

A History of Nepalese Maoism since its Foundation by Mohan Bikram Singh

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The CPN (Maoist) stems from various splits within the Nepal Communist Party. Yet one cannot attempt to trace the history of Maoism in Nepal without looking at the life of one of its most renowned and most enigmatic figures: Mohan Bikram Singh.

A myth in the making

Mohan Bikram Singh was born in Kathmandu, Marutole, on Baisakh 3, 1992 BS (15th April 1935). It is difficult to accurately paint his family background since the various accounts of his past that we were able to gather differ. For instance, Balaram Pokharel, Mohan Bikram Singh's only biographer (as far as we know), writes that his family origins remain unclear (Pokharel, 2059 BS). And while a memo written by the NGO "Mercy Corps" (Mercy Corps, 2003) claims that Mohan Bikram Singh's father was the one who first settled the family in Okharkot, Mohan Bikram Singh himself told us in August 2007, that his family has been living in Okharkot for seventeen generations and that his ancestor, named Poras Gharti, came from the district of Jumla. If it was thought that Mohan Bikram Singh's version of his family background, which he confirmed in May 2008¹, was necessarily the correct one, one cannot help wondering why Balaram Pokharel (who is from Okharkot and had the chance of interviewing MB Singh a number of times) did not mention it in his biography and merely said that "there is no trace of their immigration in Pyuthan" (Pokharel, 2059 BS: 1). Hence, if caution is recommended regarding this matter, the very fact that M.B. Singh's family history remains vague helps one to begin to grasp the great mystical aura attached to this senior leftist leader who profoundly affected Nepalese politics.

Mohan Bikram Singh's father, Khim Bikram Gharti Chhetri, was described both by his son² and by historians (Pokharel, 2059 BS) as a hot-

¹ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, May 2008.

² Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, April 2006.

headed person who recklessly refused to obey the rules of the Rana family³. Because of regular quarrels he had with the then rulers, he had to leave Okharkot, to go first to Bangemarot (another village nearby), then to Arghakhanchi district and eventually to Kathmandu. There, he met Tara Kumari whose father worked there as a judge (*ditha*). She became Khim Bikram GC's wife and mother of Mohan Bikram Singh. Soon after Mohan Bikram's birth, the family moved back to Pyuthan where M.B. Singh spent most of his childhood.

After this short account of M.B. Singh's background and early years, we will now look at his political commitment as well as how and under what influence he came to be one of the major actors in leftism in Nepal.



M. B. Singh, 2007. Photo: A. Carpentier

Like most Communist leaders we met in Nepal, M.B. Singh drew a great deal of his inspiration for communism in literature. During his first years at school, he had little opportunity to read books for they were scarce in Pyuthan. Hence, it was not until he arrived in Kathmandu in 1950 that he could start building and consolidating his Marxist-Leninist knowledge. Apart from the classics by Marx, Engels and Lenin, M.B. Singh found stimulation in political leaders (mostly Communists) who had started to emerge in neighboring India, including Rahul Sankrityayan, who had a particularly great influence on him.⁴

³ Mohan Bikram Singh always insisted on the fact that his father opposed the Rana, not for political reasons, but because he could not stand being given orders.

⁴ M.B. Singh, interview, June 2008.

But M.B. Singh's commitment to communism was not only fired by literature, but was also inspired by his father's militancy. As we have briefly seen, Khim Bikram GC often fought against the Rana rule and ultimately became the leader of the anti-Rana movement in Pyuthan during the early fifties. One must not be led to think, however, that Khim Bikram fought for political reasons, for M.B. Singh, as well as most inhabitants of Pyuthan, admits that Khim Bikram GC's main goal was to free himself of the Rana dictatorship and to lead the life he wanted. Yet whatever the motives behind Khim Bikram's militancy (whether selfish or altruist), they had a great impact on his son, who took up politics, following in his father's footsteps.

Just like his father, Mohan Bikram became a member of the Nepali Congress Party in 1950. But his sympathy for the Nepali Congress did not last when he realized that the Party had imprisoned his father on false accusations that the Ranas had made a few years earlier. From 1951 onwards, M.B. Singh viewed the members of the Nepali Congress "as corrupt, bureaucratic and power-thirsty as the Ranas used to be"⁵, and he decided to join the Nepal Communist Party in 1953.

*The creation of the Communist Party of Pyuthan*⁶

From the beginning, one could sense the importance that M.B. Singh was to assume in the future of Communism in Nepal, by the actual founding act of the Communist Party of Pyuthan in December 1953. Whereas, as our surveys showed, Communist Parties in other districts were founded by a few local activists who gathered in a room in a remote area, Mohan Bikram Singh set up an actual training center that was run for three months. No less than a hundred and fifty persons gathered in Ratamata (near Dankhakwadi) and attended the various ideological courses given by M.B. Singh or Khagu Lal Gurung (a friend of M.B. Singh), thus generating a great deal of publicity for the newly created Party among the local population.

When the training course came to an end (in February 1954), farmers from Narikot (a nearby village), who had learned about this gathering and its purpose, came to complain to M.B. Singh about the exactions they had suffered from the village *mukhiya* and his friends (Pokharel and Vasyal, 2055 BS: 10-12).

⁵ M.B. Singh, interview, April 2006.

⁶ We discovered most information on the birth of the Communist Party in Pyuthan through interviewing veterans during our fieldwork in Pyuthan, Kapilbastu, Kathmandu and Rolpa in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

They had forced peasants to sign false contracts allowing them to take over the peasants' land. M.B. Singh, followed by a hundred newly trained Communists, went to Narikot to restore the lost land to the farmers. Hoping to achieve this by negotiations, he forbade his troops to turn any weapons on the landlords, but to merely brandish them as a threat. But after a week of useless negotiations – despite the fact that by then the protesters amounted to five-six hundred people –, M.B. Singh and Khagu Lal Gurung decided to deploy tougher methods, so they kidnapped the landowners and brought them to Machchhi (Okharkot) where they were to stand trial.



Khagu Lal Gurung, Narikot (Pyuthan), 2007, photo: A. Carpentier.

