REVIEW ARTICLE

THE NEPĀLA-MAHĀTMYA: A IX-CENTURY TEXT OR A PIOUS FRAUD?

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Of the too numerous testimonies of Nepal's religious history some of the most palpable ones are, perhaps, the textual evidence, particularly the manuscripts. Although Nepal has preserved an unbelievable quantity of manuscripts of Hindu as well as Buddhist persuasions, they are mostly in the form of copies, rather than original contributions to religious thought or critical/exegetical commentaries on the cults practised in Nepal. Most manuscripts of cultural or critical significance were at first brought to the Nepal Valley either by wandering scholars seeking royal patronage or fleeing immigrant men of learning–fleeing mainly from tumultuous events in the neighbouring kingdoms. These manuscripts have, at times, been devotedly worshipped, preserved and labouriously copied and decorated for a millennium by the pious copyists and scribes or by laymen who sought religious merit in getting these sacred texts copied and preserved at places of worship.

Religious texts actually written in Nepal by Nepalese scholars are far and few between. An interesting group of texts are the local purāṇas and mahātmyas which glorify and aggrandise the local shrines. These texts are modeled on classical Hindu purāṇas and mahātmyas, and at times transplanted into them as pious fraud, adapting and assembling from several of them. One such text is the Nepāla-Mahātmya. The Sanskrit text of this mahātmya was first published privately from Banaras in 1901 in devanāgarī transliteration by Pandit Muralidhar Jha, based on a Nepalese manuscript in the then Queen’s College Library, Banaras. With Jha’s text as basis, a Nepali language translation by Mukti Nath Khanal was published in 1968 by the Royal Nepal Academy. In 1970 Uebach published a German translation with Sanskrit text from the National Archives (wrongly numbered Cat. I:1209, following Regmi, II: 836, 1966), giving variant readings from the devanagari copy made for Levi, now deposited in the Institute for Indian Civilization, Paris. In the meantime, Pandit Kedar Nath Sharma has also published a Hindi

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translation based on the Jha edition (Sharma, 1977). Recently, the Nepāla-Mahātmya has been published in roman transliteration with an English translation by Jayaraj Acharya (1992). Mr Acharya’s roman transliteration as well as English translation is based on Khanal’s Nepali edition which in turn is based on the Jha edition of 1901. As Acharya does not seem to have consulted the Banaras manuscript, or for that matter any extant manuscript of the Mahātmya, this edition is at the third remove from the original texts.

Mr Acharya has, however, “freely corrected the most obvious grammatical and type errors.” It is disquieting though reassuring to know that “the mistakes or corrections did not change much of the meaning of the text” (Preface). Although the Acharya edition is not a critical but a popular one, the liberties he takes with Jha’s text or Khanal’s text are typical of traditional Sanskritists who are intolerant of “grammatical mistakes”, or any deviation(s) from the sūtras of Pāṇini. This is a little astonishing, particularly because Acharya, besides being a scholar trained in Sanskrit Pāṇiṣṭālā and vidyāprītha, is also a qualified linguist trained at home and abroad in the rigours of modern research. The Banaras manuscript or the Levi manuscript may have been inaccessible from Arlington, Virginia, USA—his work station, but it should not have been so difficult for an assiduous student like Acharya to consult at least some of the manuscripts in the National Archives, Kathmandu, where he has several well-placed relatives and friends. In the National Archives there are nearly a dozen Nepāla-Mahātmya manuscripts including the much disputed manuscript Cat. 1: 984 (Microfilm No. A 332/13). Although Acharya quotes, analyses, emends and disputes the colophon of this manuscript (see Plate I) so passionately, no sensible textual scholar would launch himself on such a hazardous course as Acharya has done here without even consulting his primary sources.

The most controversial part of Mr Acharya’s edition of the Nepāla-Mahātmya is not his “grammatical improvement” on the original, but his 11-page Introduction to the transliteration and translation. For several reasons, no section of this Introduction should go uncontested.

Mr Acharya disputes the interpretation of the colophon of the Nepāla-Mahātmya (manuscript No I:984Microfilm No A 332/13) on the basis of its reading and interpretation published by Uebach (1970:12-14). Uebach relied on Petech for her analysis and interpretation of the colophon data, concluding that

śakābde sindhuvidhāraṇī ca dharyate

is equivalent to Śaka 1174 or 1177 (sindhu = 4 or 7, vṛjan = 7, dharaṇī = 1, dhara = 1) which gives a date equivalent to A.D. 1251 or 1254 November.
However, she confesses that the day of the week (Sunday), the *yoga* (Śādiya), and the *naksatra* (ruriśra?) "cannot be clearly verified" (Uebach, 1970:14). This colophon has since been reexamined by Brinkhaus in his excellent study on the Pradyumna-Prabhāvaḷī legend in Nepal. His interpretation is based on "metrical considerations" (Brinkhaus 1987:80). Following Petech-Uebach, in his earlier paper on "References to Buddhism in Nepāla-Mahāmya" (1980), Brinkhaus had dated the manuscript to A.D. 1251 or 1254. In 1982, during a personal meeting, I disputed this with him on the colophon evidence, which led Brinkhaus to reinterpret the colophon by rendering it this time "comprehensible by means of a metrically and grammatically necessary conjecture" (Brinkhaus, 1987:80). This time he reads it as, Śakābde sindhuvairajharajj (ca) dharṣyute, interpreting the era, not as Śaka Saṃvat, but as Nepāla Saṃvat, which gives him A.D. 1653. Thus Brinkhaus believes that since this is for him, the earliest dated manuscript of the Nepāla-Mahāmya, A.D. 1653 October/November is the terminus ad quem for the text.

