

## 'Still disappeared': reconstructing the 1990 'truth commission' in Nepal

Carles Fernández-Torné

School of Communication and International Relations, Blanquerna University-Ramon Llull,  
Barcelona, Spain

**Abstract:** Experts agree that in 1990, Nepal established a truth commission to investigate disappearances that allegedly happened between 1960 and 1990. Little is known about this truth-seeking mechanism. Most of what has been published refers to the Mallik Commission, a better-known commission established also in 1990. This Research Note presents new data on the Committee on Disappearances. It examines the process through which the Committee came to be and speculates that the main purpose for its establishment might have been to examine the disappearances of seven people in relation to the 1985 bombing, a series of explosions targeting the monarchy. The Note presents the main findings compiled in the Committee's final report and examines the reasons why the final report was never published.

**Keywords:** Truth commissions; Nepal; disappearances; authoritarianism; civil society

### Introduction

In 1990, Nepal went through a transition from Panchayat, a partyless authoritarian regime centred in the figure of the King, to a constitutional monarchy with a multiparty political system. The change of regime was articulated through a people's movement (jana andolan), a popular protest that started on 18 February 1990. The movement ended on 16 April 1990, when King Birendra announced the dissolution of the National Legislature and other structures, officially abolishing the Panchayat regime. Three days later, on 19 April, an interim government was formed with representatives of political parties, civil society and two members nominated by the King.

The interim government established two commissions. First, it established the Commission formed to investigate the damage inflicted to life and property as a consequence of the various incidents that occurred throughout the nation in the course of the Jana Andolan. This is popularly known as the Mallik Commission, after the name of its chairperson, Appeal Court judge Janardan Mallik. The Mallik Commission was established due to civil society pressure on the interim government to address state sponsored violence during the popular protest. Over the two months of protests, 45 people were killed and thousands injured by the police's use of excessive force. The interim government also established a second and less known committee to investigate disappearances during the Panchayat regime, between 1960 and 1990, named the Committee to investigate persons disappeared in the course of restoration of democracy (hereinafter 'Committee on Disappearances'). It is this Committee that forms the focus of this Research Note.

Transitional justice experts list the Committee on Disappearances as a truth commission (Hayner 2002, 2011; Freeman 2006; Backer 2009; Brahm 2009; Amnesty International 2010; Dancy, Kim, and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2010; Bakiner 2014, 2016). Indeed, the Committee fulfils the core

criteria common to the definitions of a truth commission (TC) as proposed by experts. First, it is a mechanism established anew and for a specific task, which determines its temporary, non-permanent existence. Second, it examined past events. Third, its power or right to be was given by the state in which the violations occurred. Fourth, it was established to investigate. Fifth, it investigated a pattern of infringement of rights over a period of time, where at a minimum, the state was one of the perpetrators (Hayner 2002, 14; 2011, 11–2; Freeman 2006, 18; Dancy, Kim, and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2010, 49). More generally, the Committee on Disappearances fitted the requirement of being established during a transition, in this case from authoritarian rule to democracy. Although the Mallik Commission would have also fulfilled these core criteria, the Committee on Disappearances was the one that made it to the list of internationally recognised TCs.

### **The Committee on Disappearances in the literature**

The Committee on Disappearances is not mentioned in relevant academic works covering the People's Movement of 1990 and the ensuing transition from autocratic rule to multiparty democracy (Hutt 1994; Parajulee 2000). When mentioned, it is merely to state that such a mechanism was established to investigate disappearances that occurred during the Panchayat regime (Brown [1996] 2010, 148). The Committee is not mentioned either in an often-cited study on impunity that centres around measures adopted to confront human rights violations committed during the 1990 transition (Bhattarai et al. 1999) or in a study dealing with the role of Nepali civil society in democratisation (Shrestha 1998).

International human rights organisations investigating cases of enforced disappearances have referred to this Committee through second-hand accounts. The most accurate description appears in the report 'Nepal Human Rights Concerns' (Amnesty International 1992). The report does mention some of the members that conformed this committee; the fact that they interviewed people who witnessed the arrests or who saw the 'disappeared' while in detention; and, based on secondary information, it speculates that the Committee's report contains a body of evidence implicating the security forces in the torture and 'disappearance' of detainees (Amnesty International 1992, 25). A more recent report by the International Commission of Jurists on commissions of inquiry in Nepal, limits the information to the names of the Committee members and the finding that 35 persons were disappeared at the hands of the state, out of which five were killed and the status of the others remains unknown (International Commission of Jurists 2012, 36).

