A Eulogy on the Great King Prithvinarayan Shah

By C. R. Swaminathan

The figure of the fame of ancient kings, having got reflected in the mirror of belles lettres continues to maintain the image even after those kings are no more alive.” Great personalities, particularly benevolent rulers of the past have attained immortality through the magic touch of the poetic muse. One such personality in the history of Nepal is that of Prithvinarayan Shah, founder of the present ruling dynasty of Nepal and the great unifier of this Himalayan country. Many a contemporary and later poet has sung the glories of the life of this adventurous Gorkha leader and many a story is current even to this day centring around his dynamic personality. Prithivindra-varnanodaya is a poem in eulogy of the great leader of men written by a contemporary poet Lalitavallabha Kavi.

A manuscript of this work is preserved in the National Archives of Nepal at Kathmandu, bearing the number १९६ (formerly of the Bir Pustakalaya). It represents the entire text comprising 102 verses divided into three chapters besides a post-script. There is every reason to believe that the manuscript under discussion is the original one written by the poet’s own hand and submitted to the king for perusal. The other work of the same author on the conquest of Bhaktapur by Prithvinarayan Shah, entitled “Bhaktavijaya Kavya” has already been published. The post-script appended to the manuscript under discussion states that the author was disappointed when he first presented the poem to the king for the latter, pressed for time, was scarcely able to more than run his eyes over its pages. It is quite probable that Lalitavallabha resubmitted it to the monarch along which the post-script which records his frustration as follows:–

(राज)नू श्री रमणाखुल्तेच गुणोऽस्मतिः संलोकिते भास्करी देन काठे (आततहः) भूतविचयं पृथ्वीनवर्णोदयम् अश्व लच्छुति तीर्थे………… जितजनस्थि चलाई विना अयो शोककुशानुसारतं (दलं) हुस्तेद्य हा भरम्

In these lines the poet clearly states that he had composed Bhaktavijaya and Prithivindra Varnanodaya in praise of the king, since his poetic talents were inspired by the qualities of the monarch to undertake the endeavour. Both of these works were presented to him in the hope that they would claim his attention, and even perusal.

The fact that they were only looked at and were not heard (read) caused him considerable mental anguish.

He further states that there is nothing to compare with the frustration a poet feels when his composition is not appreciated:–

कविताय दमक्षिण्यानां न चापण भोजनं:। किरणक्षिणस्यावथानो न नारायणस्य भोजनं:।

“Fire can be put out by waters and the burning hunger can be quenched by a quick supply of food. The fire of futility of one’s poetic efforts cannot be put out either by water or by food.”

It is quite probable that, soon after capturing power from the three local monarchs of Kan-

1. S. No. 27 of Gorkha Granthamala, V.S. 2009, with Sanskrit commentary by Yogi Naraharinath.
tipur, Bhaktapur and Patan, respectively, the
unifier became very busy in settling down and
establishing his sway over the new territories
and consolidating his position and naturally
perhaps he could not spare as much time as
the author would have desired for such works
of leisure as poetry. It is also probable that a
dynamic warrior like Prithvinarayan Shah could
hardly find the leisure to listen to inclination
and platitudes or put up with sycophancy. Or it
may be that the king who had a refined taste for
things of value did not have the patience or frame
of mind to suffer the prosaic and stereotyped
flattery of a court poet. Though it is not
possible to be definite as to why the poetical
works of Lalitavallabha failed to conceive ade-
quate attention from the king, it may be stated
at once that none of the above conjectures
are meant to be little the literary talents of
the poet in the eyes of the readers. As a
matter of fact, both in the Bhaktavijaya and
Prithvindra Varnanodaya, there are numerous
instances where the author's imagery, ability
of ideas and thoughts and capacity for artistic
expression are fully revealed, and some of
these are dealt with below.

That Prithvinarayan Shah as “an intrepid
soldier and an astute politician did not care
for the niceties of life” is evident from the
inscription at the entrance of the Vasantapur
palace which reads as follows:

रजानसति नो कि विहित विदिष धर्मरथपश्चवादिवाता;
बुद्धवालालागु प्रभुधिलमसह वत्वालाहिणा: ।
दवि देवोपत्तो रिदुद्वदवह प्रदवदवालातो सो ।
पूर्वाचार्यार्येत्य अवति निजपाराकशितुवहोप: ।

He was not like so many other rulers who
took life easy by indulgence in gambling, women
or just relaxation. If one reads the post-script
of Lalitavallabha, bearing the background
outlined above in mind can appreciate the
fate of the works dedicated to the king and
sympathise with the poet's frustration
expressed in it in undertone.

The poem under consideration consists of
102 verses and an additional verse in the form
of a colophon, as against 108 verses in the
Bhaktavijaya Kavya. It is divided into three
chapters, the first being “Sakala Ripukala
Dhwamsana” or “The Vanquishing of All
Enemy Groups”, consisting of 70 verses.
The first 21 verses deal with the ancestry and
birth of Prithvinarayan Shah and his
four brothers, and his ascendency to the
throne of Gorkha on the demise of his
father, Narabhpula Shah. The latter
is described as a powerful but very pious
monarch devoted to Mother Goddess. He ascended
the throne when he was still a boy due to
the untimely demise of his father, Birabhadra
Shah and the old age of his grandfather
Prithvipati Shah. His munificence to the poor
and the needy is specially praised by the poet
in the following lines:

यशस्तात् सत्व मधुरतिः सदमयात्राति निभुरुक्षः
सय: पुकलकंपः पतुतालाकलाधारिते।

(Verse II)

There is a reference to the supernatural
powers of this king with which he was able to cu-
tre dumbness and leprosy. This has also been
stated in the Narabhpula stotra” (National
Archives MS. No. 131) almost in similar
terms by Jagannivasa Kavi.

