

## Book Review

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*Nepal Rediscovered*. 1986. Edited by Padma Prakash Shrestha. 112 pages. Time Books International. New Delhi, Price NC Rs. 420/-

The year 1846 is one of the most significant dates in the history of Nepal. It was the advent of the "Rana" regime which lasted for 104 years during which the King of Nepal was reduced to a mere figurehead with all the external decorum and regalia intact. The King played a purely nominal and honorific role, deprived of all authority and power.

It was basically the Kot massacre that paved the way for this sudden swing in Nepal's history. The bloody event that took place on the night of the 15th of September, 1846, in the courtyard called the *Kot* where a notorious massacre of noblemen, officers and courtiers occurred, is an event unsurpassed in Nepalese history. Bir Narsingh Kanwar, a soldier of fortune, later to be known as Jang Bahadur Rana, played a decisive role in the massacre and emerged as the strongman much demanded by the chaos and political uncertainty in the country during the time. This efficiently conducted massacre put most of Jang Bahadur's enemies to the sword and he was proclaimed Prime Minister the very next day. Thus, Jang Bahadur was to be the first of the long line of Rana rulers with absolute and unlimited powers in all fields.

In order to keep power within the Rana family and avoid internal squabbles, Jang Bahadur decided upon a somewhat unexpected innovation to make the title and functions of the "Prime minister" hereditary. But the line of succession instead of going from the father to the son, was to go to the male descendants of the Rana family on the basis of seniority of age. According to this arrangement, only the eldest agnate of the family could succeed to the prime ministership upon the incumbent's death. Rana rule was thus established and its oligarchical character was to continue for over a century, limiting decision making powers to a few members of the Rana family.

That the Ranas lived in splendour is common knowledge and the various durbars, mahals and bhavans bear testimony to this fact. Their luxurious lifestyles, wayward temperaments, extravagant tastes and retinue of concubines are legendary and the cruelty, instability, slavery, palace intrigue and murder associated with Rana rule make them, along with the maharajas of India, the last splendid anachronisms of modern times.

By virtue of their position, many of the Ranas seemed to have been larger than life; they had powers of life and death, commanded incalculable riches, pursued grandiose courses. A few of them, however, were exceptions, and they lived by a strong code of honour outmoded elsewhere. Some proved to be capable administrators, others cultivated startling eccentricities and a few indulged in luxuries and depravities remarkable in their ingenuity. Capable, decadent, chivalrous, or arrogant, Rana rule nevertheless occupies an important position in Nepal's history and adds, if nothing else, an aura of magnificence to the whole setting.

It is precisely this aura of magnificence in Nepalese history that the book *Nepal Rediscovered* ("Rana Nepal Rediscovered" would have been more appropriate.) wishes to capture. The myriad of photographs lavishly splashed across the pages from Jang Bahadur's time depicting the Ranas decked in regal splendour, resplendent in their uniforms, swords, medals and the magnificent flowing plumes of the Bird of Paradise do bring to the fore the splendour of the not forgotten past. Formal family and personal portraits of various Rana Prime Ministers, high ranking officials, inauguration of different maharajas, leading ladies of the court, weddings, group photographs, hunting expeditions, group portraits with visiting diplomats, royal servants and palaces successfully reveal the lifestyle of the Rana court and also social, political, and religious occasions, and architectural features of old Kathmandu destroyed in the earthquake of 1934.

The collection of these rare photographs (90 and not 92 as stated in the inner flap of the jacket) which constitute the major bulk of the volume will probably account for its popularity and might even tempt Nepalese scholars and connoisseurs to take a copy home. However, had some photographs of Jagat Jang and his family been included, the album (which the book rightly is) might have been a more complete 'photo essay' on the subject.

The publication also provides a peep into early Nepali court photography, how the medium was introduced into the kingdom, the significance it acquired in later years and how some early cameras could have possibly come into the country. The brief socio-cultural and historical information about Nepal from ancient times to the recent referendum will be of immense interest to those who have not visited the country and who wish to know something about it. Though the book does not have a price-tag, the basic contents, nature and layout of the volume make it clear that it is basically designed for the world outside.

The section on "Rana Nepal: A Political History" is a scholarly piece of writing. It gives a short but graphic account of Jang Bahadur's rise to power, establishment of Rana rule, internal squabbles for power within the family, technical innovations they brought into the country, major developments in foreign relations, their relations with the British, the struggle that overthrew Rana rule, the formation of the Nepali Congress etc. But what is interesting, and which provides food for thought to Nepalese scholars and historians, is the argument presented that Rana rule may not just be a period of darkness and oppression that it is generally associated with.