Surprisingly, the fact that the Committee on Disappearances has been catalogued as an early TC has led to its examination in the transitional justice literature. However, most of what has been attributed to the Committee on Disappearances relates to the Mallik Commission. The limited publicity of the final report of these two mechanisms along with the fact that none of the reports have been translated to English has limited the information available. In fact, most of the current studies that refer to the Committee on Disappearances have probably relied on the information available in Hayner's seminal work on TCs (Hayner 2002, 57).

According to Hayner, Nepal had a TC in 1990–1991, the Commission on Inquiry to Find the Disappeared Persons during the Panchayat Period. At least in four areas Hayner attributes to the Committee on disappearances facts that relate to the Mallik Commission. First, that the Committee on Disappearances was a commission of inquiry (COI) when it was not. The difference is relevant as only COI, such as the Mallik Commission, are established under the 1969 COI Act with the corresponding powers of subpoena, search and seizure (Commission of Inquiry

Act 1969, art.4). Second, information related to the resignation of pro-human rights commissioners, the dissolution of the commission and the establishment of a second one, also refers to the Mallik commission. Third, Hayner's argument that civil society pressure finally led to the report being released in 1994 also relates to the Mallik Commission. The Committee on Disappearances report was never published. It was the Mallik Commission's report that was published in 1994 by a human rights organisation after making copies of the report stored at the Parliament Secretariat (INHURED International 1995, 24). Finally, Hayner's observation that 'few of its recommendations were implemented' appears again to refer to the Mallik Commission's report, as the report of the Committee on Disappearances did not include any recommendation.

I decided to clarify these points in Hayner's book because they are widely spread in influential sources like the United States Institute of Peace's Truth Commissions Collection (United States Institute of Peace 2021, Commission of Inquiry: Nepal 90). The literature on transitional justice also conflates both mechanisms. Some refer to the Committee on Disappearances as mandated to 'investigate the loss of lives and damage to property during the People's Movement' (Bakiner 2016, 166), which was the mandate of the Mallik Commission. Others refer to the Committee on Disappearances as 'named the Mallik Commission after the judge who headed it' and attributing the findings of the latter to the former (Sajjad 2013, 37).

### **What was the Committee on disappearances? Reconstructing the 1990 TC in Nepal (1)**

In this section, I review key components of the Committee and argue that its primary aim was to investigate the disappearance of seven people who were detained in relation to the 1985 bombing. The episode of the bombing itself has significance for ending the non-violent civil disobedience movement or satyagraha called by the Nepali Congress (NC) on 23 May 1985 and supported by other political parties. The aim of satyagraha was to demand the Panchayat government to lift the ban on political parties and to restore the respect for fundamental rights. Even though the top leaders of the NC were detained, the movement continued over the following weeks with wide-spread support, especially in the urban areas. On 20 and 21 June 1985, a series of bomb explosions targeting the monarchy hit Kathmandu and various other cities. As a result of these explosions, the NC cancelled the satyagraha and many saw the 1985 bombings as a conspiracy to stop the social movement for democracy.

The number of arrests after the bombing was massive. On 25 August 1985, the then Minister of Home Affairs acknowledged that 1,750 people had been detained for questioning (Amnesty International 1992, 14). Eventually, 23 were convicted and sentenced from three years to life imprisonment. After the end of the Panchayat regime, there were calls to pardon those still in prison. They were finally pardoned in June 1991 (Amnesty International 1992, 13). However, seven people who had been arrested for questioning remained disappeared. They are Ishwar Chandra Lama, Padam Bahadur Moktan, Dilip Chaudhari, Saket Chandra Mishra, Dr. Lakshmi Narayan Jha, Satya Narayan Shah, and Surya Nath Rao (Yadav). The disappearance of these seven people became the main focus of the Committee.

### **Establishment, mandate, and Committee members**

The Committee on Disappearances was established on 31 July 1990 to investigate disappearances that happened between 15 December 1960 and 8 April 1990. Evidence collected suggests that pressure from human rights organisations led the government to establish it. According to former Committee member Basudev Dhungana, 'the committee was not formed

so easily. It was formed after pressure was put by the various human rights organizations and other sectors' (interview Dhun-gana in INSEC 1999, 11). Specifically, national human rights organisations with strong links to main-stream political parties, HURON and FOPHUR, were crucial to establish this committee. Sushil Pyakhurel, at that time with FOPHUR, recalls,

We talked to Krishna Prasad Bhattarai [then Prime Minister from the NC], Radha Krishna Mainali, Nilambar Acharya and Sahana Pradhan [all three from the United Left Front]. We got support from Kapil Shrestha [from HURON] and others. We lobbied to the government and it formed the commission (personal interview Pyakhurel, 2014).