We are referring to Brinkhaus's "metrically and grammatically necessary conjecture" because Mr Acharya used the same device, i.e., metrically unacceptable extra syllable ca-hypothesis, without, of course, referring to Brinkhaus either in his Introduction or Bibliography. In his enthusiasm to demonstrate the antiquity of the text, Mr Acharya goes on to claim a hoary antiquity for the Nepāla-Mahāmya text, without consulting any of the extant 58 odd manuscripts! Whereas Brinkhaus thought that the year 774 was Nepāla Saṃvat because Śaka also means "a general name for any era", Mr Acharya interprets the year 774 as Śaka Era, claiming that the Nepāla-Mahāmya text is dated A.D. 852 or A.D. 855. The central bone of my contention in this paper is that this is an impossible date for Nepāla-Mahāmya manuscript because of the following reasons.

The colophon of the manuscript is misinterpreted, not only by Uebach/Petech or by Mr Acharya, but also by Brinkhaus. The era is Śaka but sindhu is 7, vājja is 7 too but dharānti ca dharā is not a one-place numeral 7 or mountain, but a chronogram for two-place numeral, king, i.e., 16. This gives us the Śaka year 1677, i.e., 1677 + 78 = A.D. 1755. (See Sircar, 1965:230-233 for the numerical values of the chronograms). The manuscript in question is an ordinary thick white-paper manuscript written in late Newari script, not a palmleaf written in Bhujuinmolo or earlier scripts. Of the 58 manuscripts of the Nepāla mahaṃyāya microfilmed by the National Archives, Kathmandu, there is no palmleaf nor any written in older Newari scripts. Among the dated ones, the earliest one is a manuscript in haritāṭā paper in the National Archives Cat l:894, Microfilm No A 332/15 with 128 folios, (see Plate II) with the following colophon:
muni randhrai samudresca yute nepalavatsare bhādraca sitapakse tu
dvīfiyayam ravaudine daivajña cakrasimhena nepala mahima likhetu

Muni = 7, randhra = 9, samudra = 7, i.e., Nepāla Era 797, equivalent to A.D. 1676 August/September. In a private collection, there is a devanagari transliteration of a manuscript dated N.S. 989, (A.D. 1868), which according to its colophon, is a copy from an earlier manuscript dated Nepāla Samvat 790 (A.D. 1669). (See Microfilm No E 718/1)¹. Thus among 58 extant manuscripts of the Nepāla-Mahātmya texts there is not a single manuscript dated earlier than the late seventeenth century A.D.

Mr Acharya gives the following five main arguments in favour of dating the Nepāla Mahātmya to the mid-9th century A.D.:
1. The text does not mention any post-Licchavi shrines or temples.
2. It mentions shrines and sites where the Licchavi inscriptions are found.
3. There is a high correlation between the two.
4. Śaka era is used in the text, an era used mostly by the Licchavi rulers.
5. There is no mention of any ruling king in the colophon, as is usual in the Malla period texts, etc.

The Nepāla-Mahātmya mentions about 25 Siva lingas, out of a traditional total of 64 lingas listed in the popular 19th-century Bhāṣā Vaṃśavallis. Of these 25 lingas, the Mahāleśvara linga (VI:66-79), Hanumadisvara (III: 15-20), Somesvara in Sulūnco, Bhaktapur (XIII:3-125; XXXVI: 7-28) or Taṃkesvara are not Licchavi monuments. None of these lingas is attested in any Licchavi documents. Although the traditions recorded in the Nepāla-Mahātmya, particularly concerning some of the well-known lingas, are at least older than the fourteenth century, the extant text is not older than the mid-seventeenth century. For example, at Kumbheśvara when an already dilapidated temple was built by a Jayabhīma during the rule of Sthīrāja Malla in A.D. 1392, it is recorded in an inscription, first published by Cecil Bendall (1886:83-87), that on this holy spot Kumbha rṣi had undergone severe penance to please Mahādeva. (Inscription IX, lines 9-11).

The Nepāla-Mahātmya mentions 25 Siva lingas but the most important lingas of the Licchavi period, such as Māneśvara, Vijayaśīvara, Anuparamesvara, Ratnesvara, Śūrabhogesvara, Daksinēsvara, Laḍījamahēśvara etc. are not mentioned in the text nor in the kseirapradakṣinā, whereas those obscure lingas mentioned nowhere in the Licchavi epigraphy comprise more than 95% of the lingas mentioned in the Nepāla-Mahātmya. Among the Sakī piṭhas, it mentions Harisiddhi,
Vajrayogini, and Vajravārāhī, none of which is attested in Licchavi inscriptions.

