

PLA women's experiences of war and peace

Interview with Lila Sharma

Lila Sharma 'Asmita' is head of the Former PLA Women's Academy, an organisation set up to help former women fighters of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA). She was a Brigade Vice-Commander in the PLA at the time the combatants entered the cantonments. Born and raised in Dang district, just south of the Maoist heartland of Rolpa, she was the first woman to rise to the rank of battalion commander in the Maoist 'base areas' of mid-western Nepal.

On PLA recruitment after ceasefire

We enticed people into the PLA by saying that if they enlisted, they could later join the Nepali Army. At that time, anyone who helped us, people who cooked food for us, provided shelter or guided us along the trails, all asked us to take their children. When we were coming from the Gandak region, I had a force of 100–125. By the time I entered the Sangram barrack in Dang, I was leading 500.

On joining the Young Communist League (YCL)

We were persuaded to enter the cantonments by being told that the Constituent Assembly was our primary agenda. One group would stay outside to force the CA election should the other parties oppose it. The other group would be involved in training in the cantonments. The question was, who would stay outside? It was decided that the more active among us would come out. So, I with a few of my female colleagues came out in the open as the YCL. We decided not to join the verification process and, after setting up the brigade barracks in Dang, I left the cantonment.

The commanders chose some of us for a political role, and we chose those below us. Of course, we also took into account people's wishes. We selected those who were good at organising, who understood politics.

The ones who had fought in the war generally had to be forced to stay back in the cantonments. They asked if the whole point of joining the fight was for a government job. But the ones who entered the PLA in droves after the People's Movement did not want to come out.

On the political developments

I rejected an offer to become a candidate in the first CA election. I didn't want to go into government, to become a CA member or a minister. My commitment was to the revolution. I am still in the party but I really do not have a deep interest in it now. All the sacrifice, the tears of our comrades, comrades who have been wounded or disabled – there is no sensitivity towards that. There is little reason now to be satisfied with Nepal's political culture – from the Nepali Congress, to the UML [Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist-Leninist], the Maoists or smaller parties.

Since the Kharipati meeting [the national assembly of Maoist cadres in 2008] I have been in agreement with the agenda of Kiran [*nom de guerre* of Mohan Baidya, who led off a splinter Maoist faction in 2012]. I believe that Prachanda Ba [literally, the honorific, father] has deviated from our goal; the party has to change its ways.

On women and the party

There were many women at all levels during the war. But after the peace process started, only those who could talk politics and deal with the media became established. These were generally the men, who were now free since they had wives to look after the children at home, to cook the food. During the war, men and women shared responsibilities, but it turns out that this was not because the men had become enlightened, but because of the situation.

During the war, we gave up everything. I got married after the peace process started, when I was nearing 30. Women in the PLA started getting married then, and immediately started having children. That meant they had to stay at home to look after the family while the men were free to do other things. That's the reason there are very few women active in the party today.

On women's influence post-2006

Not a single woman was included in the negotiating teams at the political level. Neither were any women included in the PLA and Nepali Army teams negotiating the integration process. Prachanda never disagrees with us when we meet him about increasing women's role. Just a few days ago, we had a meeting of the central committee and he said the participation of women would be raised to 33 per cent. But all the while the central committee has been expanded, and women still make up less than 10 per cent. I think there is the feeling that women are perhaps not capable of the job. And, to some extent, it is also true that there are very few women at the grassroots. All the women who joined during the war have since become disheartened and have detached themselves. Very few of the women who were in the PLA are still in touch with the party.

On the breakdown of marriages after 2006

When we started out in Dang, there were few of us women, but many men of marriageable age. We used to receive many proposals. Who could we choose? I could not marry outside the PLA because the villagers would not accept me for being a Maoist. Neither could the men marry outside. When there was no one else, a Bahun man married a Kami woman, a Kami man married a Bahun woman. What else could we do?

Marriages between Dalits ('low caste') and non-Dalits have broken down, but so have all kinds of unions. Let me use a metaphor. Yesterday, there was a room in which everyone lived together – men and women. You had to choose from among them. Now, everyone has come into the open and found there is a great variety outside. As a result, women



have found other partners, and men have too. That is the reality.

On the Ex-PLA Women's Academy

At one of the meetings of women who had been in the PLA [in 2014], we all agreed that we had achieved nothing. We had sacrificed everything: mother, father, husband, children. We still have bullets in our body, we are disabled, we are still injured. We decided to set up an organisation through which we would preserve our history since we are living proof that women are capable of fighting. So, we decided to set up a museum for ourselves.

There was also the question of who is a PLA woman and who is not. For us, the UN's verification is not important. For us, anyone who fought, even if it was for just two months, they are ex-PLA. In our estimation, in total – counting every woman who worked over the 10 years of the fighting, who left after being wounded, and so on – there are around 10,000 of us.

Not only would the organisation help ex-PLA women but also work against violence against women in society. My friends did not believe the party would provide any help. But we hoped to seek funds to help the women and their children. We have not been successful so far but we have set our priorities and have also made plans and policies.

We have identified five issues. First, the biggest need for women at the moment is counselling. Second, training to make them self-reliant. Third, work to end violence against women, particularly rape. Fourth, seek cheap loans and help women to become entrepreneurs. Fifth, find schools that are willing to help the children of those who are fully incapable, such as when both parents have been paralysed after being injured in the war.