

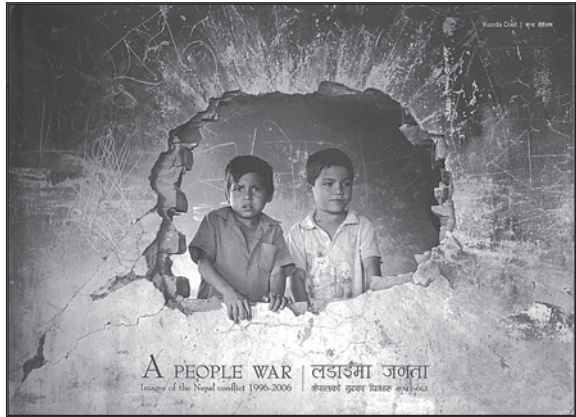
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‘Impartial’? No, this is a tribute to a people’s suffering

A People War: Images of the Nepal conflict 1996-2006, edited by Kunda Dixit. Kathmandu: Publication Nepa-laya, 2007, 215 pp. ISBN 9994620851

KUNDA DIXIT is a remarkable journalist and an inspiring communications innovator. He has been one of the visionary writers who have been able to make sense of development journalism and development communication theory and translate this into practice. A decade before this book, his *Dateline.Earth: Journalism.as.if.the.planet.mattered* (1996) became a sought after classic and should be in every South Pacific newsroom (but is actually in very few).

It should also be widely cited in Australian and New Zealand jour-



nalism schools as well. Reading it would contribute to more perceptive reportage of the region by young journalists. Dixit’s prophetic view that issues such as jungle families sickened by mine tailings, peasants impoverished by global free trade, countries harmed by toxic waste and general environmental neglect were often ignored is now widely accepted in the region with a wider range of environmental and human rights reporting now a normative.

Climate change has contributed to a paradigm shift. Chapter headings such as ‘Mass media and mass ignorance’, ‘Journalists without borders’ and ‘Development deadlock’ were indicators of his underlying message about how to make journalism more relevant to solutions rather than problems.

Although much of his work has been based in Southeast Asia, he has



This young girl in a village on the outskirts of Kathmandu carried fodder for the family livestock in 2004. She broke down in tears while telling visiting journalists how her classmates were forcibly taken away from school by Maoists to an indoctrination camp two days' walk away.

also had some forays in the South Pacific and has contributed in the past to *Pacific Journalism Review* (1995). As a Nepali journalist he has lived his mission as something of a role model as a ‘new order’ humanitarian journalist.

After working as Asia-Pacific director of the Inter Press Service out of Bangkok and Manila, he returned to his Himalayan kingdom in 1996—just as the Maoist rebels were raiding their first police stations—to establish Panos South Asia, where he was director until 2000. A decade on, Dixit became editor of the *Nepali Times* and produced this book, which is an impressive example of how conflict reporting should be—focused on the people actually affected.

The title is derived from the decade-long war waged in the name of the Nepali people. As Dixit notes, ‘the Maoists called their revolution the “people’s war”, which was appropriate, because it was mostly the people who died and suffered’. Some 15,000 people died in the conflict, mostly non-combatants. Thousands were orphaned, widowed and bereaved. Millions became displaced people. A shocking upheaval for a mountainous nation that had not been caught in the grip of a real war since the Anglo-Nepal wars of 1814-16. Dixit writes in the introduction:

Since then, Nepalis have been fighting other people’s battles, laying down their lives for countries other than their own. This is the first time in nearly two centuries that we have seen the motherland soaked in blood, our own blood. (p. 3)

It was against a ‘backdrop of democratic disarray in the capital and a spreading insurgency in the countryside that the royal massacre took place’ in Kathmandu on 1 June 2001: ‘In just over five minutes on that bloody Friday, King Birenda’s bloodline was nearly wiped out’ (p. 9).

But the period of authoritarianism, oppression and eventual dictatorship that followed was disastrous. King Gyanendra ‘miscalculated on two fronts’ when he imposed martial law on 1 February 2005. He had expected that the international community would back him for ‘rescuing the country from terrorism’, and that the Nepali people distrusted the main political parties so much that they would join his fight against the Maoists. He was wrong on both counts.

When the royal coup crushed opposition and dissent, ‘peace’ protests escalated into massive demonstrations against the royal regime: ‘Community radio, television stations and a defiant press relayed news and printed pictures of the rallies and the govern-

ment's crackdowns, keeping Nepalis fully engaged' (p. 13).

Thrust into this national crisis, there was no way Dixit was going to be sucked into 'parachute' reportage and flying out to 'file a dispatch with the sterile detached writing we were trained for in journalism school' (p. 18). Here was an opportunity to honour his journalistic ideals and live and work the example he had so often written about.

Nepal forced me to relearn journalism. I couldn't be just an aloof observer, this required the 'journalism of attachment'. To try to get inside the story and live it, not just point out the problems but present solutions. Highlight the ordeal of people who have persevered against all odds to survive and make things better. The media doesn't just hold a mirror to society, it is the mirror. Traditional ambulance-chasing body-bag journalism doesn't help us to find peace. A gripping visual or soundbite, or a juicy quote, may actually distort reality, because by being selective about the facts we report, we may end up telling lies. (p. 19)

Dixit's warns that this does not mean reporters should be waving the flag to 'deliberately take sides, distort the truth, or deliberately promote a cause' (p. 21). He argues that media needs a set of values to sustain itself.

He adds that in a society cursed with extreme inequality, this often means 'to speak for the last and the least heard'.

For this book's portrayal of the 'people war', journalists and photographers from across the country were invited to send their pictures. A three-member international committee made the final selection of 179 pictures for *A People War*, whittled down the choice from some 2561 photographs submitted for the project. Besides Dixit, on the editing team were Shahidul Alam, a Bangladeshi photographer, writer and activist with a special interest in education, new media and ICT; and Shyam Tekwani, assistant professor in photojournalism at the School of Communication Studies in Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Tekwani was the only correspondent to cover the fighting in Jaffna from the Tamil Tigers' side. The choice of pictures in *A People War*, was a difficult challenge:

We have tried to choose the pictures that contextualise Nepal's politics, society and culture to show how they were affected by the conflict. We tried to avoid sensationalism and clichés. War is not pretty, and it is not a challenge to take pictures of corpses. The real test is to take pictures that grab the decisive moment, deliver the

message sharply and without ambiguity, while at the same time being tasteful and subtle. (p. 24)

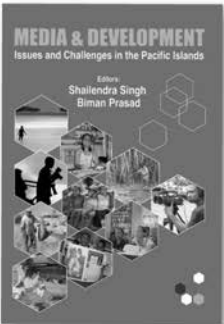
This evocative and inspirational objective has certainly been achieved. And this war's iconic imagery has been captured as a lasting tribute to the people's suffering and the resourcefulness in adversity.

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