Beyond the push from civil society organisations, there was also public pressure to find the whereabouts of the seven disappeared in relation to the 1985 bombing. Former Committee member, Dr. S.K. Pahari, explained,

Personally I feel, there were few individual for whom there was a great demand from the people side to know what had happened to them. Government had not declared if they were dead or alive (...). Only few persons, seven, eight people, Dr. Jha, Shaket Mishra, they were main figures and government had to answer what had happened to them (personal interview Pahari, 2014).

The Nepal Medical Association had also been demanding the Panchayat government to provide information about the present condition and to release immediately Dr. Laxmi Narayan Jha (Adams 1998, 118–19). International human rights organisations were following closely the fate of these seven disappeared. In 1987, Amnesty International had published the report 'Nepal: A pattern of Human Rights Violations' with detailed information of its investigation on these seven dis-appearances (Amnesty International 1992, 13).

The Committee had the specific mandate to 'investigate into the cases of disappeared persons as a result of various actions in the course of the restoration of democracy and to present a report to the Majesty's Government' (Final Report of the Committee on Disappearances 1991, preface). It was not tasked to make recommendations on any matter. Rather, it was understood that once the committee submitted its report, the government had the responsibility to conduct further investigation or take other appropriate actions (interview Dhungana in INSEC 1999, 15). Committee members included Surya Bahadur Shakya, vice-chancellor of Tribhuvan University; Basudev Prasad Dhungana, senior advocate; Dr. S.K. Pahari, president of the Nepal Medical Association and royal physician; Prakash Kafle, from the human rights organisation FOPHUR and Ananda Mohan Bhattarai, lawyer and com-mittee secretary. The Committee commenced its work only on 4 November 1990, almost three months after its establishment (Final Report of the Committee on Disappearances 1991, 1).

Although officially created by the Council of Ministers, the Committee on Disappearances was not established under the 1969 COI Act, and thus did not have powers bestowed to bodies established under the Act. In this regard, Hiranya Lal Shrestha describes the committee 'more like a civil society committee, non-government investigation; not empowered as the Mallik commission; formed by the government and supported by the civil society, but without a strong legal mandate' (personal inter-view Shrestha, 2015). To overcome this lack of power, some of the committee members used their previous relationship with the Panchayat regime. For example, senior lawyer Basudev Dhungana had been a minister during Panchayat regime and the Vice-Chairperson of the National Legislature (per-sonal interview Shrestha, 2015). Dr. S.K. Pahari was the royal physician and President of the Nepal Medical Association in 1990. Ananda Mohan Bhattarai, the Committee Secretary, was formerly working in the jaheri bibhag, an appeal mechanism that allowed the King to overrule decisions by the Supreme Court. Therefore, while committee members were from civil society, most had links with key personnel from the

former Panchayat regime. These links became a strength for the Committee when dealing with state officials.

### **Access to state officials**

The Ministry of Home Affairs sent a circular to the concerned authorities, asking them to cooperate with the Committee. Nevertheless, even if anybody refused to provide all relevant information, the Committee did not have the power to put additional pressure or to take any action (interview Dhungana in INSEC 1999, 12). Still, regarding the seven disappearances in relation to the 1985 bombings, the Committee received documentation on detention facilities, records of the detainees, and had access to police officers who had been in charge of detention centres from where people had disappeared.

Hiranya Lal Shrestha notes the role of Basudev Dhungana, one of committee members who had been a Minister during the Panchayat regime, as one factor for state officials being ready to attend the requirements by the Committee. He stated, 'Dhungana was former Minister and he had very good rapport. Even CDOs [Chief District Officers], Police Chiefs could communicate with him' (personal interview Shrestha, 2015).

Committee member Dr. Pahari explained how his prior role as a palace doctor gave him an advantage when meeting key figures. He recalls,

When we gave reasons, why we wanted to meet (...), they might hesitate to come out with 100 per cent truth. This was the reason why D.B. Lama [former Inspector General of Police in 1985 who at the time of the inquiry was imprisoned on the basis of corruption charges] called me for a second time. He thought he had not vomited out sincerely in front of the group, so he sent a message he will come out with more truth if he could see me one-to-one (personal interview Pahari, 2014).

