



# Ethnic Conflict in Nepal: A Reading of the Novel *Kathmandu Days: The Blight and The Plight*

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## **Abstract**

*This study is an attempt to understand the historical, political, and social background of the civil war in Nepal during 1996-2006 through the novel Kathmandu Days: The Blight and The Plight (2016) by Chandra K. Bhatt. The study aims to analyze the various aspects of ethnic conflict that led to the civil war in Nepal. It discusses the above-mentioned novel with the help of history and facts, along with the narratives of history and facts in contemporary fiction. The study basically follows the quantitative method and is guided by thorough analytical, descriptive, and historical approaches to examine the origin and cause of the civil war.*

**Key Words:** War, Civil War, Ethnic Conflict, Nepal, History.

## **Introduction**

*Kathmandu Days: The Blight and The Plight* (2016) by Chandra K. Bhatt, is a novel set in the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu. The novel explores the lives of several characters from different social and economic backgrounds and how they are affected by the political and social turmoil in Nepal during the 1990s. The story touches upon themes like corruption, poverty, inequality, and the struggle for democracy. It also focuses on the challenges faced by the civilians of Nepal in a time of political and social upheaval.

The novel discusses the civil war (1996-2006), which has been a crucial historical event that has deeply affected the lives of people in Nepal. In this novel, conflict is portrayed as a source of violence, fear, and uncertainty that affects people from all walks of life, regardless of their social status or political affiliation. It also depicts the political and social changes that occurred during the civil war, such as the rise of the Maoist insurgency and the challenges faced by the government in maintaining law and order as well as by the common civilians living through the war. The present novel highlights the human cost of conflict and the challenges of rebuilding a society torn apart by war.

The story starts with a Nepali family residing on the other side of the border, i.e., India. Though Nawin seems to be the protagonist of the novel, the story mostly revolves around his family, including his mother Laxmi, father Dev, and younger brother Anil. After the death of Nawin's mother, it was Nisha who took care of Nawin and Anil. Nawin could not see anybody except Nisha at his mother's place. After getting married to Dev, Nisha had a son, Dinesh, who was mentally challenged, hence capturing all the attention from Nisha and Dev.

The novel explores the effects of the Nepalese Civil War on the nation's society and politics. The narrative interweaves Nawin's personal quest for job in Kathmandu, having departed from his family, with the overarching national unrest created by the conflict. The novel illustrates the significant disruption and corruption that infiltrated Nepalese society during the conflict through Nawin's experiences. The book also examines political

intrigues, such as the killing of the Nepalese Royal Family, providing insights into the intricacies of the civil war and its significant impact on the nation.

### Causes

Bishnu Raj Upreti writes in his book *Nepal from War to Peace: Legacy of the Past and Hopes for the Future* that the Maoist insurgency was not the only result of the collapse of the newly established “multiparty democracy” in 1990. It was the accumulation of almost 345 years of exploitation. Due to its inability to fulfil people’s expectations, its malgovernance, and the freedom it provided, the post-1990 administration’s failure allowed this conflict to escalate (Upreti, 2009)<sup>i</sup>.

The Nepalese monarchy played a substantial role in the conflict. The monarchy had close ties to the governing elites and was accused of corruption and violations of human rights. In the novel, Bhatt depicts the monarchy as a source of corruption and oppression, emphasizing its role in perpetuating the social and economic disparities that fueled the conflict. As Nawin explained, “The real power was the monopoly of a family. Others were only allowed to make a living at their pleasure and whim” (Bhatt, 2016)<sup>ii</sup>.