Acknowledging the growing threat, the neighbouring landowners (mostly from Khung) decided to go in and deliver their friends, armed with clubs, *kukhuris* and even small guns. But the Communists were waiting for them and had prepared an ambush, forcing the assailants to retreat and finally surrender. In order to benefit from this “first victory of the Communist Party in Pyuthan” as M.B. Singh puts it⁷, the Communists carried on their fight in the neighbouring villages of Bangemarot, Badikot or Tusara, forcing the landowners to return the property they had illegally appropriated over past decades.

In 1954, the Communist Party of Pyuthan, led by Mohan Bikram Singh and Khagu Lal Gurung, continued to organize mass movements for

⁷ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, April 2006.

peasants' rights, as well as against corruption in the administration, and for the transfer of the district capital Khalanga to the nearby town of Bijuwar. Most of the time, their actions consisted in demonstrations and the slogans such as "land to the tiller" that the demonstrators brandished, foreshadowed the future trend the Party was to follow.

The government finally managed to strike a strong blow against the Communist Party in Pyuthan by arresting its two main leaders. In February 1955, Mohan Bikram Singh and Khagu Lal Gurung had been leading demonstrations in Bagdula when police forces encircled them and arrested the two leaders, who were immediately sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

The fight goes on

Even from his prison cell, M.B. Singh continued to fight for the people's rights. Thus, he was transferred to different jails: first to Khalanga, then to the Palpa jail, to finally end up in a prison in Salyan. The last transfer came after a riot that M.B. Singh and Khagu Lal Gurung had started in the prison in Palpa. Its prison cells were, at that time, in total disrepair and prisoners lived in dire conditions with no lavatories, and almost no food or water. When Mohan Bikram Singh and Khagu Lal Gurung discovered the prisoners' lot, they started a mass movement inside the prison, rallying all their cellmates. In order to try and quash the rebellion, the wardens started beating up Mohan Bikram Singh who answered back by striking the guard with his shoes.

When the other prisoners saw that Mohan Bikram Singh had had the courage to raise his hand against the authorities, they all acclaimed him and chanted slogans such as "Meet our demands!", "Stop the beating!" or "Stop the oppression!". Fearing a general uprising, the government decided to transfer Khagu Lal Gurung and Mohan Bikram Singh to Salyan.

The reason for his transfer from Palpa to Salyan⁸ proves to be particularly significant of the kind of struggle Mohan Bikram Singh used to lead and which contributed to creating a particular aura around him. The very fact that the story of his struggle inside Palpa's jail made it all the way to Pyuthan and brought the population of the district to lead demonstrations demanding his release (demonstrations which eventually proved to be successful), is noteworthy, and is sufficient to depict M.B. Singh's charisma.

One must bear in mind that the success and popularity of the Communist Party of Pyuthan cannot be explained merely by the

⁸ Khagu Lal Gurung, interview, May 2007.

organization of a training centre, but had a great deal to do with M.B. Singh's personality.

Mohan Bikram Singh's personality

"Communists don't believe in mysteries, myth or religious stories. However, Mohan Bikram Singh was, at that time, almost like a religious leader. [...] His authority was divine-like".⁹ This description of M.B. Singh by Mohan Baidya reveals the impact M.B. Singh had on the local population.



Mohan Baidya, June 2008, photo: B. Cailmail.

The reasons for such charisma¹⁰ lie in various factors, including his struggle against his own father. We have shown how Khim Bikram GC contributed to his son's political commitment and how his unjust imprisonment led M.B. Singh to forsake the Nepali Congress and join the Nepal Communist Party. Yet, his father's influence over his son was also revealed when the latter set about despising and criticizing his father's behaviour towards peasants.

⁹ Mohan Baidya, interview, June 2008.

¹⁰ On the issue of charisma, one could argue that a charismatic person can only be qualified as such if his peers define him this way. However, we believe that an aura can also be certified when a large part of a population sees him as such. This question, however, needs to be examined further which we will do so in a forthcoming essay.

Khim Bikram GC was a renowned “feudal” in Pyuthan and in the neighbouring districts, and Barman Budha (a Maoist leader in Rolpa) recalled that satirical songs about his avarice were common all the way to Thabang.¹¹ In fact, in the manner of the landowners in Narikot, he had acquired land from peasants by making them sign false contracts they were not able to read, thus managing to increase his land tenure up to 700 *ropani* (36 hectares) (given that the average surface nowadays according to our research is approximately 11 *ropani* (0.56 hectare) in Pyuthan).



M. B. Singh's house in Bangemarot, Pyuthan, 2007, inhabited today by M.B.'s brother, photo: B. Cailmail.

Hence, when M.B. Singh led the struggle against the landowners of Narikot in 1954, he likewise came after his father and asked him to redeem himself. His struggle against his own father made a deep and lasting impression on the people, and by doing so, Mohan Bikram Singh helped the communist Party gain many more new sympathizers than a hundred meetings would have done. Indeed, most Communists we met, whether Maoist or Masal, whole-timers or part-timers, young or old, leaders or

¹¹ Barman Budha, interview, May 2008. Mohan Bikram Singh however, describes his father as a “feudal reformist”, because on the one hand, he was against corruption, he supported democracy and was ready to fight for these standards, but on the other hand, he was not ready to share his wealth and was against all kinds of socialist and communist ideology.

simple sympathizers, told us that the first story they had heard about M.B. Singh recounted his struggle against his father and that it had all impressed them deeply. Sant Bahadur Nepali for instance (a member of *Rastriya Jana Morcha* and elected member of the Constituent Assembly), recalls that every family in his village in Arghakhanchi used to laud M.B. Singh for his abnegation and for his “struggle against his own blood”.¹²

To sum up and as Mohan Baidya puts it, M.B. Singh’s aura “came from the fact that he was from a feudal family, his father being the greatest feudal in the entire district. But because he broke away from his father and his family and embraced communism, the message it sent to the masses was tremendous. It allowed him to gain enormous prestige. The masses saw a miracle behind M.B. Singh’s actions”.¹³