यशस्तात् बहुः सत्व: सदमनुमुक्तसुतुपादायम्
(Lalitavallabha Verse–)

यथार्थताल्पि पदमयात्सत्व: वदकलादात्नानायान्यः
पुतालात्मित्वेववेदीयमार्दितृहृदमार्दितमार्दितः
मुक्त: बाली तु सव: किषुकत्व बहु निरालम्बिते स्वर्गहि
प्राप्तयत्व: अतासिदिः नृपतिः कुप्रेयोगिकान्तिः।

(Jagannivasa Verse III)

This Jagannivasa claims to be the disciple
of Gokula Vilas’a elder brother (Gokula Vilas-
prajnabhikshata).

Gokula Vilasa was the preceptor of Narabhpula
Shah for initiating the latter in the
Mantra Sastra according to Lalitavallabha.
So it can be concluded that Jagannivasa Kavi
was a younger contemporary of Narabhupala Shah and on the authority of his statement, Lalitavallabha refers to the curative power of the water used for washing the feet of Narabhupala Shah.

In response to his prayers and offerings to the Mother Goddess, Narabhupala Shah was blessed with a son who was destined to play a decisive role in history in the days to come. The poet subscribes to the popular belief that God Narayana Himself was born as Prithviraj Rana Shah. He continues this metaphor throughout the poem.

Prithviraj Rana Shah ascended the Gorkha throne at the demise of his father and began with a determination to unite the numerous small kingdoms of the Himalayan region under his sway. For this he made elaborate preparations for some years (7 years according to some historians) and it was in 1749 that he launched himself upon an expedition towards Nuwakot. In spite of the strong resistance offered by Jayaprabha Malla of Kantipur, he succeeded in capturing the fort of Nuwakot and established himself there by constructing a palace. It was here that his two sons Pratap Singh Shah and Bahadur Shah were born. The poet remembers to describe the new-born prince as the human incarnation of the kaustubha jewel which is inseparable from the chest of Narayana.

Prithviraj Rana Shah's first attempt to capture Kantipur skipped over by the poet by merely saying that he could sow seeds of dissension among the triumvirate of Kantipur, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. Suspecting that Mukand Sen (King of Makwanpur), though a brother-in-law of his, had some allegiance to the Malla rulers of Nepal, Prithviraj Rana Shah attacked and vanquished Bikram Sena, the king of Makwanpur, and held him captive along with his family.

The story goes that Prithviraj Rana Shah was provoked to attack Makwanpur because his brother-in-law Bikram Sena, had turned down with contempt his request for supply of an elephant. The poet, though not openly supporting this tradition, makes a sarcastic reference to it when he says that after capturing the territory of Makwanpur, he was getting hundreds of high class elephants every year.

The annexation of Makwanpur brought Prithviraj Rana Shah for the first time in direct confrontation with the political powers in India. The poet refers to the intervention of Mir Qasim who came with a large army to re-capture Makwanpur but was thoroughly defeated by the Gorkha army. After consolidating his position in the Makwanpur area and exhilarating his prowess in bringing about the discomfiture of the powerful Mir Qasim Prithviraj Rana Shah once again turned his attention towards the valley. He captured Kirtipur as a first step. Even when he reached Kirtipur and ruthlessly destroyed his enemies, the three kings of the Kathmandu valley became panic-stricken. Father Guiseppe describes it almost in similar line when he says “The merciless attack of Kirtipur struck terror in others and none dared to incur the wrath of the Gorkha chief.”

The poet narrates that Prithviraj Rana Shah offered prayers to the local deities like...
annexed territory of Bhaktapur Prithvirayaraya Shah proceeded to perform yajnas in which he offered liberal gifts in propitiation of gods, sages and manes.

The rest of the poem consists of poetic praise of the king and is not very important from the historical point of view. From the sketchy historical material available in the first chapter of this work, it becomes obvious that the poet has handled the theme not from the point of view of a historian but as a mere court poet. But one glaring omission has however, to be taken note of. Tradition has it that Prithvirayaraya Shah was able to seize Kantipur practically without encountering any resistance. It is said that it was on the Indrajatra day that the Gorkha ruler arrived at Kathmandu and he straight went to the Hanuman Dhokha where the Kumari Puja was being celebrated. It is also said that he just went and sat on the pedestal which was meant for the Malla king; and the Kumari (supposed to be incarnation of the Goddess) applied the traditional tilaka on his forehead unwittingly, taking him for the Malla king. This incident, apart from its dramatic import, confirmed the victory of the Gorkhas over the Mallas and in a way prepared the popular minds sentimentally to accept the suzerainty of Prithvirayaraya Shah. It is curiously interesting to note that Lalitavallabha’s narrative is conspicuously silent on this matter. Normally he would not have missed to mention it, particularly in view of its dramatic impact and religious aspects, if he had been at all aware of such an incident. The authenticity of this story requires therefore to be re-examined in the light of its significant omission by Lalitavallabha.

The poetic merits of the work will be dealt with in a subsequent issue.

1. *“An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal”— vide Asiatique researches vol.III; P.307 ff.
2. Ibid.
3. “Prithvirayaraya almost walked into Kathmandu due to the Indrajatra in which the Nepalese were sunk”. Vide S. Levi: Le Nepal, P.272.
4. The dramatic as well as political impact, not to speak of the religious, of this incident is unmistakable. No one, not particularly a poet who had set himself to the task of chronicling these achievements of the hero could be expected to miss the point. It may, therefore be considered if the popularly believed account of the triumph of Prithvirayaraya Shah was a later interpolation into tradition.