Mr Acharya claims that Śaka era is used by the Licchavi rulers, and as this manuscript is dated in Śaka era it belongs to the Licchavi period. This is an incredible argument in support of the antiquity of the Nepāla-Mahātmya. Mr Acharya might like to consult and scan the corpus of the Śah period inscriptions, Lāl Mohars, Shyāka Mohars, and the coins to discover for himself how late the Saka era persisted in Nepal. In silver coins, the Śaka era continued until 1911 when Chandra Shumshere officially adopted the era of Vikramaditya. As for the purāṇa manuscripts in Nepal dated in the Śaka era, let me arbitrarily list up the 17-19th century texts dated in Śaka era from Part VIII of the Vṛhatsūcippatram: Purāṇeiḥhāsavijayakaḥ) published by the National Archives in 1968: Uṣacaritam III: 126, Śaka 1760; Kurma Purāṇa V: 5350, Śaka 1697, Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa II: 47, Śaka 1679; Skanda Purāṇa V: 5846, Śaka 1697, and Adhyatma Rāmāyana III: 734, Śaka 1761 etc.

Mr Acharya argues that the Nepāla-Mahātmya text belongs to the pre-Mall period because, unlike in the Mall period texts, this manuscript makes no reference to the ruling monarch. This is yet another untenable argument—a naive argument which can only be marshaled by someone who is totally unfamiliar with the Nepalese manuscript-traditions and scribal vagaries. The Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project has by now microfilmed more than one million folios, including some 5000 palmleaf manuscripts in the public as well as private collections, but not all of them have colophons nor do all colophons, whenever there are any, mention the ruling king or the scribe, and that alone does not entitle us to dump these manuscripts to the so-called “Dark Period”, euphemistically called “the Transitional Period” (A.D. 750-1200). Mr Acharya takes the final fatal leap in logic when he writes:

According to Rocher (1986:237) Haraprasad Shastri and Cecil Bendall discovered, in the Durbar Library in Kathmandu, a manuscript of Skanda-purāṇa in Gupta Script, and on paleographic grounds, they decided that it was written before 659 A.D. Given the popularity of Skanda-purāṇa in Nepal as early as 659 and the allegiance to Skanda-purāṇa claimed by the Himavatkhaṇḍa and by Nepāla-Mahātmya is evidence not only of the location of the Nepāla-Mahātmya but also its date.

(Acharya, 1992:7)
The Skanda Purāṇa manuscript in question is listed in the National Archives Catalogue II: 229 and in Shastri’s Catalogue Part I (1905:141-146). The manuscript is not dated but Shastri dates it on the basis of paleography, Gupta or later Licchavi script, by comparing it with a Nepalese manuscript, Paramāśvara Tantra, dated Śaṃvat 252. Bendall (1883:xl-xlii) thought that the manuscript was dated in Harśa Era, giving an equivalent of A.D. 858/59. Shastri, therefore, thought that the Skanda Purāṇa manuscript was paleographically at least 200 years older; thus it was believed to be dated A.D. 659. But unfortunately, Bendall’s dating of the Paramāśvara Tantra itself is questionable as no known manuscript in Nepal uses Harśa Era, founded by Harṣavardhana in A.D. 606. So the whole of Acharya’s argument is vitiated by his youthful zeal to prove the antiquity of the Nepāla-Mahātmaya text by proving the antiquity of Skanda Purāṇa. Even the proven antiquity of any Skanda Purāṇa manuscript has no relevance whatsoever to the dating of the Nepāla-Mahātmaya for the simple reason that the Mahātmaya merely “claims” to be a part of the purāṇa which, evidently, is not the case. Numerous khaṇḍas and mahātmayas claim allegiance to the Skanda Purāṇa which seems to be “a basket for holding everything that cannot fit elsewhere”. In the Skanda Purāṇa manuscript referred to by Mr Acharya there is no trace of Himavat Khaṇḍa, let alone of the Nepāla-Mahātmaya. In fact, as Shastri confesses in dismay

There is no mention of Khaṇḍas in any of the colophons of the Skanda Purāṇa in the Durbar Library ..... It gradually branched out into so many Khaṇḍas and so many Mahātmayas .... that scholars thought that the Skanda Purāṇa hardly existed except in Khaṇḍas and Mahātmayas.

(Shastri, 1905: liii)

The whole edifice of Acharya’s chronology collapses once we come to face this set of naked textual evidence staring at us. Mr Acharya seems to have rushed into terra incognita of secondary or tertiary sources, not fully realising what these sources are arguing about.