Another factor that helped M.B. Singh to cultivate an aura was his (almost) complete dedication to the Communist ideology. In order to be in keeping with it, Mohan Bikram refused any kind of religious heritage and dropped his father’s name (Gharti Chhetri) for “Singh”. In the same manner, when his father died, he chose to return to the peasants his share of the land that had been taken illegally and that his father had not returned.¹⁴

Moreover, from the very beginning, Mohan Bikram Singh showed the people that he would not accept to willingly moderate his stance in order to follow a personal career, in his turning down an invitation by King Tribhuvan in early 1954 to participate in a newly constituted Council.¹⁵ He also preferred to be incarcerated rather than to take part in the first democracy set up by Tribhuvan and which he considered to be contrary to his revolutionary beliefs. Mohan Bikram Singh’s stance did not go unnoticed by the people in Pyuthan who felt for the first time that someone was standing up for them. Megulal Poudel, a 72-years-old farmer from Bijuli VDC and member of the Communist Party of Nepal (United-Marxist-Leninist) emphasizes that, although he then left Mohan Bikram’s Party on ideological grounds, it was M.B. Singh’s actual personality that had convinced him and many others to join the Communist Party in the first place.¹⁶

Lastly, M.B. Singh’s fame grew as his first writings started to be published. Although he wrote most of his books from 1961 onwards, he

¹² Sant Bahadur Nepali, interview, June 2008.

¹³ Mohan Baidya, interview, June 2008

¹⁴ Although we met peasants (or their descendants) who claimed to be beneficiaries of these donations, we were unable to verify any legal or official documents that would confirm these statements.

¹⁵ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, May 2007. See also Mercy Corps, 2003: 24.

¹⁶ Megulal Poudel, interview, March 2006.

had already started to compose a few poems during his first prison sentence that once again left a deep impression on the few ones who had had been lucky to read them. Indeed, Mohan Bikram's prose disclosed his revolutionary feelings and echoed the political speeches he had given at the various meetings he had attended in Pyuthan. This short extract from his poem *Lepht Rāit Kadam Badhāu* (*Left, Right, March*) reveals the strong images that the author used to galvanize his followers into action:

Let the mothers shed their tears
 Let their glass bracelets shatter and let them
 tear off their *dori*¹⁷
 Let the children die of hunger
 Let black clouds hide the fathers' eyes
 But the revolutionaries should be prepared to
 sacrifice themselves with smiles
 And hope for the Revolution
 Left, right¹⁸ (Singh, 2057 BS: 21).

The implantation of the communist ideology in Pyuthan is thus a combination of several factors. First of all, the training centre that overlooked the founding of the Communist Party in Pyuthan allowed its leaders to disseminate its ideology on a larger scale. Secondly, the numerous struggles that immediately succeeded the Party's birth helped the Communists to reveal their commitment towards the people's welfare. Finally, we have tried to show how the personality of M.B. Singh had a major impact on the population and led to greater cohesion among the masses. Yet, one must not think that M.B. Singh's aura led in any way to a real personality cult. And though many people were awestruck by his charisma, nobody ever worshipped him by hanging his picture on the wall, etc. Though Mohan Bikram's hold on the Party is manifest, the different party expulsions he underwent throughout his career, and which led to several splits, prove that he was still subject to criticism from his peers.

The expansion and splits in the Communist Party of Nepal

We will not linger on all the scissions the Communist Party of Nepal has undergone since its foundation in 1949, but on the splits in the different communist parties that chose to support the Chinese vision of

¹⁷ A necklace that symbolizes marriage.

¹⁸ We translate: « *āmāhorukā āṅkhabāt balindra dhārā āṅsu bharun / churā phuṭun ḍori chuḍyun, bachchāhoru bhokale sukun / bābuhorukā āṅkhāmā, kālā bādalakā lahara uṭhun / tara krāntikā lāgi krāntikāri hāṅsdai marn tayār banun / lepht rāit... »*

communism since this was the trend M.B. Singh chose and which finally led to the foundation of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

When M.B. Singh joined the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Nepal in 1957, there was already a certain amount of dissension regarding what stance to adopt towards the King. Whereas Rayamajhi was in favour of a pro-king line, Mohan Bikram along with Pushpa Lal Shrestha and Tulsi Lal Amatya opted for a republican ideological line (Thapa, 2004: 24-37). Furthermore, as in almost every other country in the world, the Communists of Nepal were divided between the partisans of a China-like ideology and those that pursued the Moscow trend. The combination of these two divergences finally led to the first major scission during the third Party Congress in 1962, and gave birth to the Communist Party of Nepal (Tulsi Lal Group).

The underground organization

At that time, M.B. Singh had been in prison since 1961 for having once again taken a stance against the King and his government. Since Mahendra's royal coup in 1960, all political parties were banned and their members threatened with imprisonment. Nevertheless, communist activists did not suspend their struggle, despite retaliations from the government, but continued spreading their ideology, thus gaining more and more sympathizers.

To this end, the Nepalese Communist Parties moved to India where they could express their opinion freely: first, in Darbhanga (Bihar), then in Varanasi from 1961 to 1974, and finally to Gorakhpur, for it was nearer the border. However, most activists stayed on in Nepal and pursued their struggle from there. They held meetings, distributed pamphlets and even led a few demonstrations against the King's autocracy. A party worker from Badikot in Pyuthan (whose name we cannot reveal as he is still a member of the underground Masal Party), recalls that the monthly meetings he used to organize in neighbouring villages took place at night in small houses.

To start with, there were only five or six members who attended the meetings, yet from 1979 onwards, their number rose to twenty members or more (they could even be as many as 150 if the meetings were held at district level). No women were present and most of the audience was made up of literate men. Another activist from Tusara VDC remembers that some of the meetings targeted the population at large and could last a whole week during which they would explain the basic principles of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. In order to organize such mass meetings attended by as many as 500 or more people, they had to meet in the depths of the jungle where it was not easy for the police to

venture. Those organising the meetings, as well as those only listening to the speeches, were likely to be arrested for this reprehensible act. Thus, every member of the party was forced to go underground to avoid police reprisals. However, being a clandestine did not necessarily mean that one had to leave the country or spend one's time hiding in a cellar. Most of the time, the underground party members led a normal life during the day, thanks to the villagers' sympathy for their cause, and they worked for the party at night.

