

Mohan Mainali. 2071 v.s. *Māñṭhā Darāyeko Jug*. Kathmandu: Fine Print.

The ten-year long civil war (1996–2006) shook Nepali people’s lives, leaving thousands of women widowed, children orphaned, dreams unfinished, and parents heartbroken. In *Māñṭhā Darāyeko Jug*, Mohan Mainali writes about his travels from Sankhuwasabha in the east to the Karnali region in the west spanning seven years between 2002 and 2009, and tells stories of the people he met during his travels, all of who were impacted deeply by the war. The book is written in 58 short chapters which are organized into six parts; each part records a separate trip.

While the war tore apart many parts of rural Nepal, in Kathmandu, casualties were reported as news stories, too many numbers and narratives to keep track of. In June 2002, Mainali goes to Jogimara, Dhading, where he visits the families of the 17 laborers that were killed while working at the Kotbada Airport in Kalikot. The people they have left behind, 14 families and ten widows, are broken by the news of their death, and unsettled because they have no proof that their family members are actually dead, no bodies to cremate.

They deal with their grief in different ways. There is one father that tells Mainali that his family will not perform his son’s last rites, even if he doesn’t come back for four or five years. Other families have made a doll out of *kuśa*, a holy plant, to represent the deceased, and performed their sons’ last rites, “We have already performed his last rites,” one mother says, “if he comes back, show him the other way” (p. 51). It seems harsh, until one realizes that she is talking about showing her son the other way because she still has a glimmer of hope that her son will return home. Another set of parents have lost two sons to the same incident, and a third son to mentally instability following his brothers’ death.

One year and a half later, Mainali reaches the site of Kotbada Airport, where he hears accounts of the incident in which the laborers were killed. A day after they fired at the laborers, the Nepal Army orders the locals to bury their bodies. The brother of the airport contractor, who died in the incident, is a soldier himself, and comes through the area on a patrol. But he is on duty, and although he cries when he hears of his brother’s death, he doesn’t have time to mourn. He gives the locals five hundred rupees and requests that his brother not be buried in the mass grave. Incidents like

these, subtle but heartbreaking, demonstrate that human life was, in fact, a triviality during the war.

The next day, Nepal Army soldiers come back to the site and ask the locals to dig up the dead bodies, place arms beside them, and take photographs to prove that the people they killed were indeed Maoists. The locals bury the dead again. The following day, a group of Maoists come by, ask the locals to dig up the bodies again, wrap them in Maoist flags, and take pictures. “After their death, the army made these laborers terrorists,” Mainali writes, and “the Maoists made them rebels” (p. 211).

In late 2002, a man runs away from Mainali’s crew which is taking out camera gear to film in Pandusen, Bajura, mistaking the tripod for a gun. “*Mānṭhādekhi mānṭhā...ḍarāunyā jug āyo,*” (pp. 125–126) he explains. *Mānṭhā* is the word for people in the local dialect and he was saying that an era in which people had to be afraid of people they did not know had arrived. The title of Mainali’s book comes from this conversation, and captures the fear that was the essence of the war years. Six and a half years later, Julfe Sarki has aged quite a bit, and does not remember them. “*Ma hopeless mā paḍigayā thiyā,*” (p. 303) he explains, using the English word hopeless and local dialect to mean that he was frazzled. But the fear he experiences is not unique to him, many people run away from Mainali’s crew when they see their tripods, and the journalists themselves are afraid, often faking bravado to save themselves from the hostile behavior of soldiers on either side.

During the same trip, Mainali’s crew also meets a young boy of 15 or 16 who is selling apples. He needs an additional 26 rupees to buy the shoes he wants. Mainali’s team buys his apples, but the boy, Bhakta Bahadur, is unable to buy the shoes he wants. He goes home to news that his father has been killed by the state forces. A year after his father died, Bhatka Bahadur goes to India with a neighbor to work as a laborer. He cannot afford to take the bus, so he ends up walking three days to get there.

Eighteen months after her husband’s death, Bhakta Bahadur’s mother Rauli Devi is still shattered by her husband’s death, and alarmed because her children seem to have forgotten their father. However, she had managed to pick up the broken pieces of her family, sending her youngest two children to Dhangadi, where a local organization will send them to school. In Chait 2065 v.s. (spring 2009), Mainali finds Rauli Devi’s house deserted. She has moved to Dhangadi to see if she can find any luck there, and to try to give her youngest son, the only child that remains with her, something of a future.

Mainali, a well-known journalist whose stories featured extensively in the media during the conflict, depicts atrocities committed by both the security forces and the armed rebels, and tells a complete story of how the war ravaged the lives of ordinary Nepalis. Each story is as heartbreaking as the other; there is a woman who, in shock after her husband's death, has forgotten her own name, and many children who have stopped going to school because they need to support their families after the death of their fathers. Mainali visits some of his subjects multiple times between 2002 and 2009. Although you have to turn back pages when characters reemerge, you are invested in their recovery. Their stories are telling of the lasting impact of the war.

The joint winner of the 2071 v.s. Padma Shree literary award, *Māñṭhā Darāyeko Jug* is a valuable resource for looking into a people's history of the recent conflict in Nepal. It gives voice to people who are frequently left out of dominant discourse and unaccounted for in decision-making. *Māñṭhā Darāyeko Jug* makes us revisit the human costs of the conflict and is itself a plea for peace and justice.

By describing each encounter in detail, Mainali evokes an emotional response from his readers. Some things stick for a long time after reading the book. "*Makana mārīlānus, hajur ho*" (Please kill me, sirs) [p. 131]. Amrita, the widow of Padam, who was tortured and killed by the state's security forces in Bajura, cries. Just one day ago, she had begged a group of soldiers to kill her too, if they were going to kill her husband. But they spare her, and leave her hurting. A year and a half later, she tells Mainali "*Makana daivale ruwāyeko hoina...sarkārle ruwāyeko ho*" (God didn't make me cry, the state/government did) [p. 259].

Ten years after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in November 2006 to end the Maoist conflict, we are caught up in a flurry of political jargons and analysis. Surely the conflict did change the fabric of Nepali society in a way that directly and indirectly paved way for many political changes, but its human cost must not be forgotten.

**Aditi Adhikari**  
Kathmandu