significant challenges to the task of educational reconstruction. Implications of the violent past and the kind of conflictual impasse brought to schools/ head teachers are located in the form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1977) that are essentially the same kind of dilemma. The protracted peace process, continued political violence and dominance of politics on the educational sector

have obviously obscured the contentious role of education during the conflict and undermined any meaningful debate on what 'more of the same' education might mean for reconstruction of 'new Nepal'. The continued development-inspired formula of education for narrow economic gain unfortunately seems to overlook the connections between education and conflict described by those who experienced discussed above.

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<sup>i</sup> The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) was formed by the seven parliamentary parties after the royal takeover in February 2005. The SPA continued its protest peacefully through demonstrations until the new alliance 12-point agreement was signed with the CPN-M in November 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> The schools were selected from Doti (Far Eastern Region), Rolpa (Mid Western Region where the 'People's War' was started), Kapilvastu (a district in the Western Plains bordering India where the Maoist conflict was followed by a severe ethnic/ religious violence recently), Kathmandu (the capital in the Central Region) and finally, Udaypur (South Eastern Region) and Sankhuwasabha (a mountainous district in the North Eastern Region).