Yet, many of them, especially among the leaders, did not manage to escape the authorities and served a prison sentence. But even then, M.B. Singh, who spent nine years in prison, Mohan Baidya and many more of the leaders that had been arrested, managed to continue working for the Party from their prison cells. They were kept informed about what was going on outside with the connivance of the wardens who closed their eyes to their activities. Mohan Bikram Singh recounts that he managed to send and receive letters by hiding them in the food he was allowed in his cell¹⁹, while Mohan Baidya emphasizes the fact that as all party members were underground, they were able to receive their visit without alerting the authorities who took them for relatives.²⁰

The scissions

Despite their ability to go on working while in prison, it was not before the main leaders' release that the CPN (Tulsi Lal Group) could solve the new issues that had emerged over the past years, and thus continue to build their Party. However, the different resolutions that were taken divided the Party and led to new scissions. A first split appeared in 1968 when Pushpa Lal decided to create his own Party. A few years later, Mohan Bikram Singh (who had just been released from jail)²¹ along with Nirmal Lama, took part in the formation of the Central Nucleus, a new political organization which aimed at founding a new central party "*by tying together the various strands of the communist movement*" (Thapa, 2004: 30). Hence, in order to federate the different trends within the Communist movement, they asked Pushpa Lal to join forces with their future Party.

¹⁹ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, May 2007.

²⁰ Mohan Baidya, interview, June 2008.

²¹ Mohan Bikram Singh was the last of the great communist leaders to be released from prison in 1971, for unlike Man Mohan Adhikari or Sambhu Ram Shrestha for instance, he had refused to sign a paper agreeing to give his support to King Mahendra.

However, they failed to reach an understanding with the latter on the party's policy regarding the Nepali Congress²² and China. Thus in 1974, Mohan Bikram Singh and Nirmal Lama founded a new Party called CPN (Fourth Congress) which became the strongest communist Party over the following years. As its new General Secretary, Mohan Bikram Singh adopted a hard-line policy, advocating Mao Zedong Thought and the protracted armed revolution which could only take place aided by a mass uprising.



Rastriya Mukti Morcha, Butwal, 2007, photo: A. Carpentier.

Nevertheless, this new Party did not remain united for long and a new scission occurred between Mohan Bikram Singh and Nirmal Lama in 1983 on the question of the legitimacy and the orthodoxy of the Jhapa Uprising that had started in 1971. Mohan Bikram Singh left the Fourth Congress to create the Nepal Communist Party (Masal) which lasted two years before another schism occurred.

We have willfully given a brief overview of these different splits for they have already been studied more or less thoroughly by fellow researchers. Our focus will be the scission of 1985 which marks a turning point in the history of leftism in Nepal.

²² Contrary to MB Singh and Nirmal Lama, Pushpa Lal was in favor of a unity of all democratic forces against the *panchayat* regime, including Nepali Congress.

Divergences

From the moment the Masal party was created, it already bore the seed of dissension. Though Mohan Baidya, a growing Party figure at the time, still followed Mohan Bikram Singh's line, he gradually came to think that the Jhapa Uprising was not responsible for divergences within the communist movement of Nepal and that M.B. Singh's stand on this issue was heading towards what he called a "reformist line"²³. As the CPN (Maoist) later puts it, he, along with other members of the Masal Party (including Pushpa Kamal Dahal who had joined the Fourth Congress in 1977), felt that "the Jhapa revolt had, in essence, played the same role in the Nepalese communist movement as what the Naxalite revolt had done to expose revisionism in the Indian communist movement and establish the universal contributions of Mao. Therefore, the Jhapa revolt [...] had provided a ground for unity of the revolutionaries" (CPN (Maoist), 2004: 77).

Furthermore, Mohan Baidya and his followers also came to believe that, unlike what Mohan Bikram Singh thought, Pushpa Lal Shrestha could not be accused of being a renegade²⁴, a refutation that was, for that matter, restated by the CPN (Maoist) a few years later: "the ideas and political line of Pushpa Lal have helped, in totality, the revolutionaries [...]. His works and contributions [...] prove the fact that Pushpa Lal Shrestha was a sincere communist leader of the Nepalese communist movement" (CPN (Maoist), 2004: 78).

Lastly, Mohan Baidya, accused Mohan Bikram Singh of "anarchist individualism and rightist opportunism"²⁵ for his constant postponing of the armed-struggle that should normally be the main goal of the Party.

All in all, the dissidents decided to create a new Party in 1985 under the leadership of Mohan Baidya, which they called the *moto mashal* Party, later to become the CPN (Maoist).

Comrade Jaljala

"In spite of those different disagreements, we could not make a serious debate about [Mohan Bikram Singh's] line. We could not refute thoroughly that line. But still, the split was inevitable. But then, we did not raise political questions, only technical questions. It was only after the split that

²³ Mohan Baidya, interview, June 2008.

²⁴ See Singh, Mohan Bikram. 2052 BS. *Krānti vā bhrānti*. Kathmandu: Jana Sahitya Prakashan.

²⁵ Mohan Baidya, interview, June 2008.

political questions were raised very seriously”.²⁶ With Mohan Baidya’s statement, we reached the crux of the Masal scission: behind this split, there was mostly a “technical problem” due directly to Mohan Bikram Singh’s personal life.²⁷

We have shown, at the beginning of this paper, how Mohan Bikram Singh’s personality had served the communist Party and helped attract many sympathizers. Yet, this was also the reason for one of the major scissions the party has had to deal with since its creation. In 1974 in Varanasi, M.B. Singh fell in love with Bidhya Dhakal, another party member. He then named her “Comrade Jaljala” for he explained that “when I went to Thabang VDC in Rolpa for the first time, I saw Jaljala hill covered with ice and shining in the rays of sun. Since then I loved the hill very much, so [...] I gave her the name Jaljala”.²⁸ And although he had already been married to Shanta Singh since 1972, he did not break off his relationship with Jaljala until her death in a bus accident in Delhi in November 1981.