Nevertheless, the Committee on Disappearance did not have access to the palace or the Nepal Army. Sushil Pyakhurel who supported the Committee's work, remembers, 'everybody would say: yes, it happened but we got [an] order from above. What is above? Above means the King, but we didn't have access [to him]' (personal interview Pyakhurel, 2014).

### **Findings in the Final Report**

On 21 April 1991, the Committee on Disappearances submitted its report to the interim government. The Committee registered a total of 205 cases of disappearances. It investigated 61 cases. In 35 out of 61 cases, the investigation was completed. In 26 cases, the investigation was still pending at the time the report was submitted to the government, on 21 April 1991.

The Committee classified 61 disappearances into 5 groups: (a) 9 persons who were disappeared during confrontation with the army or disappeared after being arrested by the army; (b) 14 persons disappeared who were involved in political activities, but who could not be confirmed that they were arrested by security forces at the time of their disappearance; (c) 5 persons had disappeared and found to have died; (d) 26 persons that include those whose information were received too late to undertake detailed investigation and those whose cases remained incompletely investigated due to inadequate support; and (e) 7 persons who were arrested and disappeared during the 1985 bombings.

Although the Committee's report discussed all these categories of cases, it mainly focused on the seven disappeared in relation to the 1985 bombings. Half of the report (page 5–65) refers to 54 cases of disappearances with very little detail, sometimes only a few lines. The other half of the report (page 65–129) examines thoroughly the seven disappearances linked to the 1985

bombings. The second volume of the report provides testimonies and documents related only to these seven dis-appearances.<sup>2</sup> In short, it would seem that Committee members decided to focus their investigation on the seven disappearances.

### **The Findings on the seven**

The Committee's report disclosed new facts and evidence surrounding the enforced disappearances of these seven detainees. It demonstrated the seven had been arrested by state agents. It also traced and documented how they were moved from one detention centre to another until the last place where they were kept without evidence of release. The report presents evidence obtained from fellow detainees that some of the disappeared had been severely tortured while in detention. Further, the Committee found that the police had forged the signature of one of the detainees on a document showing his release as well as the signature of a police officer who allegedly acted as a witness to the release. S.K. Pahari, former Committee member, recalls,

It was very difficult to take the truth out because maximum what you can do is trace. The seven were taken from here to there and from there no one knows what happened. We could trace them, but not to get the final answer (personal interview Pahari, 2014).

The report did speculate with their fate by concluding 'that a decision regarding these persons must have been made at a high-profile policymaking and implementation level and that these persons must have experienced the same results' (Final Report of the Committee on Disappearances 1991, 129). While not stating that the seven had been killed, the report did refer to the practice by security forces of killing politically active citizens. Others had previously referred to the existence of anti-national elements elimination committees integrated by ex-servicemen to eliminate opposition during Panchayat (Baral [1977] 2006, 62). The report states,

During the Panchayat era, there was a custom for the government's agents to secretly kill people who were involved in politics that was opposed to the state power; to arrest and disappear them; and to destroy proof and evidence (Final Report of the Committee on Disappearances 1991, preface).

The report did name police officers under whose command those who had been detained disappeared as well as administrators at the zonal and district levels. Due to lack of publicity of the report, the fact that perpetrators were named did not entail any real accountability.

### **Follow up to the Committee's findings**

After the submission of the report by the Committee, the interim government did not take any action. As one of the committee members expressed,

We submitted it to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister sent it to the Home Minister, and that was it; no action was taken thereafter. The government did not send the report to the Attorney General for further actions (inter-view Dhungana in INSEC 1999, 15).

Another former committee member recalled,

We were ready to make the report public and call a press conference. All of a sudden it was postponed. We never had a press conference. It was the duty of the government to call a press conference and make it open [to the public]. [That the report] was incomplete, that was the pretension they [the government] put forward [not to release it to the public]. We had the answer, but it never came to the public (personal interview Pahari, 2014).

Despite the efforts by committee members, the report was not published. As a former committee member stated,

We put a lot of pressure [on the government] to bring this report before the general public. We even issued press statements. We provided information for the public through that press statement. But still, no other additional information other than that was made public (interview Dhungana in INSEC 1999, 15).

