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FILM REVIEW

SCHOOLS IN THE CROSSFIRE

DURBA BASNET

REVIEWED BY TOM ROBERTSON

“WHAT WAS THE POINT OF KILLING OUR CHILDREN?”

I still remember the mix of disbelief and dread that came over me when I first saw Durba Basnet's 2001 documentary *The Killing Terraces*. At that time the on-again, off-again civil war between the Maoists and the Nepali government was just beginning to spread from hills of the Mid-West throughout the rest of the country. I had read, heard, and talked about the insurgency a great deal. I had even met Maoist cadre during a trip to the Mid-West. But I had never seen their gun-toting soldiers or the armed patrols of Nepali police searching for them. The interviews and the background narration of *The Killing Terrace* are both excellent. But at the time, it was the images of Nepalis—especially school-aged Nepalis—carrying guns that sent a shiver down my spine. I had seen violence before in Nepal, and knew of the country's mostly hidden history of violence and torture, but seeing these guns—and then hearing of the tragedies associated with them—simultaneously shocked and saddened me.

Basnet's most recent film is also full of images and stories that will make you shudder with horror. His 52-minute *Schools in the Crossfire* documents one of the most tragic aspects of the civil war: the violence that has become almost routine in Nepal's rural schools and that has made real education next to impossible. Through interviews in Khotang, Lamjung, Bajura, and Mugu districts with teachers, students, and family members of the dead, the film shines a much-needed spotlight on the tragic plight of the thousands of children and teachers at government schools caught between the Maoists and the government.

Schools in the Crossfire puts a human face on the

violence we read about in the papers. It really hit home for me. For three years in the mid-1990s, years in which the hopes of a new democracy began to give way to the disillusionment that has come to define Nepal, I worked with primary and secondary level teachers in Khotang, one of the districts described in the film. Because I gave trainings at different high schools and visited many of their feeder schools, I got to see dozens of school communities and meet scores of Nepali teachers, many of whom are now routinely pressured by one side or the other. Or both: one teacher-friend has been abducted by the Maoists *and* has been forced to report to the army several times a month. Many have paid tremendous costs: another friend of mine—a dedicated teacher whom I had visited in his school several times—was found tied to a tree, beaten and killed by Maoists.

By highlighting the disruption of schools, the film highlights one of the ways that the conflict will continue to hurt Nepal and Nepalis long after the fighting stops. In doing so, it points to what seems like another contradictory result of Maoist strategy: Although they rail against how the explosion of boarding schools during the last decade has created a two-tiered system of education in Nepal, their political and military campaigns have hurt the very people they claim to be working for—the rural poor. “They say they are working for the country but instead are making everyone cry,” the wife of one Maoist victim comments. “What do they get by killing people?” Another family member of a victim put it even more directly, “What was the point of killing our children?”

The film only begins to answer these questions. Through interviews with Maoist cadre, we hear some of the ideology that blinds their actions. They downplay “short-term” costs, and instead emphasize the

Schools in the Crossfire

Durba Basnet

2004, 52 min. Available through Himal Books' Clearinghouse for South Asian Non-Fiction Film.

way the curriculum trains students to revere the monarchy. More digging into the politics of schools is clearly needed by journalists and scholars alike. As the narration provided by journalist Deepak Thapa explains, schools have become a chief arena of contestation because they are often the only branch of the government still active in many rural areas. But this is not a recent phenomenon: schools have been the most visible state presence in most rural communities for decades. Understanding this history, then, is crucial to understanding current anti-statist views in Nepal.

Modern schooling only began in Nepal during the 1950s. Before that, the Ranas monopolized the education and its benefits for a small group of elite supporters; they severely punished those who acquired education without their permission. The overthrow of the Rana regime in 1950 resulted in the establishment of schools in thousands of communities across Nepal during successive decades. In most of rural Nepal, they are the most prominent symbol of modernity. The history of these symbols of modernity can be seen in two ways. Which version you believe often explains what you think of the state of Nepal. On one hand, given that the literacy rate in the 50s was probably under 3%, the current rate of roughly 45% can be seen, despite all of Nepal's other education problems, as a great achievement, especially for a place facing the economic and geographic obstacles that Nepal does. On the other hand, the schools have long been rife with mismanagement, teacher absenteeism, favoritism, and cheating. While many teachers are truly underpaid heroes, others fall far short of acceptable. Schools may no longer be

the monopoly of the elite, but it's not clear what they have really done for the poor. Thus the Maoists, who in many cases have set up informal schools for their cadre, are not just blinded by a utopian vision; they also feel that disrupting a school disrupts an institution that is not really accomplishing much at all. The Maoist logic is very debatable. Nonetheless, no one can dispute that the schools have been in a sad, sad state for a long time and this has cost Nepali society dearly.

Another point is also crucial: the disruption of Nepali schools for political purposes began long before the Maoists spread across the country. The major political parties have long used the schools to wage political battles. They use the schools to punish their enemies and to protect their own. Rarely has the interest of the students been the top priority. More than anything else, the politicization of the schools explains why they have performed so poorly—and why the Maoists feel no qualms taking their own political battle to the school ground. So while clearly the Maoist abduction of students, intimidation of teachers, and overall violence is reprehensible, the blame for this problem extends beyond just them. Let us hope that the Nepal that emerges out of the conflict is one in which the nonpartisan management of the schools for the sake of student advancement is held sacrosanct.

Tom Robertson is a Postdoctoral Fellow in History at Rutgers University