The Nepāla Mahātmaya is not a IX-century text but a late-Malla period pious fraud, concocted by some overenthusiastic pundit who knew bits and pieces of local traditions and bits and pieces of puranic lore. That it is a pious fraud is painfully evident from the wild absence of structural unity in the text. For example, Chapter I on the Origin of the Paśupati liṅga and Chapters VIII-XII, dealing with the well-known Harivamśa legend-cycle of Pradyumna-Prabhāvātī, are almost bodily lifted word for word from the Paśupati Purāṇa. The earliest extant manuscript of this purāṇa is A.D. 1504 (Yogi Naraharinath, Sanskrit Sandeśa 1:6, 2010, pp. 13-17: also Risal,
1969: Brinkhaus, 1987 for a detailed analysis of textual relations between these two texts). The absence of structural and thematic unity in the text is nowhere in greater evidence than in the transplantation of the Chapters XVI-XXVI, comprising nearly the one-third of the whole text, dealing with Rāvana (and Lākṣā) who is reported to have observed dreadful penance at Gokaṅgeśvara (XVI: 79-XXVI: 1). These chapters have more to do with Rāvana or with Lākṣā than with Nepālamaṇḍala or its Śaivism. These chapters read more like Lākṣā or Rāvana-Mahātmya than Nepāla-Mahātmya. Similarly, Chapter XXVI: The Story of Bhṛgū and Chapter XXVIII: the Story of Guṇḍadhyāya are a meandering and listless narrative whose only Nepalese connection is the so-called origin of the liṅga of Bhṛgūgāreśvara, the Bee-Lord incarnate who was Śiva’s gate-keeper Bhṛgū, fallen out of the Lord’s favour and condemned to be born a mortal who became the famous author Guṇḍadhyāya.

Chapter XXIX: Kṣetrapradakṣiṇā or Circumambulation of the Sacred Places is a kind of hurried résumé that ties up all the loose ends into an instant guide-book for the pious Hindu pilgrim. Perhaps, this is the only section of the text of some interest to modern students of Nepalese religious history, particularly to gain Śaivite perspective on the holy sites of the Nepal Valley. In this guide-book there are two critical points worth noting. Even for the Śakti piṭhas it mentions only Guhaśeśvari, Rājarājyeśvari, Vatsalā and Jayavāgadā śeśvari—all in the environs of Paśupati complex. The only other Śakti piṭhas mentioned elsewhere are Candeśvari of Banepa, Harisiddhi, Vajrayogini, and Vajravarāhi. None of these Śakti cults is known in Licchavi documents.

Following Lévi (1905:205-212) and other scholars following him uncritically, Acharya believes that the “Nepāla-Mahātmya puts Śiva, Viṣṇu and Buddha not only at the same level, but as one and the same” (Acharya, 1992:8). Already more than a decade ago Brinkhaus (1980) has incisively exploded this half-truth about religious syncretism in the Nepāla-Mahātmya. The text does not put the Buddha at the same level as Śiva or Viṣṇu, let alone consider him as “one and the same”. The Buddha is clearly made to play a subordinate role here—subordinate to Śiva-Pārvati. He is shown practising austerities to please Pārvati who, pleased with the Buddha, appeared under the name of Vajrayogini, and instructed the Buddha to erect a liṅga (Karuṇikeśvara) at the confluence of Vāgmati and Maṇipati, at Śaṅkhamīla or Śāṃkhū, because the liṅga is also known as Maṇipingeśvara (Chapter I:56-67).

In the history of Nepalese Śaivism the cult of liṅga has a place of utmost significance. There are some 25 liṅgas besides the Paśupati liṅga, which belong to the Licchavi period. The original liṅga of Paśupati was vandalised
by Shamsud-din Ilyas in November 1349. This desecrated four-faced liṅga stood abandoned on the way to Mrigasthali before it was stolen in June 1987. The present phallus was installed by Jaya Simha Rama in 1380. Undoubtedly, the Paśupati complex was already a sacred area by A.D. 533. The finest piece of Śaiva sculpture belonging to the Licchavi period, with distinctly Gupta style and features, now located in a damaged state in Kailash, is dated between A.D. 500-550 by art historians (Pal, 1974:83-86; Bangdel, 1982:53). Among the principal features of the liṅga cult in Licchavi period, the most significant appears to be the installation of a Śiva liṅga in the name of the living or dead mortals. For example, in A.D. 477, Ratnasangha installed a liṅga which he named after himself—Ratneśvara. Some years later, the same donor installed another liṅga in the name of Prabhusanga, and called it Prabhukeśvara. Similarly, Jayavarma or Jayalamba installed a liṅga and called it Jayaśvara. In A.D. 505, Vijayāvatī, Mānadeva’s daughter born of Queen Śrī Bhoginī, installed a liṅga in Suryaghta, Paśupati, in commemoration of her deceased father and called it Vijayaśvara. The most brilliant instance of this Śaiva practice is documented in Bhaumagupta’s mother, Ābhirī Gomini’s inscription dated Śaka 462 (A.D. 540). Ābhirī Gomini installed a liṅga dedicated to the memory of her deceased husband, Anuparam, and called it Anuparemeśvara. For worship and maintenance of this liṅga she allocated guḍhi lands as well. The Paśupati liṅga may very well have been founded in the same tradition as all other Licchavi Śiva liṅgas by a contemporary historical person with committed temporal or spiritual motive. If the Paśupata sect of Saivism was founded by Lākulīn about the 2nd century B.C. (Bhandarkar, 1928: 116-117), the sect might have penetrated Nepal only a few centuries later. From Aṃśūvarma (died A.D. 621) who styled himself as bhagavatapaśupatibhaṭṭārakapāḍāṇugrahitō (favourite of the feet of Lord Paśupati) to Jayadeva II (ca. A.D. 733), the prominent rulers of the Licchavi Nepal were staunch adherents of Śaivism, without being too sectarian in their religious belief and practice. However, none of the liṅgas that were installed in the Licchavi period had any divine-miraculous-mythical origin stories attached to them—perhaps, not even the original liṅga of Paśupati which has not been dated earlier than the 5th-6th century A.D. on stylistic grounds. On the contrary, everyone of theLicchavi-period liṅgas was verifiably installed by contemporary historical personages with unmitigated ulterior motives, as it were. The donor always wished for the well-being of the near and dear living ones (father, mother, relative or the king), for unmixed puṇya-vriddhi (earning religious merit), or simply mokṣa (liberation) or svarga-prapta (attainment of bliss in heaven) for the deceased relative. The miraculous origin stories of the liṅgas, with divine intervention in a mythical context, are much later embellishments. Inspired by strong
influence of Brahminism (See Uebach, 1970), to glorify and aggrandise the holy liṅgas and shrines, the local pundits framed up bizarre narratives punctuated with boring dialogues between the benign Hindu gods and the sanguine ṛṣis who seem to have little else to do than providing puranic legitimacy to the Śiva liṅgas in the Nepalāmaṇḍala.