When his adulterous relationship came to the Party members’ knowledge, many of them were offended. Indeed, explains Chitra Bahadur KC (a Central Committee member of Masal Party at the time and president of Rastriya Jana Morcha today) “during this whole period, society was still very traditional and it was frowned upon to divorce, especially if you had children (Mohan Bikram had two at the time)”.²⁹

Thus, many Party members, such as Mohan Baidya or Barman Budha, criticized him vehemently and asked him to put an end to it.³⁰ In the face of his stringency, they finally expelled both lovers from the Party in 1978 for a period of three years.

After one year spent in Kerala and in Chennai, Mohan Bikram Singh was allowed back into the Party. Despite being banished from the Party, Mohan Bikram Singh had still not ended his relationship with comrade Jaljala, and although he had “regularized” the situation by sending a letter

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Amik Sherchan had spoken about this “technical problem” to Deepak Thapa and the latter admitted that Sherchan had refused to elaborate on the matter (Thapa, 2004: 35).

²⁸ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, July 2008.

²⁹ Chitra Bahadur KC, interview, June 2008.

³⁰ Mohan Baidya and Barman Budha, interviews, June 2008.

of divorce to his wife in 1980³¹ (divorce which Shanta Singh had refused), many party members had not forgiven him for his behaviour.³²

According to Mohan Baidya and his followers, as Mohan Bikram Singh had had his love affair while married to Shanta Singh, he had become a “bourgeois” and was no longer capable of leading the revolutionary party. “*Had he divorced before meeting Jaljala assured Keshav Nepal (office secretary to the CPN (Maoist)) in his interview, there would have been no problem at all and we would not have expelled him from the Party in 1978*”.³³ Furthermore, they emphasized that it was Mohan Bikram’s refusal to acknowledge his mistake that finally urged them to create a new Party.³⁴

Logically, M.B. Singh’s partisans have another explanation for this new split. Although he blamed Mohan Bikram Singh for his love affair, Chitra Bahadur KC for instance, affirms that “if the Maoists [i.e. the then moto masal] made such a fuss of this whole affair, it was because they were becoming extremists. Mohan Bikram Singh was struggling against their extremism and they knew that they could not match him on ideological grounds. Hence, the only way they could get to him was by attacking him on personal matters”.³⁵ Though this analysis seems too simplistic, the very

³¹ According to Shanta Singh (interview, June 2008), Mohan Bikram Singh asked her for a divorce in 2037 BS whereas he states that he sent his letter of divorce in 2042 BS.

³² One must not think that this adulterous relationship only causes problems for Communists in countries with a traditional type of society. A former communist leader of France recounted that at the end of the seventies (therefore after May 1968 and the women’s liberation movement), he attended a meeting of the local branch in Aubervilliers, during which one of the central committee member was accused of having an affair with another member. He was summoned to either leave the Party or marry her. This example shows that the Party’s involvement in its members’ personal life was not specific to the Masal Party and can find an explanation in the very principles of communism. Engels, in his *Origins of the Family*, made it very clear that mostly members of the upper class have a mistress: “The right to conjugal infidelity remains secured to [the man], [...] and as social life develops, he exercises his right more and more” (Engels, 1931: 60). Hence, to have an adulterous relationship stems from a “bourgeois” way of life and is therefore reprehensible.

³³ Keshav Nepal, interview, June 2008.

³⁴ A puritanical reason is not the only explanation for the sexual issue within Communist Parties. Hence, one should note the excellent work of Goodwin on the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, according to whom, “this [sexual] prohibition is motivated not by a puritanical fear of sexuality per se, but by fear of libidinal withdrawal from the group” (Goodwin, 1997: 56), or that of Lanzona (Lanzona, 2008). This question will be further discussed in our future essay.

³⁵ Chitra Bahadur KC, interview, June 2008.

fact, as Mohan Baidya himself acknowledges,³⁶ that it was only *after* the split that the *moto* masal started to address political questions, tends to prove that Chitra Bahadur KC's allegation, if not totally correct, is based on reliable sources.

As for M.B. Singh, one can obtain some insight of his state of mind at that time by reading his poem written in March 1979 and entitled "Ganga-Kaveri Express" (Singh, 2057 BS), in which he depicts his doubts and mixed feelings towards his friends and his Party. In a long metaphor on a train trip between Varanasi and Chennai, Mohan Bikram wonders why there is a growing distance between him and his friends. His incomprehension remains total and yet, he concludes that whatever happens, he will always be dedicated to the Party and will keep on spreading the revolution's principles wherever he goes. We noticed in our interviews that twenty eight years later, Mohan Bikram Singh's feelings have not changed.

1985 was thus a turning point in the history of Maoism in Nepal: from then on, Mohan Bikram Singh's *patalo* Masal Party gave way to Mohan Baidya's *moto* Masal which eventually, became one of the main actors in Nepalese politics.



The Rastriya Jana Morcha office in Butwal, 2007,
photo: A. Carpentier.

³⁶ Mohan Baidya, interview, June 2008.

CPN (Maoist) and CPN (Masal): the “fraternal enemies”

The takeover of the village of Thabang in Rolpa by the CPN (Maoist) is a good example of the growing supremacy of the latter over the Masal party on Nepal’s political scene.

