Early Christian missions in the Himalayas:
including a note on the location of missionary archives in Italy
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Christian missionaries were one of the most important channels through which the European world received historical and anthropic information about the Orient. The exactitude, impartiality and truthfulness of their observations — and indeed their missionary aim itself — may be questionable for many today, but no one can deny that ethnologists and historians today owe much to the works of the early Christian missionaries.

The Himalayas, one of the regions of the world most difficult of access, was first approached by missionaries in the early 17th century. Over the next two hundred years many missionaries visited the region, some of whom remained for a considerable period of time, studying the local languages and cultures. The documents relating to their activities (circulars, decrees, letters, memoirs, etc.) form a huge corpus of literature scattered in various ecclesiastical and civil archives in Italy. Parts of that literature have been edited by scholars, the most important of which for the missionary activities in Nepal and Tibet being Prof. Luciano Petech's massive I missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal. The more modest aim of the present report is to summarize these missionary activities and to bring to the attention of scholars, both from Europe and the Himalayan region itself, the extent and location of the missionary archives in Italy.

Early Expeditions to the Himalayas

Muslim traders were already active and geographically mobile in western and central Asia during the centuries preceding the European Renaissance. Their role in bridging the gap between East and West and in stimulating the Renaissance is well-known. Petech (1952-56: 1, 18) stresses how the story attributed to Muslim traders of "remote, forgotten and degenerated Messiah-following communities" somewhere inside the highlands and valleys of the Asia Interior fuelled European curiosity and later stimulated missionary expeditions to the region. Most probably the Muslim traders confused the Buddha-image with that of the Messiah. The Persian term for idolatry būt-parasīt (būt = statue, idol) might be related to the term Buddha (Buddha > Bud > Būt) whose images and statues were abundantly found in Central Asia when Muslims began to convert local peoples.

Christian missionaries were already in the process of consolidating their bases in China and India by the beginning of the 17th century. Goa, Macao and other Portuguese colonies served as base-camps for exploratory ventures. The sea-way between China and India became increasingly dangerous due to the attacks of local pirates and Dutch corsairs around Macao, the south Chinese waters and Indochinese coasts. The need for a new route between the Chinese mainland and the Indian subcontinent, via terra, was felt as an utmost priority by missionary authorities. The missionaries were not always escorted or assisted by the European powers so they sought to establish their own routes and support centres. Many of the early travellers, and especially the Jesuits, used to operate autonomously, but they did not hesitate to take full advantage of the facilities intentionally or unintentionally provided by the European powers.

The earliest missionary explorations of the Himalayan region were undertaken with the aim of opening new channels of communication between China-based and Indian-based missionaries. The first western missionary to cross the Himalayan passes and visit the Tibetan plateau was a Portuguese Jesuit, Father Antonio de Andrade (1580-1634). In 1624 he reached Tibet from India, via Garhwal, and one year later established a residence and chapel at Tsaparang (or Tsa-bra-ld) in south-western Tibet. A further visit to India enabled him to return to Tsaparang with additional resources and manpower. Father Antonio de Andrade wrote two reports on his travels and missionary operations, which were published under the title Novo descoberimento do Gran Cathay ou reino de Tibet, pello padre Antonio de Andrade de Companhia de Jesu, Portugueses, anno de 1626 (see Peireiro, 1921). His reports aroused much curiosity and were soon translated into Spanish, French, Italian and Polish. Called back to India by his superiors in Goa, Fr. de Andrade left the Tsaparang mission to his assistants. About a decade later the centre was closed due to political upheavals and the frequent Ladakhi forces, who did not view the presence of Christian missionaries as a positive influence in the region.

During the same period two other Portuguese Jesuits, Fathers Estevão Cacella (1585-1630) and João Cabral (1599-1669), arrived in the region. Fr. Estevão Cacella went to Goa as a Jesuit missionary around 1614, and worked for some time on the Malabar coast in southwestern India. In 1626 he and Fr. João Cabral went to explore Tibet via Bengal and Bhutan, but they did not remain there for long. Fr. Cabral is said to have returned to India passing through Nepal in the years 1628 (B.C. Sharma 1975: 195).

