

# some questions on nepali history

## The Kiratas

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The history of Kathmandu Valley prior to the fifth century A.D. is obfuscated in a web of myth and legend. Recent geological studies have substantiated the legend<sup>2</sup> that Kathmandu Valley was originally a lake.<sup>3</sup> Genealogical writings called Vamsavalis, dating back to the fourteenth century A.D.,<sup>4</sup> mention a number of royal dynasties which ruled Kathmandu Valley during the early centuries before and after the Christian era. However, no dependable historical evidence, lapidary or documentary, is available; hence there is little point in adding conjecture to legend.

Most scholars who have written on the beginnings of Nepali history have commenced their account with the so-called Kirata rulers. One author even has a section on "the pre-Kirata period."<sup>5</sup> The sole "evidence" available to us regarding the so-called Kirata and pre-Kirata periods are the Vamsavalis. The oldest of these Vamsavalis was compiled approximately fourteen hundred years later. There is no evidence that any written literature existed in Nepal during the early years of the Christian era, or that any oral literature was transmitted from generation to generation. In these circumstances, the detailed lists of Kirata Kings, and their regnal years, which Nepali historians<sup>6</sup> are so fond of reproducing from the words of Kirkpatrick,<sup>7</sup> Wright<sup>8</sup> and others, or from the Gopalarajavamsavali, can be regarded as no more than a conglomeration of myth and legend of doubtful historical veracity. By the same methodology, one may as well start compiling a history of India on the basis of the Purnas. Several scholars have discovered too many holes in the historical accuracy of the Vamsavalis<sup>9</sup> to permit us to depend upon these writings for any serious study of ancient Nepali history.

What can be proved through historical evidence is that a non-Sanskrit-speaking dynasty was ruling in Kathmandu Valley at least during the first or second century A.D. The inscriptions of the subsequent period, which are invariably in the Sanskrit language, refer to a number of places, taxes, government offices, etc. with non-Sanskritic names.<sup>10</sup>

This non-Sanskrit-speaking dynasty has been given the name of Kirata on the testimony of the Vamsavalis. Attempts have been made to show that the Kiratas were an ethnic community, of the same stock as the present-day Kiratas of the eastern hill region. However, ancient writings, inscriptions, and Vamsavalis using the term Kirata were all the products of people of an Indo-Aryan cultural background who came to Kathmandu Valley from the south. It is perhaps too much to expect these authors to have possessed an accurate knowledge of the ethnology of this region. They used the term Kirata to mean mountain-dwellers in general.<sup>11</sup> If this hypothesis is not correct,

should we say that there were only Kiratas in Kathmandu Valley and the peripheral areas during the early years of the Christian era?

Inaccuracy of ethnological terminology because of ignorance was not confined to ancient and medieval Nepal. In our own days, we use the term "Madise" to denote the inhabitants of the Terai region, irrespective of their actual ethnic status. Similarly, the term Bhote is used to denote all communities of Tibetan stock. Another example is furnished by the use of the term Newar after 1768; the term, which originally denoted nationality, was thereafter used to denote a caste.<sup>12</sup>

### The Licchavis

The Kiratas are said to have been followed by the Licchavis. An attempt has been made to connect them with the Licchavis of Vaisali in India.<sup>13</sup> Manadeva and his successors were, no doubt, born of immigrants from India. The Indian influence, demonstrated by linguistic, iconographic and other evidence, cannot be explained otherwise. But the claim of Manadeva's family to belong to the Licchavi clan must be regarded with some skepticism. Manadeva, from whose reign Nepal's recorded history starts, himself made no such claim. In his Changuanarayan inscription of Samvat 386, he listed his forbears as Vrisadeva, Sankaradeva, and Dharmadeva, but did not use the term Licchavi for the dynasty.<sup>14</sup> It was only forty-one years later, in 427 Samvat, that his daughter, Vijayavati, made the claim that Manadeva was born in the Licchavi dynasty.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, the ruling dynasty of Kathmandu Valley had become sufficiently strong and illustrious during these four decades to be able to advance such a claim. This process culminated with Jayadeva II's inscription at Pasupati, in which he claims a twenty-three-generation pedigree, and direct kinship ties with the solar dynasty of India.<sup>16</sup>

Each ruling dynasty in Nepal has tried to connect its lineage with one or other of the well-known royal dynasties of India. The Malla rulers styled themselves Suryavamsis. The attempt of King Ram Shah of Gorkha to obtain recognition of kinship ties from the Ranas of Udayapur may also be mentioned in this connection.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Kunwars who seized power in Nepal in 1846 assumed the title of Rana and claimed consanguinity with the Ranas of Mewar in India.

### The Modern Period

The modern period in Nepali history is generally regarded as having commenced with the establishment of the unified Kingdom of Nepal through the conquests of Prithvi Narayan Shah. D.R. Regmi's Modern Nepal thus deals with the period beginning 1750. As he explains:-<sup>18</sup>

Prithvinarayan Shah is the maker of modern Nepal and, therefore, we begin our history with his career of conquest. ... The history delineated (in

Modern Nepal) could be called one of the early modern period. Here we no longer have to depend on inscriptions or like documents for sources. The chronicles tend to give more or less ascertained dates as the chronicler in all cases happens to write about events within his memory. As this period coincides with early British rule in India, we have also in many instances British Indian sources to verify any unascertained date figures. Other source materials are sanads, royal and official charters, letters and memorials and notes prepared by foreign visitors.

