

A Eulogy on the Great King Prithvinarayan Shah

By C. R. Swaminathan

आदिराजयशोविम्बमादर्शं प्राप्तवाङ्मयम् ।
तेषामसन्निधानेपि न स्वयं पश्य नश्यति ॥

So says Dandin in his *Kavyadarsa*. "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. *Prithvindra-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 नृ-195 (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 published¹. 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 with the post-script which records his frustration as follows :-

(राज)न् श्री रमणाकृतेस्तव गुणैः सन्नोदिता भारती
द्वे काव्ये (व्यतनोद्धि) भक्तविजयं पृथ्वीन्द्रवर्णनोदयम्
अद्य त्वच्छ्रुति तीर्थ..... जिकृतदृष्टा वगाहं विना
व्यर्थं शोककृशानुनानवरतं (दन्द) दृयते हा भृशम् ॥

In these lines the poet clearly states that he had composed *Bhaktavijaya* and *Prithvindra 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 :-

क्वचनः परिशाम्यते जलैर्जठराग्निश्च तथाशु भोजनैः ।
कविताश्रमनिष्फलानलो नजलैर्हृत न चापि भोजनैः ॥

"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 adequate 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:

राजानः सन्ति नो किं दिशि दिशि धरणीपालवशाधिजाताः
 द्यूतस्वापावलासु प्रणिहितमनसो दातयुद्धप्रहीणाः ॥
 दाने मेघोपमानो रिपुदवदहन प्रौढदावानलो सौ ॥
 पृथ्वीनारायणेशो जयति निजधरावारितद्यूतदोषः ॥

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 Dhvamsana" 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 ascendancy to the throne of Gorkha on the demise of his father, Narabhupala 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:

यद्वस्ताम्बुमुनि प्रमृज्वति सदभाम्बूनि भिक्षुद्रुमाः
 सद्यः पुष्कलसंपदः सुरतरुत्रातानधश्चक्रिरे ॥

(Verse II)

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

यत्पादाम्बु महौषधैः समभनन्मूकत्वकुण्डापहम्

(Lalitavallabha Verse-)

यच्छ्रीमत्पादपद्मच्युतसलिलकृतस्नानपानाभिषेकैः
 पूतान्तर्वाह्यदेहोभवदमितमहीनाममात्रं गुणानः ।
 मूको ब्रह्ममी तु सद्यः किमुत बहु गिरावश्यमेव स्वयंहि
 प्रागन्यच्च श्रतासीदपि नृपतिपते कुष्ठरोगोपशान्तिः ॥

(Jagannivasa Verse III)

This Jagannivasa claims to be the disciple of Gokula Vilasa's elder brother (गोकुलविलासा-ग्रजलब्ध विद्याप्रसादः).

Gokula Vilasa was the preceptor of Narabhupala 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 decisively significant role in history in the days to come. The poet subscribes to the popular belief that God Narayana Himself was born as Prithvinarayan Shah. He continues this metaphor throughout the poem and it is further extended to identify his four brothers with the four Dikpalas or Lords of the Quarters. Uddama Kirti Shah is described as the Avatar of Indra; Dalamardana Shah that of Yama; Dalajit Shah as the incarnation of Varuna and Surapratapa Shah as that of Kubera. The poet also devotes the entire second chapter for comparing Prithvinarayan's achievements to those of the ten incarnations of Narayana.

Prithvinarayan 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 Jayaprakash 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 Pratapa Singha 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.

Prithvinarayan 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 Kanti-

pur, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. Suspecting that Mukanda Sena (King of Makwanpur), though a brother-in-law of his, has some allegiance to the Malla rulers of Nepal, Prithvinarayan Shah attacked and vanquished Bikram Sena, the king of Makwanpur and held him captive along with his family—
नामप्यन्त मम स्वविक्रमसौ नेपालपक्षस्थितम्
माकन्दानिप कुतुम्बसहितं बन्धन् हि दिग्बन्धनम्
(Verse)

The story goes that Prithvinarayan 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—

सर्वं तद्विषयं स्वकीयमकरोद्धस्मान्पुपेनामुना
प्राप्यन्ते प्रतिवर्षमेव शतशस्तम्बेरमा उत्तमाः ॥
(Verse)

The annexation of Makwanpur brought Prithvinarayan Shah for the first time in direct confrontation with the political powers in India. The poet refers to the intervention of काश्मली यवन or 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 Prithvinarayan 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 panicky. 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 Prithvinarayan Shah offered prayers to the local deities like

Gokarneswara, Sikhara Yogim, Vajya Yogina, Guhyesvari, and Pasupati etc. before embarking upon the attack on Kantipur. For the first time in Nepal, he used the gun in warfare in this campaign. It is said that, he obtained some of the modern weapons of warfare from his father-in-law Abhiman Singh, a Rajput cheiftain at Banaras, before he launched his second attack on Kantipur. The poet refers to the guns in his own language as भीममहान-लास्त्र. The fact that it produced both fire and a loud report, confirms that the term is used to mean the gun. Later also, whenever he refers to this बहुचस्त्र he mentions the enormous noise it created. When the city was under siege, Jayaprakasa Malla, in order to avoid the fate that befell the king of Makwanpur, escaped in the darkness of night under disguise. Hearing this news, the king of Lalitpur, Teja Malla, followed suit and both of them secretly took refuge with Ranajit Malla of Bhaktapur. Informed of this by his spies, Prithvinarayana Shah decided to invest Bhaktapur so that all the three adversaries could be dealt with at once. After his triumph in the resultant campaign, Prithvinarayan Shah entered the city and took both the rulers of Bhaktapur and Lalitpur as captives, Jayaprakasha Malla of Kathmandu having laid down his life in battle. Ranajit Malla of Bhaktapur expressed his desire to spend the rest of his life in meditation at Varanasi, which was readily granted just as Mahabali was allowed to stay in *patala* after his discomfiture by Vishnu.

तं भक्तावनिपालमात्मवशगं संप्रार्थयन्तं मुहुर्मुक्तिं संसृति-
बन्धतो

विनिहतामर्षं निबद्धाञ्जलिम् काशीं प्रापयदाश्वदध्रकरुणः
श्री पृथ्विनारायणो रम्यं भागवतं विरोचनसुतं शक्रानुजः
प्रागिव ॥

With the treasures and riches of the newly

annexed territory of Bhaktapur Prithvinarayana Shah proceeded to preform *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 Prithvinarayan Shah was able to seize Kantipur practically without encountering any resistance¹. It is said that it was on the Indra-jatra 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 Prithvinarayana 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.²

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

1. "An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal" - vide *Asiatic researches vol.III; P.307 ff.*

2. *Ibid.*

3. "Prithvinarayan almost walked into Kathmandu due to the Indra-jatra 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 Prithvinarayan Shah was a later interpolation into tradition.