The introduction of the communist doctrine in Thabang

The leading and most charismatic figure of communism in the village of Thabang in Rolpa, is Barman Budha, born in 1930 and the first of the villagers to fight against the local headmen’s authority and forms of abuse.³⁷ Because of his commitment to the struggle against what he called “*the oppressors of the village*”, he was accused of being a Communist in 1955 and ordered not to leave the headquarters of Khalanga, where he had been to plead his case against one of the local leaders. This type of accusation was very commonplace in the 1950s. In fact, everybody who dared to attack the authorities was labelled a “Communist”, no matter whether the accused knew who Marx and Lenin were. Indeed, according to Barman Budha’s own confession, he had never heard of communism before and did not know what it stood for.³⁸

However, while under arrest, he met Nanda Lal Gurung (Khagul Lal Gurung’s elder brother) and Rum Bahadur Pandey, who were both close to Mohan Bikram Singh and fought alongside him. When he learned that his “cellmates” were Communists, he asked them to teach him the rudiments of Marxism-Leninism. A year later, after he had been released from Khalanga and had returned to Thabang, he met Mohan Bikram Singh who was on his way back from the Salyan prison, along with Khagu Lal Gurung and Rum Bahadur Pandey. There, M.B. Singh taught Barman Budha the basic principles of communism and in 1956 he helped him to create a Peasant Front (which would be less subjected to retaliations by the government than a Communist Party).

The communist movement in Rolpa was thus inspired and created by Mohan Bikram Singh who, for the decade to come, became the main political figure in the area. Though he did not return to Thabang himself until May 2008³⁹, he was represented by Party comrades whom he had sent to continue to spread the good word (Comrade Jaljala for instance, spent a whole year in Thabang in 1977).

³⁷ For an excellent account of Barman Budha’s life, see de Sales, Anne. Forthcoming.

³⁸ Barman Budha, interview, May 2008.

³⁹ He went to Thabang just this once in 1956 (2013 BS), where he spent several days.

Yet, if the communist ideology had penetrated Rolpa through Thabang, the rest of the district was still, according to M.B. Singh, virgin territory that was only conquered after 1985 by the *moto Masal*.⁴⁰ Indeed, during the scission of 1985, Barman Budha decided to follow Mohan Baidya's line for he accused Mohan Bikram of being the one who had caused the split: "when the Party asked him to redeem himself, he chose to create the *patalo masal* instead. This, I could not admit, which is the reason why I chose to stay with *moto masal*"⁴¹. This decision had major consequences for the *moto masal*, because the village of Thabang became their base area from which they launched their People's War ten years later. Due to the fact that Mohan Baidya⁴² had been the Party leader for Rolpa district before the split and thanks to the help of Barman Budha (who, as a native was well known and trusted by the local population), the *moto masal* managed to extend its influence beyond the immediate area around Thabang, at the expense of the *patalo masal* which had to retreat to its Pyuthan lands.

If *Moto Masal*'s takeover of Thabang VDC foreshadows its supremacy over the leftist political scene, the decline of *patalo Masal* was also the consequence of a continuous desertion of its cadres who mainly walked out on the Party for ideological reasons.

International communist movement

In order to fully grasp the reasons behind these ideological divergences, one must bear in mind that, like most communist Parties in the world, the CPN (Masal) did not develop on its own, completely cut off from the outside world, but always kept an eye on the international situation. Moreover, the Masal Party was not just a simple observer of the international communist movement but it became one of its main actors.

In March 1984, somewhere in France⁴³, different Marxist-Leninist and revolutionary parties from four continents (Africa was not represented) formed the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM). "Armed with the scientific teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tsetung" (RIM, 1984), their aim was to provide a genuine revolutionary leadership to unite "the revolutionary struggle of the masses in all countries" (RIM, 1984). Although Mohan Bikram Singh was a founding member of this

⁴⁰ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, August 2007.

⁴¹ Barman Budha, interview, May 2008.

⁴² Mohan Baidya was also a local leader, since he was born in Khaira VDC in Pyuthan.

⁴³ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, August 2007. MB Singh did not remember precisely where the meeting took place and the other members present at the meeting did not wish to answer our questions on this matter.

organization, he rapidly expressed his reluctance regarding certain aspects of RIM's ideology, and particularly about Bob Avakian's⁴⁴ theories. In a "Note of Dissent presented to the 2nd International Conference of Marxist-Leninist parties and organizations held in 1984", Mohan Bikram Singh, on behalf of the CPN (Masal), accused Bob Avakian of "trying to weaken the very ideological foundations of nationalism and national revolutionary movement. For this purpose Marx, Engels and Lenin are interpreted in a confusing way, Stalin is opposed in an antagonistic way, Mao is criticized in a friendly way and the history of the International Communist Movement during the WWII period is evaluated wrongly" (CPN (Masal), 1996: 16).

The ideological cleavages between Mohan Bikram Singh and RIM intensified at the beginning of the 1990s, regarding the question of Maoism⁴⁵. While Mohan Bikram Singh followed the line based on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, from 1993 onwards the RIM believed that the experience gained from the People's War in Peru enabled the International Communist Movement "to further deepen [their] grasp of the proletarian ideology and on that basis take a far-reaching step, the recognition of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as the new, third and higher stage of Marxism" (RIM, 1993). One must not be led to think that this "ism" dispute was just a quibble between M.B. Singh and RIM, for it had an impact on the whole international Maoist movement. As M.B. Singh put it, "in the context of RIM, "Maoism" represents an opportunist trend to drag Revolutionary Internationalist Movement as a whole on to the path of opportunism and Trotskyism" (Singh, 1996). Hence, today a major distinction exists between the Communist parties that continue to follow "Mao Zedong Thought" (some of which belong to the "International Conference of Marxist-Leninist Parties and Organizations") and those that follow "Maoism" (and related to the RIM). By choosing the latter, the CPN (Maoist)⁴⁶ thus definitely diverged from Masal.

Apart from this issue, the RIM and the Masal also disagreed on the question of an armed-struggle. Whereas M.B. Singh believed that the "objective and subjective conditions to raise an armed struggle were not

⁴⁴ Leader of RCP (USA) and main figure in RIM.

⁴⁵ On the question of the disagreements between RIM and Masal, read Singh, Mohan Bikram. 2058 BS. *RIM ra māobādihoruko kathit janaddha*, Kathmandu, Jana Siksā griha.