Significantly, there was no pressure by civil society or human rights groups to compel the government to publish the report or to take action against those named in the report. Sushil Pyakhurel, who supported the Committee, gives two reasons for not putting pressure after the report was submitted: '[first] the priority was to cultivate a weak democracy; and, second, civil society was weak at the time' (personal interview Pyakhurel, 2014). Those interviewed in relation to the Committee appear to agree that one of the reasons for the lack of interest by the media was the fact that on 21 April 1991, at the time of the submission of the report, Nepal was already in election mood. Political parties had started campaigning for the 12 May elections, the first democratic elections since 1959.

However, lack of pressure from civil society to the government to publish the report needs to be framed within the compromised nature of the 1990 transition from Panchayat to multiparty democracy. The 1990 movement ended in a compromise which included the King and his people and this compromise was designed to bring about a mutual reduction in risks; consequently, the guilty could not be punished because they were party to the compromise (Brown 1996, 148). This compromise was articulated in the November 1990 constitution that generally favoured the demands of the Democracy Movement but still reserved important powers and privileges for the monarchy (Hutt 1991, 1035).

In this context, publishing a report that named alleged perpetrators within the police and state officials also meant holding the Panchayat regime, and ultimately the King, accountable. Particularly, because those named were responsible for the disappearances in response to the 1985 bombings that had targeted the monarchy. According to the secretary of the Committee, in five of the seven cases, there was enough evidence to prosecute those responsible (personal interview Bhattarai, 2014). Radha Krishna Mainali, acting chairperson of the United Left Front during the Jana Andolan, stated that the Disappearances Committee report became controversial. According to him, 'the government hid the report and put it aside' (personal interview Mainali, 2015).

Importantly, this compromise also affected civil society and human rights activists, as they also had their political affiliation. Some of them were political party members. With the end of Panchayat and the ban on political parties lifted, these activists became officially political party members who had to follow the party discipline. Such party discipline was dependent on the compromise political leaders had reached with the king, which excluded any prospect of prosecuting figures from the previous regime (Fernandez Torne 2019, 37).

## Conclusion

The Committee on Disappearances is one of the less known TCs both inside and outside Nepal. The Research Note sheds light on the work of this Committee, the way it was established, who were its members, and its primary focus on investigating the disappearance of seven people who were detained in relation to the 1985 bombing. The article argues that the lack of any follow-up measure by the government to publish the report and to punish perpetrators needs to be circumscribed within the compromised nature of the 1990 transition from Panchayat to multiparty democracy. A compromise that also affected civil society and human rights activists, as they had their political affiliation and had to follow the party discipline. As a result, the whereabouts of those disappeared remain, still today, unknown.

Fast forward thirty-two years and thousands of Nepali families are no closer to knowing the truth of what happened to their missing loved during the decade-long armed conflict that ended in 2006. This time around, the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons has made public a list of 2506 persons who were allegedly made disappeared, either by the state security personnel or the rebelling armed party. Still, the new Commission has failed to establish what happened to a single victim, and nobody has been held accountable. This time around, however, it is victims who persevere in their demands for a credible process to learn the truth of what happened to their loved ones. Fifteen years after the peace agreement, it is finally time for the government of Nepal to fulfil those demands.

## Notes

1. Documental sources were originally in Nepali language. Parts of book one and two of the Committee on Disappearances' final report (around 30,000 words) and a written interview to a committee member were translated to English.
2. In the second volume, Annex 1 includes 39 documents under the heading 'Statements and responses provided by former and incumbent police officers and other officers in the context of 1985 bombings.' Annex 2, 43 documents under the heading 'Important statements, affidavits and responses relating to individuals in the context of 1985 bombings.' Annex 3, 22 documents under the heading 'Important documents.'

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## **Appendix. List of people interviewed**

1. Bhattarai, Ananda Mohan. Secretary of the 'Committee to investigate persons disappeared in the course of restoration of democracy'. 9 April 2014, Kathmandu.
2. Mainali, Radha Krishna. Acting chairperson of the United Left Front, during the People's Movement. 25 March 2015, Kathmandu.
3. Pahari, Sachche Kumar. Member of the 'Committee on to investigate persons disappeared in the course of restoration of democracy'. Royal physician and President of the Nepal Medical Association in 1990. 10 April 2014, Kathmandu.
4. Pyakhurel, Sushil. As a member of the Forum for the Protection of Human Rights (FOPHUR), he collaborated with Prakash Kafle, one of the members of the 'Committee to investigate persons disappeared in the course of restoration of democracy'. 16 April 2014, Kathmandu.
5. Shrestha, Hiranya Lal. Member of Parliament from Mawanpur in the first Parliament 1991. Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs and Human Rights committee of the House of Representatives. 26 March 2015, Kathmandu.