The contention is that Rana rule is often viewed in the wrong perspective because of excessive concentration of power on its last years when the Rana family, especially the hard line members, were fighting a rearguard action to brush off changes that events in the wider field of South Asia had made inevitable.

In this context, Rana foreign policy, which has always come under heavy criticism, is taken up and is justified on grounds that the Rana

alliance with the British was not necessarily a prop to retain power at the expense of Nepal's national interest but, on the contrary, to preserve Nepal's independence, since reliance on an enfeebled China as a counter to the threat from the south was of little value.

Rana conservatism is also discussed, and the plea that it could very well be rooted in national attitudes developed long before the advent of Rana rule is convincing in the sense that Nepal had, from Prithvi Narayan Shah's time, followed a strict isolationist policy to preserve her Hindu identity, and for Jang Bahadur to act otherwise would have been suicidal.

The failure of Rana rule and its ultimate overthrow in 1951 are equally well presented, the latter being attributed to the policy taken up in the latter half of the Rana period during Juddha Shamsheer's premiership. The attitude behind this policy, as stated, was precisely expressed by Singha Shamsheer in the report on industrial development where he acknowledged that though promoting living standards among the people was desirable, they (Ranas) possibly couldn't take steps that could later prove subversive to their autocratic authority. It is true that this resulted in Nepal being cut off from developments beyond her borders, and that the insignificant technological and cultural change that did take place affected only the privileged few. That this policy created resentment and mass public discontent is too well known, and the logic, that this coupled with population pressure on resources and mounting ecological problems proved to be a powerful nucleus for discontented political groups in finally uprooting the 104 year old Rana regime, is convincing.

The plea for a reassessment of Rana rule on grounds that it has often been viewed from a wrong perspective is equally plausible. Nepalese analysts are also in agreement that the euphoria that followed the overthrow of Rana rule came like a blinding flash, and that it obscured impartial assessment of their rule in its totality. The contention that the latter half of Rana rule was conveniently used by ideologues to promote their own vested interests to depict the 104 years of Rana rule as a period of cruelty and oppression is also a case in point which further supplements the need for an objective assessment of this particular chapter in Nepalese history.

These arguments put forth in favour of Rana rule, though not enough, are well debated and provide the flavour which the book otherwise lacks. Readers might even be tempted to think that the section, somehow, does not conform to the overall nature and spirit of the volume, and that events should have been further elaborated with more details and used for a different publication altogether. As it stands, the section, though brilliant, is too brief and rather out of place and context.

In spite of the book being edited by a Nepali, the kind of errors that have crept in could have been avoided, and they must be seriously looked into if there is to be a revised edition of the volume. Prince Gyanendra (p.12) is referred to as the youngest grandson of King

Tribhuvan, whereas, the youngest, in fact, is Prince Dhirendra. Nepali is pointed out to be the official language (P. XII) whereas it is the national language of the country. The Malla rulers of the Kathmandu Valley were not "Newar Kings" as stated (P. XII) but were actually Kshatriyas. In a single page (the Family Tree) Bal Narsingh Kanwar is wrongly written as Balnar Singh Kanwar, Prithvi Bir as Prithvivir, Singha as Sinha, Subarna as Suvarna and Aishwarya as Aiswarya.

In the captions to the photographs, there is no consistency in the titles, and this seriously mars the spirit and the formal air the publication as a whole intends to convey. On the one hand, there are grand captions like "Maharaja Jang Bahadur with his senior Rani Hiranyagarbha Kumari" "Maharaja Dev Shamsher with his senior Maharani Krishna Kumari" and, on the other, more mundane ones like "Maharaja Chandra Shamsher with his wife", "Maharaja Bir Shamsher with his wife and brothers". etc. Besides, had the names of illegitimate offspring in the photographs been italicized, like in the family tree, it would be helpful for easy identification.

The main aim of the book, however, is to preserve the national heritage of the country through photographic relics in a very concrete way so as to conserve Nepal's cultural patrimony, and thus remind future generations of their own roots. In this regard, the publication is a successful undertaking and will in its own way contribute to the gigantic task of preserving the legacy of the kingdom. The effort is timely and even more commendable on grounds that the rapid pace of modernization might cause great cultural harm to a nation with a rich heritage and long traditions.

- Ananda P. Shrestha

*Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy Society and Culture in Northwest Nepal.* 1986. By James F. Fisher. 232 pages. University of California Press. Berkeley. Price US \$ 35.00.