In 1629 Fr. Cacella received a mandate to open a permanent missionary centre in the area previously visited by him and Fr. Cabral. He left for Shigatse (south-eastern Tibet) with a clear mandate and a long-term project. Soon after his arrival in Shigatse he fell sick and died there in 1630. After his death the Shigatse mission was abandoned, and the Jesuits remained inactive in the region for almost three decades. Fr. Cacella's memoirs contain interesting historical and ethnographic accounts of the area around Shigatse (cf. C. Wessels 1924: 120-63). At this time another Portuguese Jesuit, Fr. Manoel Dias, was sent to the eastern Himalayas by the Jesuit authorities at Cochín. Very little is known about his travels. Fr. Dias is supposed to have died in the Morang (Terai) of Nepal on his way to Tibet.

Two Jesuit fathers, Johann Grueber and Albert d'Orville, are said to have reached Lhasa in 1661, thereby becoming the first westerners to reach the political and cultural centre of Tibet. Fr. Johann Grueber (1623-1680), an Austrian Jesuit, travelled as a missionary to Macao in 1658 and then went on to Peking, where he remained for a couple of years. He was engaged to explore the land-route from China to India. In 1661 he passed through Tibet and Nepal in the company of the Belgian Jesuit, Fr. Albert d'Orville. In the winter of 1661-62 the two Jesuits halted at Kathmandu for a month or so, where they were received by the then King, Pratap Malla. The fathers presented the Malla ruler with a telescope. The king was an author of verses in Sanskrit and a great admirer of learned persons; so he was pleased to meet the two erudite and experienced Jesuit travellers. In one of the inscriptions found inside Haman-Dhoka words in Roman letters have been found; the inscriptions belonged to Pratap Malla. It is supposed that the king learned Roman letters from these Jesuits. The king was fond of learning many languages and he used to invite many scholars from different parts of the Indian subcontinent (B.C. Sharma: 168).

Fr. d'Orville died after reaching Agra, and Fr. Grueber went back to Europe via Persia and Turkey. Many of the letters, reports and memoirs of Fr. Grueber are still unedited. Wessels (1924) and Petech (1952-56) note that some were published by A. Kircher in Amsterdam (1667) and M. Thévenot in Paris (1672).
In 1679, another Jesuit, Fr. Marcan-
tonio Santucci, is said to have visited the
Nepal valley. Fr. Santucci was an Italian
missionary resident at the Patna quarters of
the Jesuits. Neither Guerber and d'Orville
nor Santucci bothered to use their foot-hold
in the Nepal valley for the evangelization,
but they did collect accurate information and
building good rapport with the local authori-
ties.

Missions to Nepal

After the explorative phase of the
Jesuits, Europeans with a more zealous
temperament and a clear religious goal
started to appear on the Himalayan scene. In
1707, a group of Capuchin fathers ventured
to Nepal and Tibet. The Capuchin fathers
halted in the Nepal valley for a couple of
months without revealing their true identi-
ties and goals, presenting themselves instead
as medical practitioners. In those two months
they did nothing to consolidate their base:
Petech notes that they left no significant
report or memoir behind, except for some
personal letters containing superficial
observations and remarks regarding the life
in the Valley.

In 1715, again on its way to Tibet, the
Capuchin expedition passed through Nepal.
Unlike the previous expedition, some of the
Capuchin fathers remained and sought to
establish links with local society with a view
to evangelization. The Head of the Capu-
chin expedition was Fr. Francesco Orazio da
Pennabilli (1680-1745). He was perhaps the
brightest of all the Capuchins. His Breve
raguaglio dell'operato da Cappuccini nella
missione del Tibet, Rome, 1738 (cf.
Analect Ordinis Min. Cappuccinorum -
71, 1921) and Relazione sul principio e stato
presente della missione del Gran Tibet,
Rome, 1722 (cf. Analect Ord. Min. Cap. -
4, 1888) are accounts of the difficulties
and problems related to the “evangelization”
of the Nepalese and Tibetan peoples. It also
contains many other details of the missionary
expeditions and operations and
some valuable information about local con-
ditions. Fr. da Pennabilli was the first to
translate Christian writings in Tibetan and to
prepare Italian-Tibetan vocabulary (cf. F.
d'Anvers 1934; also Petech op. cit.).