The Nepalā-Mahāmya also betrays another syndrome of later Brahminic texts in Nepal written in clear reaction against the Buddhist attempts to assimilate the Śiva liṅgas into the cultural jurisdiction of Newar Buddhism. For example, already in the earliest dated text of Svayambhū Purāṇa, dated Nepalā Samvat 644 (A.D. 1624), deposited at the Asiatic Society Library in Calcutta, there is an attempt to absorb the following eight famous Śiva liṅgas into the Buddhist cultural geography: 1. Maṇilīṅgēśvara 2. Gokarnēśvara 3. Kīlēśvara 4. Kumbheśvara 5. Phāṅgārēśvara 6. Phāṅhilīṅgēśvara 7. Garteśvara, and 8. Vikrameśvara. These palpable Śiva liṅgas were analysed and reinterpreted as Eight Viśāraṅgas, the Eight Passionless Beings, by the Buddhist myth-makers of the Nepal Valley. In the later lists of Śiva liṅgas, in response to this “cultural imperialism” of the Buddhists, the number 8 is multiplied by 8 to make a total of 64 liṅgas, mainly to outdo the Buddhists in their own cultural game, as it were. If the Śiva scribe in the Nepalā-Mahāmya makes the Buddha follow Pārvati’s instructions and install a Śiva liṅga one should not have been surprised at all. That the Newar Buddhists considered Śaivism as the single most powerful rival faith is all too evident from the verses which close a manuscript of the Svayambhū Purāṇa, edited by Haraprasad Shastri: (1900:500).³

It is against this background that one must place the Śiva texts such as the Nepalā-Mahāmya. One should not be astonished at the route of holy circumambulation prescribed in this text. It begins and ends with the shrine of Paśupati, making even the Buddhist shrines such as Vajrayogini a Śiva-Śākta shrine, deserving a visit only en route to the Paśupati’s temple which becomes the be-all and end-all of the holy man’s existence.

With all his academic credentials in linguistics, Acharya does not even hesitate to recommend the attention of “anthropologists” to the folk interpretation of the word Nepalā, offered in the text of the Nepalā-Mahāmya, “because this land in the lap of the Himalayas was protected by the Muni Nemi, with pious deeds, it was named Nepalā, (literally, protected by Nemi).” (Acharya, 1992:10)

The Ne-muni of the Paśupati Purāṇa (XXII:1) has undergone a mysterious transformation into Ne-mi in the hands of the learned scribe who assembled the Nepalā-Mahāmya (XI:61)². The compiler of the Gopālarājvaṁśāvalī refers to Nepal the cowherd; the compiler of the 19th-century Buddhist Vaṁśāvalī, Padmagiri, interprets Ne as the Ādi Buddha. Evidently, Ne-muni
has all the essential credentials of being a legitimate child of fertile s scribal
imagination (see Malla 1983b, for the archaeology of the word, *Nepāla*).

Mr Jayaraj Acharya deserves credit for diligently transliterating the
Muralidharā Jha-Muktnathā Khanal text into roman. His translation into
English may be faithful to the Sanskrit text published by Jha and emended by
Acharya, but not incontestable. This is evident from a cursory comparison of his
English translation of the crucial Chapter I verses 57-67 with Brinkhaus's
translation (1980:276-277). Like his "grammatical improvements" in the
original text, Mr Acharya seems also to take editorial liberties to improve
upon the religious semantics of this Śaiva text to make it more readable to
modern Western readers.

Assuming that Mr Jayaraj Acharya has either time or patience in the thick
of his too busy diplomatic assignments to peruse some of the popular 19th-
century *Bhāṣā Vaṃsīvaliś*, composed between ca. the 1830s to the 1880s,
he could have effortlessly identified all the Śiva *iḥāgas* mentioned in the
*Nepāla-Mahātmya*, including, of course, the neglected and abandoned
Somaliṅga, for which both Mr Acharya and his text lament so eloquently:

Nobody really knows the importance of the Somaliṅga in the Kali Yuga.
(Preface, page 6 and the text XVI: 33)

Perhaps. But not everyone is *such* an infidel even at this high noon of the
Kali Yuga.

