

## In search of reconciliation

**Peace is the highest common denominator for former warriors**  
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It was no ordinary gathering. There were three ex-People's Liberation Army soldiers, three ex-Nepal Army soldiers, one Madhesi Student Front leader, one United Tharu National Front leader, a bunch of poets, musicians and community peace workers. What they had in common was a commitment to peace.

They were gathered to address issues of truth, justice, mercy and peace and craft it into a song. For three days, they camped, ate and sang together. They shared stories of their childhood and diverse backgrounds. They narrated personal accounts of trauma caused by violence. They threw hard questions at each other. Are you a Tharu, or are you a madhesi? Why did you join the PLA? Who would you vote for?



**Kumar takes a trust fall, to be caught by co-participants. He joined the Maoists in 1993 and served in the PLA for one-and-half years. He recently returned home to get married and then left for India to look for work. Kumar is 16 and his wife 15. He is back home now and does not wish to return to the cantonment. Many youngsters like Kumar are returning home from the conflict to marry early and migrating abroad for work in the hope that they don't have to be guerrillas again.**



**Ajeet K.L. Karna (pictured right) is the General Secretary of the Madhesi Student Front. He says his political awakening came when he was severely**

Amidst differences, they found common ground. Everyone wanted security, food, shelter, clothing and education for their children. Everyone wanted respect and dignity as a Nepali citizen, despite ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation.

The retreat was organised by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) which works towards transforming the way people deal with conflict in various parts of the world. In Burundi, the group played a key role in breaking down ethnic fears and hatred. In Macedonia, its popular children's television series helped change the attitude of children towards those of other ethnic groups.

In Nepal SFCG's activities are aimed at fostering conditions in which armed conflict can be resolved in a way that addresses root causes of

**beaten up in Kathmandu during the Hrithik Roshan Riots because he "looked Indian". Ajeet is from Siraha but grew up in Tanahu.**

Transforming conflict can be as simple as reframing a situation, creating a new context in which people attack problems, rather than each other.

At this time of critical political and social polarisation, some may find reconciliation naïve. After a week of working together, wouldn't participants find themselves back at square one? A week after the gathering, participant Ajeet K L Karna, the General Secretary of the Madhesi Student Front, was in Biratnagar for an important unification meeting of three madhesi student organisations. "My perception of the Tharu issue has completely changed," he says, "so far we have responded to problems emotionally. I realise now we must be practical and there must be dialogue." Karna says singing the jhijiya song made him feel positive about the Tharus. Ex- PLA soldier Kumar wonders: "If we could sit together like this more often and really listen to each other would things be different? I realize that we all want the same things."



**Ex-army soldier Suman (above, left) and former Maoist fighter Raju participate in a trust building exercise. Both have left their armies and work as human rights advocates in their respective communities.**

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