The Nepalese Civil War had a significant impact on rural communities, especially in the country’s remote mountainous regions. The novel also depicts the rural communities’ struggles with poverty, inequality, and violence. Being a member of a particular caste was even more significant than having political connections in terms of getting a job. Nepal is a very diverse country in terms of ethnicity, caste, class, language, and religion. The novel discusses not only the job shortage but also the politics and caste hierarchy in society, specifically how the upper caste has dominated all the civilian jobs and how it was nearly impossible for people like Nawin to find a job because they neither belong to the upper caste nor have any connections with the powerful or royal family members. This sense of alienation attracted people, especially those belonging to the lower class and caste, to support the insurgents who wanted Nepal to be a ‘Republic’. The novel explains,

*“There was an active rule of the king. Police and military jobs were the most rewarding and therefore the most sought after by young graduates like Nawin. But they were very difficult to get, because of undeclared criteria of caste or political affiliations, apart from the regular written and oral examinations, and the checking of the physical fitness...Not having a strong political or caste connection left one at a great disadvantage. In addition, was the fact that everyone serving in the government was actually serving the king”* (Bhatt, 2016, p. 48).

Inequality in Nepal was caused by several issues, including gender inequality, ethnic discrimination, and discrimination within caste groups, as well as rural and urban geography. The rural poverty rate was roughly 44%, but the urban poverty rate was approximately 20%. There was also a disparity in income between rural and urban residents. During 1989-96, the income of those “living in urban regions climbed by 16% annually, from US\$ 126 to US\$ 285”, whereas the income of persons living in rural areas increased by just 4% annually, from US\$ 95 to US\$ 125. Even while urban area expansion outpaced rural area growth, rural dwellers’ impression of inequality grew (Lawoti & Pahari, 2013, p. 8)<sup>iii</sup>.

The government’s neglect of the issue of poverty and failure to offer employment options for youths led them down the path to rebellion. Continuous negligence raises the poverty rate from 33 percent in 1979–1977 to 42 percent in 1995–1996, hence increasing inequality (Sharma, 2006)<sup>iv</sup>. Another cause of poverty in Nepal was the unequal distribution of land, as the people who were mostly dependent on agriculture for their survival hardly owned any land.

The novel also emphasizes the role of women in the conflict, describing their experiences as victims of violence. Nepal has historically practiced caste-based hierarchies, including untouchability, marriage restrictions, and occupation restrictions. Untouchability was also observed among women. They had been dehumanized because of the prevalence of rapes, sexual harassment, and accusations of witchcraft against women. The novel discusses these issues as Laxmi, Nawin’s mother, describes them: “Rapes too were common occurrences in cases of women venturing out alone. But they were never reported, as it would only invite embarrassment” (Bhatt, 2016). Hence, women were easily drawn to the insurgency and joined the CPN (M). About 40% of guerilla warriors were female. For women, joining an insurrection was a means of liberation from prejudice and oppression (Pettigrew & Shneiderman, 2004)<sup>v</sup>.

The Maoists in Nepal started a well-organized nationwide movement in 1996 and got huge support from the people of Nepal, as evening blackouts occurred nearly every day in Kathmandu. They switched off all their house lights before clapping and shouting from their rooftops in the deep night. It was a pro-revolution declaration (Bhatt, 2016).

The novel examines the state's ongoing fight with the communist movement. The story recounts a time when the state was experiencing 'huge political and social instability'. There have been daily reports of activists going missing. During this period, the printing of leftist newspapers was prohibited, therefore they were quickly sold out "as they appeared on the footpaths, the more extreme one more so-the one affiliated with the communist party" (Bhatt, 2016). In addition, communists desired a republic in the country, therefore the system posed a greater threat to communist leaders; consequently, most communist leaders were underground and in hiding.

The Panchayat era was regarded as the most challenging period for journalists. After King Mahendra replaced multiparty democracy with a party-less panchayat government in December 1960, the media and journalism endured three decades of their darkest days. Professor P. Kharel, in *The Kathmandu Post*, said, "If the private media wrote against the monarchy, they would be persecuted, shut down, or jailed, and there would be no environment for investment" (The Journey of Private Media in Nepal, 2023)<sup>vi</sup>. Bhatt in his novel described,

*"The government controlled information. So, the media mostly reported the daily activities of the members of the royal family... Through radio, television, or the newspaper such information poured in. In turn, more and more nations backed the proposal of the king to declare Nepal a zone of peace. No one abroad seemed to have sensed the turbulence and violence in Nepalese society"* (Bhatt, 2016, p. 50).