**Notes**

1. स ९१९ फल्गुन सं १ रो ६ न्यामक विषय चक्र का व्या सपू श्री श्री दत्तेवब जुल
   // सुनाय लेख यात्रा परिपातक तान // ७९० लेख वकनिन्धठ नविलमन चयय तंयु
   समूल्ली रत्ना चोत दुर्यो //

   Colophon of a *Nepāla-Mahātmya* manuscript in a private
collection dated N.S. 989 (A.D. 1868), being a copy of an
erlier manuscript dated N.S. 790 (A.D. 1669). Microfilm No.
   E 718/1.

2. यदा भविष्ये कले च अग्र नेपालमध्ये //
   शैवधर्म प्रकटते दुर्धेरा वर्मत्तितय ///
   यथा वथा शैवधर्म प्रकटते अग्र मणिते //
   तथा तथा च अग्ययु दुर्धेरा वर्मत्तितय ///
   शैवधर्म कार्यवेयिन्य शैवधर्म कार्यवेयिन्य ///
   ले सबै कृतकात (च)च नागकण्ड गमित्तित //

   *Svayambhū Purāṇa*, edited by Shastri: 1900:500
References


*Nepāla-Mahāmya*. A manuscript in devanāgarī transliteration by several hands, copied for Lévi, now deposited in the Institute de la Civilisation Indienne, Universite de Paris, MS-A-4, 245, with 77 folios, 11-14 lines per folio, 27 × 16 cm.


*Nepāla-Mahāmya*. A manuscript deposited at the National Archives, Kathmandu, Catalogue I:984 (Microfilm No. A. 332/13). 91 ollios, 7 lines per folio, 29 cm × 10 cm.

*Nepāla-Mahāmya*. A manuscript deposited at the National Archives, Kathmandu. Catalogue I:894. (Microfilm No. A. 332/15 and 333/1). 128 folios. Six lines per folio. 26 cm × 10 cm.


BOOK REVIEW


It is not frequent that one comes across a general non-academic English writing in Nepal, and from a native born at that. Therefore, the publication of “Mustang Bhot in Fragments” by Manjushree Thapa is a welcome addition to the volumes on contemporary Nepal. The book is basically an “identity trip” by the author to find an “unsplintered” identity for herself and the broader Nepali society.

Though the work is based on Thapa’s two sojourns into Mustang in the aftermath of the political upheavals that wracked Nepal in 1990, it is, nevertheless liberally sprinkled with generalizations and experiences emanating from upper class, America returned and developmental credentials.

The author must be given credit for lack of pretensions regarding her work. True to its name, the book is rather fragmentarily presented. The slim volume is arbitrary apportioned into seven chapters, with considerable white space to spare in and between units. The overall efficiency of the book would have been somewhat enhanced by better organization of the ideas and units.

However, the minor structural defects of the work need not detain us from the main strength of the book which is its ability to raise a number of salient issues discussion. Foremost among these are the questions of identity, cultural change, politics, tourism and development.

Much of the book is the author’s own involvement, written in a breezy journalistic first person. After spending nine long years in the United States of America, but still unable to “... embrace the American dream,” she returns to find her destiny in what she terms “... an open, liberal, developing Nepal.”

With her convent propriety upbringing, western education and high caste/class pedigree, she naturally lands in the developmental field. It is the arena where the upwardly mobile youths of Nepal carve out their niches and

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fortune. So no surprise that she finds herself in the midst of heavy preaching and professing on ecological degradation, gender, caste, class and, of course, development. This developmental circle appears "... open and liberal and quick to distance themselves from their feudal culture."

Delving a little further into the multilayered reality, the author rightly discovers that the same champions of democracy and development carry a different facet at another level. Thus, environmentalists turned out to be cynical businessmen, "... social servants swindlers, women's development officers, patriarchs." The institutions she finds no better: "... bone corrupt and revolutionary at the same time."

Obviously, the first flowering of the democratic euphoria has worn off. It is an incisive insight into the contemporary social pretensions and middle class mindset. But given the amount of development dollars, foreign trips and international recognition involved, it should come as no surprise. In Nepal it pays to wear your democratic, developmental and environmental labels on your forehead.

The barren and rocky landscape of upper Mustang conjures up visions of Santa Fe and the Grand Canyon for the author. While good for comparative perspective transplantation of borrowed visions may distort the ground reality. The first thing in understanding Nepal is to grasp its topo-climatic diversity and not attribute "exotic" flavour to it. As Nepalese, let us leave that for the tourists.

The liberal use of alien terms and categories that do not always relate well with the local context is not limited to the description of the terrain alone. The "Hindu" temple of Muktinath is a place of worship and pilgrimage equally sacred and important for both the so-called "Hindus" and "Buddhists." These absolute and mutually exclusive terms cannot reflect the reality of religion in Nepal as it is a wonderful blending of animism, mysticism and the universal precepts of eastern spiritualism. The total outcome is a sui generis entity, immensely richer than any one of the components and uniquely harmonized with the local cosmobiological and geophysical elements.