Here is another solid piece of ethnography to add to the growing composite mosaic that is Nepal. Fisher's book is a portrait of a Highland Buddhist village in Dolpo district. It is an economic portrait since economic production and exchange is this anthropologist's main concern. More specifically, this is an analysis of trade because according to the author, these Magar Nepalis are essentially a trading society. And it is a highly successful trading community even though the economic base of trade is agriculture; land is critical to most Nepali communities, including urban dwellers and government officers who own land. Fisher's characterization of the Magar is reasonable since their trading activity makes them distinctive and perhaps accounts for their continued success and survival in the severe environment of Dolpo locked as it is behind Dhaulagiri. Readers familiar with Fürer-Haimendorf's *Himalayan Traders* published in 1975 will find a section there (pp 204-222) on these same Magar people.

The people Fisher spent more than a year with in 1968-69 are farmers living in a recess of the western Nepal mountains "apparently" isolated from economic centres. They grow ample grain (it ranges from barley, buckwheat and millet to corn), beans, and most recently, potatoes. Through a long association with Bhotia people who originate in Tibet, they themselves built up a Tibetan woolen culture. Until recently they traded surplus grain for salt; as such they played a key role in the transfer south of Tibetan salt. Exploiting that position, as Fisher says, these Magar became a "cultural, linguistic and economic hinge between the Tibetan north and the Nepali south".

If anyone has any doubt about isolated hillfarmers' ability to adjust to economic flux and political turmoil, here is the evidence that will end your concerns that peasants cannot take care of themselves, because when Chinese occupiers in Tibet restricted cross border movements, the Magars' grain-salt trade with the north fell off; yet this Dolpo community was able to alter its trade cycle and make a new intermediary role for itself in another trade circuit in this area. The Magar relied less on wool and salt themselves, and began trading animals (sheep and horses) and woolen goods brought to them from the north to the south where they purchased goods (mainly non-essentials) to be sold in the outlying areas of Dolpo-Tichurong Valley and the areas of Khasan and Bhot beyond where the traders' own homes were.

This book also shatters any lingering belief we may have that a village lying behind a mountain divide without communication for 6 months of the year is populated by an isolated people. Contrary to what we might suppose these people are not isolated and their culture is not remote. As Fisher explains at the outset of his study, these hill people are "acutely aware of the world beyond their valley" and "have evolved strategies to deal with their remoteness". As the author puts it, "they exchange their way out of isolation" (p. 3). One assumes this is the

reason for Fisher's interest in this culture. It is certainly a good reason for our attention to his book which provides us with a thorough, systematic explanation of how trade operates here.

The Study focuses on one village, Tarangpur (pseudonym) one of the largest of 13 villages in Tichurong Valley, Dolpo district. Before describing in detail the dynamics of the trade system here the author introduces the area with a long chapter (pp 46-86) on how this community produces a surplus. It is important to establish because it is this surplus which permits trade. This chapter (Chapter 3) deals exclusively with farming: field allocations, crops, division of labour, technology, household expenditures and extent of surplus. Important observations on division of labour lay the setting for the following chapter (Chapter 4) which deals with the Salt Trade Circuit. We learn that the concentration of women in farming and the free (!) (surplus) time of men allows the latter to spend the long months they do trading. Almost all of it is longdistance trade determined in part by the ecology of the area. (They cannot return until the mountain passes open in spring).

Chapter 5 focuses on Transactions: the Commodities Circuit, the new south-oriented circuit which takes these Magar people to the Tarai and on to India for cottons and other manufactured items. Fisher emphasises the importance of this new circuit in "modernizing" these once Tibetanized people, making them more Hindu and more Nepali while they are so engaged. It is a process already well documented among the Thakali people, although this author makes only brief comparative reference to the latter (p. 128). Even though they are not as rich as the Thakali have become, these Magar traders appear to be extremely facile at adapting the manners, dress and language to succeed in the southern commodities circuit, a skill which should not be underestimated. This facility is as critical as those quantitative attributes such as capital, networks, credit-associations, and commodities. Fisher recognizes the quintessential force of this adaptability just as he recognizes that a major surplus fostering this trade is *time* (pp. 78-86). (It is also a surplus that results from a strict sexual division of labour, or an exploitation of female labour, depending on how one looks at it. In either case, this is a condition Magar [women] farmers share with others not only in Nepal but worldwide).