D. R. Regmi thus does not explain clearly the reasons for advancing the view that the modern period in Nepali history commenced at the middle of the eighteenth century. He indirectly implies that he considers this period modern because of the availability of copious and dependable historical materials, including the accounts of witnesses.

Baburam Acharya holds two views about the modern period in Nepali history. At one place, he writes that this period commenced in 1723.<sup>19</sup> At another place, he puts forward the following view:<sup>20</sup>

The mediaeval period in Nepal continued until 1525, when the Mughal Empire was founded in India. The modern period commenced thereafter. The founding of the Mughal Empire in India, the splitting up of the Malla Kingdom into three parts in Nepal, and its subsequent reunification -- all these events took place during the modern period.

The practice of dividing historical periods into ancient, mediaeval, and modern appears to have started with the use of term "Middle Ages" to denote a distinct period in historical time separating the civilization of ancient Rome from the new civilized Europe which began with the Renaissance.<sup>21</sup> Although the term, as well as the concept symbolized by it, was considerably older in origin, the term appears to have been popularized by the German Protestant seventeenth-century analyst Cellarius.<sup>22</sup> Once the concept of mediaevalism was adopted, the subsequent period was naturally regarded as the modern period. In the words of J.J. Bagley,<sup>23</sup> nineteenth century historians adopted the terms Middle Ages and Medieval because they found them convenient labels for those centuries which, in the western half of Europe, separated the Ancient World from the capitalist, technological, rationalist Europe of nation states, which they, if not the general public, called modern.

In the opinion of John B. Morrall,<sup>24</sup> the dichotomy between "medieval" and "modern" is no longer self-evidently valid, but "it is no use denying the presence of a certain sense of "otherness" felt by every modern historian when he considers the Middle Ages.

... What the twentieth-century historian of this medieval period has to try to do is to account for this 'otherness' without recourse to unsubstantiated theories of cataclysmic break." J.J. Bagley makes the same point when he says that the modern period in English history commenced not in 1485 but from the middle decades of the sixteenth century, when "the distinctive pattern of modern social life" started emerging.<sup>25</sup>

Geoffrey Barraclough<sup>26</sup> has remarked: "It is, indeed, a major question whether we can devise any scheme of chronology which is applicable to every country or to every people at once." If the criterion for distinguishing between the mediaeval period and the modern period in history is the transition toward "a distinctive pattern of social life," it may be valid to put forward the view that the modern period in Nepali history commenced during the middle of the nineteenth century, when Rana rule emerged in Nepal.

#### Footnotes

1. This article has been reprinted from the Regmi Research Series, Year 8, No. 1, January 1, 1976, Kathmandu, Pages 2-7, mimeo.
2. Daniel Wright, History of Nepal, Reprint of 1877 ed. Kathmandu: Antiquated Publishers, 1972, pp. 77-78.
3. Toni Hagen, Nepal: The Kingdom in the Himalayas. Berne: Kimmerley and Frey, 1961, p. 53.
4. Wright, op. cit., p. 5.
5. D.R. Regmi, Ancient Nepal. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960, pp. 60-62.
6. Regmi, op. cit., p. 63.
7. Colonel Kirkpatrick, An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal. Reprint of 1811 ed. New Delhi: Manjusri Published House, 1969, pp. 257-258.
8. Wright, op. cit., pp. 109-110.
9. Baburam Acharya, Shri 5 Badamaharajadhiraja Prithvi Narayan Shah. (The Great King Prithvi Narayan Shah). Kathmandu: His Majesty's Press Secretariat, 2024 (1967). Part I, pp. 40-42.
10. Dhanavajra Bajracharya, "Licchavikalako Itihasama Kiratakalako Prabhava". (Impact of the Kirata Period on the Licchavi Period). Purnima, Years 5, No. 1, Baisakh-Ashadh 2025 (April-June, 1968), pp. 1-8.
11. Regmi, op. cit., p. 23.



12. Government of Nepal, "Newar Jatko Ain" (Law of the Newar Caste). Muluki Ain (Legal Code). Kathmandu: Gorkhapatra Press, 1955, pp. 75-82.
13. Hit Narayan Jha, The Licchavis (of Vaisali), Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1970, p. 126 ff.
14. Dhanavajra Bajracharya, Licchavi Kalaka Abhilekha. (Inscriptions of the Licchavi Period). Kathmandu: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, 2030 (1973), pp. 9-30.
15. Ibid, pp. 82-87.
16. Ibid, pp. 548-562.
17. Yogi Naraharinath (ed.), Gorkha Vamshavali (Genealogy of the Gorkha Dynasty). Kashi: Aryavirasangh, 2021 (1964), pp. 27-28.
18. D. R. Regmi, Modern Nepal, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975 (2d. ed.). Introduction, pp. vi-vii.
19. Baburam Acharya, Nepalko Samkshipta Vrittanta (A Concise Account of Nepal). Kathmandu: Pramod Shamsher and Nir Bikram "Pyasi." Chaitra 2022 (March 1966). "Prastavana" (Preface), p. 5.
20. Ibid, Chapter I: "Purva Vrittanta". (The Early Account), p. 2.
21. Geoffrey Barraclough, History in a Changing World. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957, p. 54.
22. John B. Morrall, The Medieval Imprint, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967, p. 13.
23. J.J. Bagley, Historical Interpretation: Sources of English Medieval Hwstory, 1066-1540. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 259.
24. Morrall, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
25. Bagley, op. cit., pp. 259-60.
26. Barraclough, op. cit., p. 61.