Muktinath and many other such pilgrimages help integrate diverse linguistic, ethnic and caste groups together on a spiritual and religious level. The etic view that imposes duality where none exists can only distort objective reality. In the long run it carries seeds for mischief if the people themselves adopt the categories tagged on them to generate fissionary tendencies. It is in similar vein that she describes women as "Hinduized"
from their pierced noses and a particular design of blouse they wear. Here too she falls in the trap of employing categories and concepts borrowed from western analytical science, itself based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Nose piercing is not a strictly Hindu practice; we see perfectly “Hindu” Newars who do not do it.

It is from this erroneous standpoint that the author laments the subsumption of Buddhism by the all “embracing Hindus.” At a time when various spots around the globe have become flashpoints of religious bigotry and when some of the outcome is lapping at our very doorsteps, our religious traditions must be given full credit for seeking to embrace differences rather than to exclude, and accommodate rather than eliminate.

The nature of our indigenous folk religion is such that there are no strict boundaries. Ask village folks what religion they belong to, and the reply will be a look of incomprehension because a structured and church-like religion does not exist here. The dichotomy of Hinduism and Buddhism is an alien notion at the popular level. But these labels are being relentlessly imposed upon the people; they are being told: you are Hindu, he is a Buddhist. Similarly with dress, there are no clear-cut territories. Instead, there are continuous gradations of influence, acculturation and physical needs.

Thapa mentions that people in Mustang often get “Hindu” second names such as Rajendra, Surendra or Manju from their school teachers. While this could be true for individual cases, there might be pitfalls in generalizing the phenomenon. We could begin suspecting St. Xavier fathers for the increasing instances of “Christian” names. To a great extent people choose what they think elevating and civilizing.

Not only are the people of Mustang colonized, as the author contends, but liberated intellectuals and academicians condemned to adopt and implant inappropriate foreign categories could also be under a subtle form of subjugation. In her enthusiasm to see the contradictions in Nepali society, the author unnecessarily fragments the issue where fragmentation does not exist. Concepts and categories are not value neutral, those who use them inappropriately run the risk of projecting the underlying premises and prejudices inherent in these categories. It is in similar romantic spirit that Thapa bemoans the people who have gone the way of money in upper Mustang: and whether that “entailed Hinduising or westernising or Nepalisising mattered little.” Given the reality of upper Mustang as “... farming in the spring, animal husbandry in the summer...” and increasingly wider trade networks and travels, is it not rather wishful to expect the culture to remain pristine, if such a thing ever existed?

Given the vogue that culture is in, the author was bound to take up the cultural issue. The first thing to understand about culture is that it is man’s
adaptation mechanism fashioned to suit a particular physical and social environment. A culture will transform both in form and content, if the conditions of subsistence alter. The interplay of ecology, history and economy must be taken into consideration before singing a eulogy on the erosion of romantically exotic cultures.

It would be naïve to consider Mustang as sort of a mystical Shangri-la and a land that time forgot until the tourists arrived to break the enchanted spell. The “sequestered” image is part of the tourism myth and anthropological romanticism that underplays the fact that Mustang has long been wedded into the global economy and culture before either official “development” or the latter day saviours, the tourists, arrived. Due to economic and demographic factors, Bhotias are more mobile than the Rongbas of the mid-hills. The extensive trading links of the northern people in Tibet, Nepal, India and overseas, as well as their distant pilgrimages, attest to this. Each foray out of Mustang brought back bits and pieces of the global cultural traits.

Various writers and apologists of the northern cultures may have sought to mislead us with the halo of “Tibeto-Burmans” as an egalitarian people, devoid of any class or cultural hierarchy. Sherry Ortner revealed the existence of a complex Khadeu and Khemendeu hierarchy among the Sherpas. Now Thapa has brought to light the Kudak (Bista)/Loba distinctions in fabled Mustang Bhot.

While dealing with the question of cultural decline, the book seeks to link the dilapidated state of some gompas (monastery) to the present poverty of the people. But are not awe inspiring religious monuments the result of religious fervour and organization of the community and not wealth alone? Due to developmental and tourism dollars, Kathmandu is incomparably richer than ancient Nepal, but we hardly expect to see another Changu Narayan. So the “deep seated” religiosity of the community in upper Bhot is perhaps not that deep, and poverty certainly should not be the problem if people there can afford designer clothes, silk, satin and videos.

Mustang Bhot in Fragments provides an insightful commentary on political wranglings in rural Nepal. The tradition of state politics in Nepal has been one characterized by parochial views and clique loyalties rather than guided by mass-based associational organizations and ideologies. There is "...no room for truth in this system, only for factions that claim to know the truth...," which now, nevertheless, is laced with trappings of modern political rhetoric and ideological pretensions.

External interventions such as developmental programmes and ideology seem to have further deepened the community cleavages in some cases. Instead of enlightening the populace to make rational choices, the practitioners of modern politics seem to be preying upon the vulnerability of
the community, reinforcing “old schisms” and running campaigns filled with “rhetoric, lies and impossible promises.”

Whatever the extent of internal schisms, the recent democratic movement has certainly made it fashionable to raise strident calls of separateness and aloofness from the mainstream along ethnic and linguistic lines. But the innate strength and harmony of our traditions must be credited for preventing these divisive tendencies from disrupting day to day community life.