Chapter 6, Control and Uses of Wealth, examines how profits from trade are employed in the local village context, offering some interesting and perhaps alarming estimates of the wealth stored here. We are given an idea about what villagers expend for ceremonies and feasts, and how inheritance laws effect this moveable wealth. (The author does not dwell on any particular ceremony or cultural activity such as merit-making.)

The final chapter (Chapter 7) on Transactions in the Village Context attempts to understand how wealth from trade works into political and prestige considerations since ultimately we want to know how the accumulated differentiated wealth affects the social structure and political manoeuvrability or strength of the village.

As a whole, the book offers a fairly comprehensive account of transactions in this little known economic sector of Nepal, a sector which sustains an entire culture different from both the Tibetans to the north and the Nepali speaking Hindu people of the south. (These Magar people speak their own language, Kaike, as well as Nepali and Tibetan, and their religion is a combination of Lamaist and shaman practices with some Hindu rituals as well.) I would think Nepalis who have never been to this part of their country would, after reading this book, come away with a considerable respect for their compatriots living in Dolpo. And government planners might in particular appreciate they are dealing with both a flexible and enterprising people when they introduce their inevitable programmes and ideas into this district.

Those readers as well as scholars should read this book along with 4 others 1) Haimendorf's *Himalayan Traders*, 2) Jest's *Dolpo, Communautés de Langue Tibétaine du Népal*, 3) Macfarlane's *Resources and Population*, and 4) Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon's *Nepal in Crisis*. The first will put this in the wider context of trade all across the Himalayas, the second will provide the background of the less Nepalized people of Dolpo, e.g. the Tarap people, with whom these Magar have some ties, the third provides a more detailed, quantified exposition of local agriculture and its social ramifications, and finally the fourth provides the administrative-political context of corruption spreading from the Centre into the hills which is eroding the freedom and flexibility of traders and farmers to control prices, commodities, and maintain some degree of self-sufficiency. Today in Nepal, no single book tells the story; with such cultural diversity here, and with such excellence of research of different facets of culture, a reader cannot rely on any single volume or perspective. It is fortunate that so much excellent work has been done in this and adjacent areas of Nepal, so that if one cares about the subject and wants to gain a firm grasp of the dynamics of rural economy, then this range of materials is available.

Having made these points, I must note my reservations and disappointments with the book under review. A major item is its price. At \$35.00, an already heavily subsidized book becomes impossible for most interested readers. Translated into NR this relatively small book (232 pages, 191 pp. of which are main text) becomes an outrageous price--Rs 770! One wonders how books which are first based on data collection supported by research grants and later publishing subventions have reached this price range. I can imagine that the author and others in a similar position feel embarrassed by this.

The price is even more difficult to justify when we see that all the data herein is from 1968-70. It is almost 18 years since the author collected this data, and for reasons he does not explain, he has not undertaken a supplementary study in order to gather new data on which to evaluate his 1968 figures and to update his study. Were this a study of social structure, family or religion, the 18 year difference may not matter, but this is a study of a progressive trading community, one that made a major shift as a result of politico-economic changes in 1960.

Much has been going on in this area in the last 2 decades; we cannot but expect that the trade which is the focus of this study itself underwent major developments during this time. If it did not, that in itself is a worthy issue for investigation. Given the excellent detail of household consumption, expenses, field allocations, and so forth, we would not expect the author to repeat his study; there are other ways of bringing a work up to date which would not have been too time consuming and would have added yet another layer of scientific validity and significance. I have no doubt that the author himself regrets the time-lapse and he must have considered long and hard before allowing the book to be published with only 1968-69 data, but I do not know his reasons for following the course he has. Each reader or prospective buyer will have to decide if a new expensive book with 1968-69 data on economics is really relevant in Nepal today. Certainly no economic planning can take off from this study. A new investigation would have to be made to see where the Magars of Tarangpur are today; indeed it would be dangerous for a government plan to be designed on the data in this book without undertaking such a check.

A final minor point might be added about the pseudonym applied to the village under study here: Tarangpur. Anyone knowing Nepal can easily uncover the real name and one wonders about this pretence to protect the people since all the economic data regarding family incomes and enterprises is quite explicit and revealing. Fisher here is following an irrational unjustified custom set by his predecessors and it ought to be ended. One clumsy additional result of this naming is the next assignation, the name Tarangpurians [!] to the people of the village. I could not help thinking of Lilliputians every time I came across the word; finally I had to assign my own fictive term and I chose "Tarangi" for these fine Magar people. I wonder what they would prefer.

- B.N. Aziz