The primary obstacle between them was the 1996 Maoist insurrection, which negatively harmed the media. Yet the media continues to post content. Then, Gyanendra Shah imposed censorship, precipitating a media crisis.

In addition, everyone interested in joining the civil service was required to pass the "Panchayat" examinations. Dilip, Nawin's friend, desired to enter the Nepali government service. However, each time he attempted the civil-services examination, he quit when he was needed to take the "Panchayat" examinations, despite having completed other courses. Evidently, the goal of this test was to determine the examinee's ideological orientation. Dilip also expressed his dislike for the panchayat system to Nawin (Bhatt, 76).

After the royal massacre of June 2001, a senior Maoist leader Babu Ram Bhattarai declared, "The conventional monarchy in Nepal has ended" (Bhatt, 2016, p. 127). In India, he was buried beneath the ground. His declaration appeared in a renowned vernacular daily *Kantipur* piece he authored. He revealed in the same piece that the Maoists had a working contact with King Birendra via his youngest brother Dhirendra.

That proved what everyone already believed, namely that the liberal image of the king was as unconvincing as the Maoists' calls to abolish a constitutional monarchy. The communist and royal coalition against a fledgling democracy appeared unusual, but it was quite rational. One had lost power, while the other aspired to make Nepal a communist republic (p. 127).

"B. P. Koirala was the first elected Prime Minister" under a constitutional monarchy in Nepal, when the Rana kings agreed to extend their rule under a king of democracy whose feudal powers were curtailed and whose fate was to be determined by election. They were defeated in this election, and a two-thirds parliamentary majority was won by the party of Koirala (p. 135).

Extortion and torture of the rural inhabitants by the Maoists appeared to have intensified. The political atmosphere in Kathmandu became increasingly unstable by the day. Many individuals whose legs the Maoists had shattered with a heavy sledgehammer used in the hamlet to shape hot iron were being treated at the teaching hospital in Kathmandu, according to one newspaper. The Maoists considered them to be government spies. They crushed the bones with hammers, making it nearly impossible for the physicians to reconstruct them (pp. 139-40).

According to the novel, people were being murdered by both sides, and "it was evident that the war was beginning to toughen people on both sides. You were on one side or the other, a Maoist leader declared, there was no middle ground to trade on for the commoner" (p. 141).

As the end of winter drew near, one day the King disbanded the Sher Bahadur Deuba administration and assumed administrative control himself. Radio Nepal confirmed the news that the monarch had usurped control of the

government. There was a climate of terror. The new leadership has established a state of emergency. Including cell phones and the Internet, civil communication was banned for approximately one week. During this same period, security forces conducted searches of the offices of several privately owned news organizations. Clearly, the population would no longer tolerate injustice. If the future monarch tries to destroy democracy as his father Mahendra did nearly fifty years ago, he will likely fail (pp. 143-44).

On the other hand, the king appointed the crucial authority to deal with the Maoists to the military. The onslaught conducted by the army escalated the conflict. It was no longer essential to wait for insurgents to attack. Instead, it advanced deeper into the forest to destroy their bases. The army evolved from a ceremonial force to a fighting force. Historically, individuals entered the military in order to enter the middle class by serving in UN peacekeeping machines. During the nocturnal search efforts in Kathmandu, countless people vanished.

The coming of the king to power made the world more accessible. After the king rose to the throne, the security forces no longer disagreed on how to respond to the issue, which was costing them more lives. This unusual condition pushed democratic political parties towards the Maoists and against the king.

The king was ousted as a result, and Nepal became a republic. After sweeping the election, Maoists are now in charge of the country's coalition government. The monarch accepted the people's vote and left the mansion. The drafting of the constitution was becoming increasingly challenging with each passing day, so he resigned. Some ethnic groups desire a state within a state, posing a threat to the dissolution of the country. Political violence claimed a greater number of lives than the Maoist conflict (p. 191).