⁴⁶ From now on, since we have chosen in this paper not to list or recount in detail the different splits that occurred from 1990 to today, we will use the CPN (Maoist) terminology to designate the *moto masal*, even though it may sometimes be anachronic, for it only adopted that name in 1995.

fulfilled”,⁴⁷ the RIM was convinced that it was time for Nepal to launch the People’s War and urged the Masal Party to do so during the 6th Convention of the RIM in 1994. Contrary to M.B. Singh, who refused to accept RIM’s point of view, Prachanda, having replaced Mohan Baidya at the head of the former *moto* Masal Party in 1988, accepted the Organization’s advice and, as of 1991, started to prepare the Party for an armed uprising that would bring Mao’s New Democracy to Nepal. Faced with these strong disagreements, the Masal party was expelled from the RIM and the CPN (Maoist) became the only party to represent Nepal in this organization.

This dispute within RIM thus affected political relations inside Nepal: the Masal and the CPN (Maoist) steadily grew further apart. As Mohan Bikram Singh summarizes it, “we flatly rejected RIM’s suggestions [...]. That distanced us from the RIM but brought Prachanda, Kiran and Babu Ram closer to the RIM leaders. [And] the day the trio embraced Maoism, the differences between my party and the CPN (Maoist) started simmering” (Singh, 2007). And though issues only related to politics in Nepal were also debated within the country’s leftist movement (we will not linger on this in this paper), we have seen that the international communist movement played an important role in the Nepal’s political orientations. Not only did the RIM contribute to separating the two Nepalese parties, but it also incited the CPN (Maoist) to launch its People’s War. Mohan Bikram Singh goes even further and claims that “the Maoists did not raise an armed struggle themselves. [...] RIM was the main instigator behind the armed movement in Nepal” (Singh, 2007).

Yet even though the international context contributed to the decline of the Masal to the benefit of CPN (Maoist), the personality of Mohan Bikram Singh was once again a sizeable factor.

Mohan Bikram Singh’s personality called into question

The ideological divergences between the different Communist parties led members of the Masal party to abandon their party and join forces with the CPN (Maoist). Perhaps the most significant defection is that of Baburam Bhattarai, who joined the CPN (Maoist) in 1990. Though this particular defection is full of highly symbolic meaning, it remains one among many others.

Among the various activists who left Masal and whom we were able to meet and interview, all admitted that Mohan Bikram Singh was very much responsible for their defection. The case of Dinanath Sharma, now member of the *politburo* of the CPN (Maoist), is a perfect example of the

⁴⁷ Mohan Bikram Singh, interview, December 2007.

growing feeling of misunderstanding that gradually filled the minds of Masal activists. Dinanath had remained faithful to Masal until 1999, when he finally decided to split and form his own Masal Party (which he merged with the CPN (Maoist) two years later): “I was very close to Mohan Bikram Singh [...]. But gradually, I began to realize that he had made two mistakes: he had lapsed into sectarianism and dogmatism”.⁴⁸ Those accusations of sectarianism and dogmatism, very common between Maoists, were not the only reasons for Dinanath’s split:

In his writings, he keeps on talking about revolution but in practical terms, he has never been able to organize and unite people around him. He did not succeed in building a strong Party. And this is because when there were inner struggles inside the Party, there was never any change. Inner-struggles are not made to create splits but to bring changes. But M.B. Singh never accepted change. This is one of his mistakes.⁴⁹

This reproach is of utmost importance in understanding why many members of Mohan Bikram’s party finally abandoned him. As we have shown in previous sections of this paper, the split in 1985 was partly due to M.B. Singh’s stubbornness regarding his relationship with Comrade Jaljala. If, unlike in 1985, one admits that it is his unwillingness to accept changes in his ideology that led people to leave his party starting in the 1990s, both episodes show that it was M.B. Singh’s obstinacy that was to blame.⁵⁰ Ajay Sharma (Central Committee member of CPN (Maoist) and now ambassador of Nepal to Australia) for instance, confessed: “At the beginning, I did not want to leave Masal. I just hoped Mohan Bikram Singh would understand his mistake and merge with the CPN (Maoist). But when I saw M.B. Singh’s obstinacy and realized that he would not change his mind, I decided to join Prachanda’s Party”.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Dinanath Sharma, interview, May 2008.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Although we will not give a detailed account in this paper, we should mention the fact that MB Singh’s personal life once again caused fresh quarrels within the Party when he decided to remarry Durga Paudel in 2000. M.B. Singh was then forced to resign from his post as General Secretary. He was called reinstated a year later.

⁵¹ Ajay Sharma, interview, June 2007.



Ajay Sharma, 2007, photo: A. Carpentier.

Hence, just like Barman Budha in 1985, many leaders accused M.B. Singh of being responsible for the many splits in Nepal's Maoist movement. Dinanath Sharma, for example, does not have a single doubt about it: "Mohan Bikram Singh was responsible for the scissions and he still is."⁵²

If the intransigence of Mohan Bikram Singh led many members of his Party to leave, it was also one of the reasons that incited some of his supporters to remain with him. Indeed, most Masal activists we met admire M.B. Singh for his "correct and never deviationist vision of Marxism-Leninism."⁵³

A member of Masal, whose name we cannot reveal for obvious reasons, cites as an example of M.B. Singh's noble stance the fact that in 1961 he was the only one on the Communist Party's Central Committee to demand and vote for a Constituent Assembly.⁵⁴ And while everyone at the time criticized his line of action, my interlocutor went on, "today, they all claim to be the first one to fight for it. This proves that Mohan Bikram Singh had the correct vision from the very beginning and that he was right not to give up his stance, despite criticism within the Central Committee".

Perhaps the most symbolic testimony is that of M.B. Singh's former wife, Shanta Singh. Although she was repudiated by her husband, she never ceased to support the Masal Party: "It is not because the husband is bad that the leader is. Even if, as a man, I dislike him, I have to admit that his line is and always has been the correct one. Unlike the other leaders,

⁵² Dinanath Sharma, interview, May 2008.

⁵³ Member of Masal, interview, May 2007.