Thapa intelligently sought to interlink the issue of development with the nature of community politics and local leadership. Indeed, local development works, especially the variety requiring community participation and involvement, cannot hope for any degree of success unless they are based on proper understandings of community relationships and the nature of local leadership. The community operated hydel projects in Jharkot and Purang are a success due to the vitality of leaders, fewer distinctions within the community and the ability of these communities to use the electricity for income generating purposes like tourist lodges. On the other hand, similar schemes in upper Mustang are plagued by mutual suspicion, jealousy and non-cooperation. The communities are too fragmented on Bista/Loba lines, the traditional leaders have lost credibility, and there seems to be no monetary use for bijuli at present. As one villager puts it in exasperation, “Whatever you do, don’t involve us. We can’t trust each other.”

The author succinctly records the pitfalls of current rhetoric on participation and voluntary labour. The small hydel project in Charang extracted equal amounts of monetary contribution (Rs. 500 and one wooden pole) and labour input (a months voluntary labour) from each household. But when it came to sharing the benefits, some would be plugging in twenty-six bulbs, stoves and VCRs, while many would be hard pressed to afford one bulb. No wonder the peasants get sceptical and think of “participation” as another scheme to exploit them. The development pundits, on the other hand, get perplexed that their visions of blissful pastoral cooperation find no ready takers among the ignorant laity.

Mustang has been touted as the last touristic frontier in Nepal and the question of its “opening” or restriction was a matter of controversy in the industry and environment circles for quite a while. Upper Mustang was finally opened, and the book has done an excellent job in exposing the various interests behind the decision. In rather condescending terms, the “low-scale highcost” tourism was officially deemed suitable in the culturally and ecologically “fragile” region in the local people’s interest. Furthermore, the government, voicing the industry’s line, argued that this version of elite tourism was the only viable option available for the uplift of the area and the people.
Through its US $500 entry fee and organized group tour requirements for Mustang, the government played into the hands of a few powerful interests within the tourism industry. These exclusiveist regulations meant small and local operators of the area could not partake in the tourism dollars. To the local Mustangis’ feeble claims that a certain portion of the operations in the area be reserved for them, the official retort reads something like: “If you run tourism here, you will ruin your culture and environment, we know how to run it best for you; and as for benefit sharing, you can become porters,” that is, “if we decide not to bring them from Kathmandu.” So despite democratic credentials, the government still choose to play “god” and hand top-down decisions.

Given the obviously low tourism dollar retention rate (as low as fifteen cents per dollar) for Mustang, it is yet to be seen how the much heralded high-cost, high-altitude tourism will benefit the local economy, despite its people and environment friendly labels. One is tempted to hope for the sake of the people that tourism is prevented from becoming a sort of a rough and ready justice: all cultural and environmental burdens on the locals, and profits to the operators.

In a sense Mustang’s mystical halo will be its own undoing as far as “preserving culture” is concerned. No matter what kind of tourism is introduced into the area, it cannot be totally insulated from the local cultural processes because people and cultures are not inert entities. But that’s a normal cost of doing business, as far as the operators are concerned. Given the inevitability of Mustang’s cultural and ecological transformation due to tourism and other contemporary processes, some justice would still be served if the lobas could make something out of the deal. Otherwise, it might, as the Magars say, be “Eei lang bhrasta, woo lang Bhrasta” for the Manangis.

At the end the author comes close to what she was in search of: identity and self. Her position of “first world possibilities in a third world society” is not a produce of her efforts alone but also to a great extent the result of generations of accumulated privileges and power that is “... borne by impoverished, disempowered suffering Nepalis.” This is a critical statement on the working of the rigid stratification system in Nepal and how it determines people’s life chances. To a large extent being born in the “right” place is what counts.

But the seeker of self must be content with partial illumination because “living this schismed identity is what it mean to be like a Nepali.” Maybe the Lobas of this country deal with the identity crisis better, except for the worries of Tasampa and mundanities, they don’t seem to be raked by the perennially confounding.
At another level, however, the question of identity is a problem for the whole new generation that is restless and aspires out of the rural context: from Kagbeni's lodge owner who despises his dhindo and dreams of the "good life" in India, or Norbu Nepali, an unabashed champion of Thak, who in his inner self desperately desires bidesh. But in a sense, don't we all? Depending upon our skills, education and connections, the land of our heart's desire lies elsewhere, whether it be India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan or the western shores. The glorified Lahoure tradition is alive at every level of society - in varying degrees, various forms. Otherwise, why would we communicate about Nepal in foreign tongues in Nepal? The lingua franca or any other local dialects are considered incapable for higher expressions, thus unviable for development and academics. We may be talking about Nepal, but we are not talking to Nepal and Nepalis; our significant audience lies elsewhere. It is ironic that even in this outward flight, the ablest get the farthest out.

It is always tempting to fragment the issues and portray the reality in isolation for conceptual as well as analytical convenience. But the Nepalese situation, instead of coming in a black and white dichotomy, is often a subtle continuum of organic graditions. This holistic realization would perhaps lead to better appreciation of the various issues involved in the questions of development/underdevelopment, politics, culture and identity.

- Saubhagya Shah
Notes to Contributors

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