### Conclusion

*Kathmandu Days: The Blight and the Plight* presents an unvarnished perspective of Nepal's Civil War through a potent amalgamation of human and political narratives. It illuminates the anguish, fortitude, and ethical quandaries encountered by common Nepalese throughout this turbulent age, rendering it a noteworthy literary addition to Nepalese historical fiction.

Nawin, the protagonist, departs his rural residence for Kathmandu in pursuit of more favorable prospects. Nevertheless, his voyage is characterized by the upheaval of a nation in crisis. His personal struggles are indicative of the more extensive socio-economic challenges that thousands of Nepalese citizens have encountered, including those who were displaced, compelled into exile, or recruited into the Maoist movement.

The book examines Nepal's declining political environment during the war, emphasizing the prevalence of corruption and power struggles. It explores conspiracies, including the assassination of the Nepalese Royal Family in 2001, a critical event that exacerbated political instability in the nation.

The conflict resulted in extensive human rights abuses, enforced disappearances, and economic distress. The story powerfully illustrates the suffering of ordinary individuals, especially in rural regions, resulting from the battle between Maoist insurgents and government forces.

Nawin's relocation to Kathmandu epitomizes the struggles of several Nepalese who abandoned their villages to evade violence. Kathmandu, while comparatively safer, was not exempt from the war's repercussions, as it emerged as a center for political agitation, spying, and corruption.

The novel depicts the psychological trauma experienced by war survivors and their challenges in adapting to the changing political and economic landscape of Nepal. It depicts a nation divided between tradition and modernization, where citizens must navigate allegiance, survival, and ethical quandaries.

From 1996 to 2006, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal was a decade-long military confrontation between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government of Nepal. The rebellion began as a Maoist effort to topple the constitutional monarchy and install a communist republic. The Maoists' original approach entailed launching attacks against government installations and security forces in rural regions, where poverty and inequality were at their worst. Throughout time, the insurgency gained strength and seized control of large swaths of the countryside, particularly in western Nepal.

The government responded with harsh measures, including violations of human rights and extrajudicial deaths. An estimated 13,000 individuals, including civilians, rebels, and security personnel, perished as a result of the battle (Human Right Watch, 2004)<sup>vii</sup>. The 2001 massacre of the Nepalese royal family by the crown prince sparked a chain of political events that ultimately led to the dissolution of the monarchy and the foundation of a democratic republic in 2008.

In 2006, the Maoists and the government signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended the fighting and allowed the Maoists to enter the political mainstream. In the 2008 elections for the Constituent Assembly, the Maoists emerged as the largest party and governed a coalition government from 2008 until 2013. While the peace process has been mostly successful, Nepal's political stability still faces obstacles, such as persistent conflicts between political parties and ethnic groups, as well as economic obstacles, such as high levels of poverty and inequality.



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<sup>i</sup> Upeti, Bishnu Raj. (2009). *Nepal From War to Peace: Legacies of the Past and Hopes for the Future*. Adroit Publishers.

<sup>ii</sup> Bhatt, Chandra K. (2016). *Kathmandu Days: The Blight and the Plight*. Niyogi Books.

<sup>iii</sup> Lawoti, Mahendra, and Anup K. Pahari. (2013). *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge.

<sup>iv</sup> Sharma, K. (2006). "The Political Economy of Civil War in Nepal". *World Development* 34(7), 1237-1253.

<sup>v</sup> Pettigrew, J., & Shneiderman, S. (2004). Women and the Maobaadi: Ideology and agency in Nepal's Maoist movement. *Himal Southasian*, 17(1), 19-29.

<sup>vi</sup> *The journey of private media in Nepal*. (2023, April 3). The Journey of Private Media in Nepal. <https://kathmandupost.com/special-supplement/2023/02/19/the-journey-of-private-media-in-nepal>

<sup>vii</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2004). *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Civilians Struggle to Survive in Nepal's Civil War*. *Human Rights Watch Report*, 16