⁵⁴ This fact was also recounted by Bhima Rawal in: Rawal, Bhima. 2047 BS. *Nepalma samyavadi Andolan: udbhav ra vikas*. Kathmandu: Pairavi Prakahana, p. 53.

he has never altered his stance in order to further his career. He is not an opportunistic.”⁵⁵

The accusation of being an opportunistic was the obvious counter-attack Mohan Bikram Singh used against his opponents. According to him, what they consider to be stubbornness is complete dedication to the Communist ideology, even if it means abandoning power for a time. He thus reminds us that he could have been a member of the government as early as in the 1950s or could have avoided many years’ imprisonment if he had agreed to renounce some of his principles, a stance which, according to him, Prachanda and his followers refused to adopt:

A few months after we started working together, I felt that both Prachanda and Babu Ram Bhattarai were careerists and not honest comrades, who could fight for the people’s rights. They kept on changing their minds rather than discussing on the issues of national importance. [...] The statements issued thus far by the Maoists, if you read them, tell us how inconsistent they are. [...] They have given up their communism and their main goal is to come into power (Singh, 2007).

M.B. Singh is not the only one to blame the CPN (Maoist) for its opportunism, since some of its allies have expressed great disappointment regarding its latest change of heart (since April 2006). For instance, the CPI (Maoist), which has close ties with its Nepalese counterpart, has strongly criticized Prachanda’s new line since it jeopardised the revolution: “the decision of the CPN (Maoist) to dissolve the revolutionary people’s governments in the countryside and to merge the PLA with the reactionary army will unfold an irreversible process of losing all the revolutionary gains achieved till now” (CPI (Maoist), 2006).

If, as we have shown, the gap between Masal and the CPN (Maoist) widened from 1990 onwards to the latter’s benefit (in terms of size as well as in terms of the impact on Nepalese politics), the former’s influence did not cease completely, particularly in Pyuthan. Indeed, even though the CPN (Maoist) considered Pyuthan to be part of its base area, one will see that in reality, the situation was rather nuanced.

The People’s War in Pyuthan

The many accounts we could gather during our fieldwork in February-April 2006 and in May-June 2007 in Pyuthan, highlighted the fact that the

⁵⁵ Shanta Singh, interview, June 2008.

grip the People's War's had on the local population was not as strong as suggested by the declarations made by the CPN (Maoist). The figures collected by different NGOs already showed that the casualties in M.B. Singh's birthplace were lower than those in the surrounding area and Yam Lal Upadhya, the local representative of the Red Cross, corroborated this.

Table 1 : Number of victims in 2005 in Pyuthan and in the surrounding areas

Districts	By Maoists	By State	By Others	Total
	No. of Victims	No. of Victims	No. of Victims	
Pyuthan	37	9	1	47
Rolpa	77	70	13	160
Arghakhanchi	60	54	7	121
Dang	65	127	22	214
Gulmi	1 032	46	20	1098
Baglung	51	133	14	198
Rukum	1 640	160	18	1818
Palpa	558	73	3	634
Kapilvastu	100	98	571	769
Banke	144	290	14	448
Salyan	85	28	142	255

Source: Poudel, 2006: 244-277

The Maoists' incapacity to establish a strong hold in Pyuthan (apart from the northern part of the district) is due to a combination of several factors, among which the presence of the Masal is by far the most important. The fact that the district is the birthplace of one of the founding leaders of Maoism in Nepal is obviously one way of explaining why the Masal retained a strong influence in this area. We have shown that the Party's work in the district and the numerous meetings, speeches and gatherings they had organized since 1953 had rendered the local population particularly well politicized. Hence, when the CPN (Maoist) arrived to "educate the masses" (to use their terminology), the latter had already been trained in Marxism-Leninism by the Masal and were thus reluctant to adopt a new ideology from strangers.

But the main reason why the local population remained faithful to the Masal was that its members proved to be the only ones to dare to oppose the Maoist violence in the district and which will be perfectly illustrated by the following example recounted to us in 2006. In 2004, Maoists accused members of the Masal Party of having killed one of their activists, Dal Bahadur Pariyar, in the village of Bijuli. In retaliation for this so-called murder (Masal members as well as local villagers claimed it was a suicide),

the Maoists kidnapped 22 Masal members, five of whom were held captive for 74 days. Far from being intimidated by the Maoists' actions, the Masal activists (including Mohan Bikram Singh) gathered their forces and led demonstrations throughout Pyuthan, demanding the release of their comrades. These demonstrations lasted for several weeks and the CPN (Maoist) was finally forced to capitulate.

Although this event was the most revealing, it was not the only one that proved the Masal's resistance to the Maoists. Many villagers admitted that they felt strong enough to defy the Maoists because they knew that they were backed by Masal activists. Lastly, the many slogans written on walls by the Masal against their opponents illustrate once again their opposition.

Yet, one must not believe that the CPN (Maoist) was totally absent from Pyuthan. The north of the district came to be one of their strongholds during the war, an area which they used as a corridor to mobilize their army for their attack on Sandhikharka (in Arghakhanchi) in September 2002 or on Tansen (Palpa district) in January 2006.



Maoists in Bijuli, Pyuthan district, Feb. 2006. Photo: B. Cailmail.

Conclusion

Mohan Bikram Singh, through his commitment to Communism and his constant struggle against the Monarchy, is one of the pillars of the Nepal communist movement and the founding leader of Maoism in Nepal. Yet, we have shown that his political and ideological divergences with members of his Party led to several splits that finally gave birth to the CPN (Maoist) in 1995. Above all, the strong personality of Mohan Bikram Singh led to many quarrels within the Party and contributed to one of its most important scissions. This is perhaps one of the most interesting features of this charismatic leader who dedicated all his life to the party, disregarding his personal career, and who almost lost everything for the love of a woman.

Despite the present decline of the Masal Party, Mohan Bikram Singh remains a respected figure in Nepal politics. While Mohan Baidya, for instance, considers that M.B. Singh made a huge contribution to the communist movement in Nepal, Dinanath Sharma states that he still greatly respects Mohan Bikram Singh, even though they no longer share the same ideology. Finally, the rumours that spread in Kathmandu during the month of May 2008 about the nomination of M.B. Singh as first President of the Republic of Nepal (rumours that were reported to be false by the man himself) prove that the influence of the Masal Party on Nepalese politics remains significant.

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