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ON THE TRAIL OF A MAOIST

By Ben Otto '96

"What will you do if you meet a Maoist?" Lakpa's grandson skidded past us along a trail that looked like a muddy luge carved into the hillside. "What if they won't let you pass?"

"Isn't that why you're here?" I said. He laughed and skipped down the trail, splashing through the faint stream that had already gathered in the morning's rain.

But I didn't know exactly. We were in eastern Nepal, beyond the roads, moving slowly through the foothills that skirt the Himalaya. I'd walked this trail years earlier, twice, but this was the first time since it had become a no-man's land the Nepali government rarely entered, a place now governed more by Maoist militias than anything else.

Direct sunlight was just creeping into the valley when we arrived at a row of clay and wood houses. The rain had washed the day into a watercolor dreamscape: the red clay path, wide enough for four bodies abreast; the green pipal and banana and pine trees standing like sentries all around the terraced rice plots; and the churning water of a glacial river, gray as ashes on a plume of smoke. I put my pack down on a boulder and leaned hard against it.

A moment later I heard footsteps and glanced up to see two young men walk into view. One had with him a small backpack, the other a camera case slung across his chest. They walked to a water spigot and paused there long enough to wash their faces and drink. The first then continued down the trail to one of the houses nearby. The other hovered around the spigot a moment before turning to me with a look of amusement on his face.

He was dressed in the dark polyester pants and button-down long sleeve shirts often worn by Nepali men in the mountains. A red bandana swept his hair back in a black wave, and tinted sunglasses sat across the bridge of his nose, the lenses round and red like a pair of coins still hot from the forging.

"Where are you going?" he asked, in careful English.

"Up the river," I said, "two or three days." He tensed slightly when he heard me speak in Nepali.

"Do you know you need a permit to be here?"

"I know you used to. But there's not much of a government here anymore, is there?"

At this he smiled again, his eyes widening behind his glasses: "Yes . . . this is ours now. All of this." He swept his hand through the air over his head, indicating all the land both seen and unseen from our perch over the river.

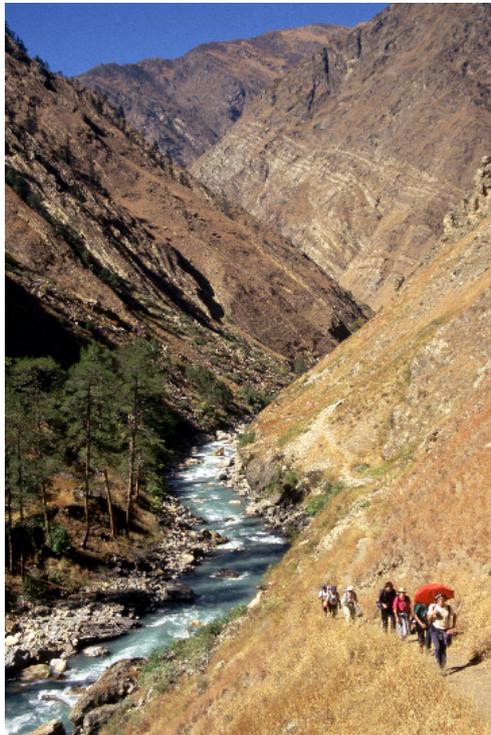
With his candor, his obvious youth, he might have been a boy returning to the lowlands district headquarters for boarding school. Even now, that's what I took him for.

"You don't look like a soldier," I finally said.

"I am."

"And you fight with the Maoists?"

"Yes."



When I eyed him skeptically, he pointed to his red bandana. When I pulled one nearly identical from my own pocket, his face wrinkled and he looked away, uncertain, as if he'd forgotten a piece of his uniform somewhere up the trail. He glanced around to see a group of young boys and men who had gathered near one of the houses to watch us. Then he swung his camera case around to the front of his body, unzipped it so I could see the flash of steel within, and whispered: "Do you know what this is?"

He pulled the zipper farther down, and, when I made no response, moved closer to me. What I saw inside looked like a giant nut and bolt screwed together, about the size of a rock you could barely carry in your hand. I wondered for a moment if it had been taken from some structure, like a bridge; but both pieces reflected light with the strength of untarnished, unused metal, something new. He stepped back and zipped the case shut.

"You'll meet the district secretary in the next village," he said. "Make sure you stop."

He turned and set off down the trail, his friend joining him. When they had disappeared, the crowd pulled closer and I described what I had seen.

"A bomb," one boy said.

"No," I said, "Something else, something . . ."

But an older man stepped forward. "No, it is a bomb. That's what the youngest ones use."

Several others confirmed this, but when I asked where the young man had come from, and whether he was right that the whole area was under Maoist control, faces turned apologetic and the crowd dissipated.

In truth, it's difficult to know just who's in control of the country these days, or even who should be in control. Nepalis themselves are ambivalent, many recognizing the sense in some Maoist reforms but also longing for the day when, even if they lived under a corrupt government and failed economy, they lived in relative peace. Even in the mountains, where Maoists often find the most support, people are hesitant to declare their allegiances, daily living amidst the threat of conscription into Maoist ranks and interrogation at the hands of the national army. Ideology, for most Nepalis, isn't a determinant of allegiance.

When Lakpa joined me, I shouldered my pack and we headed on. Just as the trail opened onto a cliff above the river, I began to ask him who his grandson would fight for in the war, if he had to. But as if the question was moot, my words were momentarily lost to the percussive tumbling of stones along the river bottom below. And then the trail narrowed, with a precipitous drop to the river on one side, and we focused for a while on the ground at our feet, walking carefully but quickly down its worn center.

Ben Otto '96 is an M.F.A. candidate in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa, where he also teaches undergraduate writing. He spent summer 2004 in Nepal working on an account of the conflict in Nepal and hopes to finish a book on the subject in late 2006.