Unlike the Jesuits, the Capuchin fathers
were less interested in learning about
local society through a study of local
language and culture. Instead, they were
mainly interested in evangelization, the task
for which they had dedicated their lives.
The Capuchin mission had a mandate from
the Church of Rome. The Santa Congregazione
de Propaganda Fide (a huge section of
the Church of Rome presiding over the
missionary affairs of all Catholics) had
already given the charge of evangelizing the
Himalayas to the provincial capuchin
authorities in Ascoli-Piceno (Le Marche,
central Italy).

The Capuchin missionaries are said to
have established bases in Patan and Kath-
mundu with the disciples of Fr. Orazio da
Pennabilli remaining in the Valley to launch
their mission. Their medical practices were
continued along with the effort to “evan-
gelize” the people. The local elite grew
uneasy with the Capuchin fathers; and in
1735, the Capuchin transferred their centre
to Bhadgaon because the authorities of
Kathmandu and Patan were no longer
friendly to them. Bhadgaon was relatively
smaller and less influential than Kathmandu
or Patan. It was basically a quiet agrarian
place. But the difficulties pertaining to the
mission’s resources and man-power and their
contact and communication with other
Capuchin bases in India and Tibet rendered
the operations problematic. The locals were
not openly hostile but stubborn and confi-
dent. Evangelizing such people was not an
easy job. Frustrated with the difficulties and
meagre results, the Capuchin fathers gradu-
ally retreated from Tibet and Nepal to their
Indian base at Patna.

After three years from their retreat to
Patan, the Capuchins -- already well-known
to the authorities of Kathmandu, Patan and
Bhaktapur -- were approached by the emis-
saries of the Mallas rulers. The rulers of the
Nepal Valley and central midlands were
notorious for their rivalry and shifting alli-
ances amongst themselves. By that period
the presence of westerners in various parts of
the Indian sub-continent was already well-
known to the Nepalese feudal lords. Many of
them were quite eager to build good rela-
tions with the Europeans, which, in their
eyes, were replacing the Muslims as the
dominant power. By courting and favouring
the missionaries they wanted to establish
Closer contact with the Indian-based Euro-
pean colonizers. They wanted to use the
missionaries as strategic bridges to win
sympathy and, eventually, military assistance
for their own territorial ambition and to
settle their scores with internal rivals. Of
course, the reality was quite different; the
missionaries were not so close or directly
related to the Indian-bases European
powers.

Utilizing fully the nice opportunity,
two Italian Capuchin missionaries, Fathers
Joachim da S. Anastasia and Vito da Recanati
left Patna immediately. King Ramajit Mall
of Bhaktapur offered the best opportunities,
and so the missionaries opted to open their
base there. They were lavishly helped by the
King. After some time, they were lured to
open another centre in Kathmandu. It is said
that the then King, Jaya Prakash Mall, did
his best to please the missionaries, (B. C.
Sharma 1975: 195-6)

The Capuchin mission continued
without any perturbation until 1769 at which
time the Gorkhali conquerors, who had been
planning the capture of the valley for some
time, succeeded in their aim. Soon after the
Gorkhali conquest the missionaries were
expelled from Nepal along with their
neocoverts, altogether 62 persons. Gorkhali
still repeat the saying: “Traders come with
Bible and then the Bible comes with the
sword”(vyapar-ko saith Bible ko saith tarvat).
They had witnessed the subju-
gation of many Indian rulers and associated
the European traders and colonizers with the
missionaries. When the Gorkhali were
completing their take-over, they did not
want a single missionary or even a single
neocovert to remain. But nobody was
physically harassed or killed for this reason.
The Nepalese neo-converts went to Bettiah
(Bihar) and settled as an exiled community.

According to Petech (1952: 1, 68) the
Capuchin had been able to establish good
contacts with the “croftie of Pritivi Narayan,
the Gorkhali king; i.e. before the Gorkhali
take-over of the valley (cf. Petech, ... op. vol.
L, p. LXVII). In 1767, some of the Capu-
chins are said to have visited Nuwakot
(north-west of Kathmandu, then under
Gorkhali command) on the explicit request
of the Gorkhali themselves (Petech 1952, 2,
294-97). But nothing regarding this is to be
found in the history narrated by the native
scholars.

After the death of Pritivi Narayan, the
Gorkhali king who unified the numerous
peoples of the central Himalayas and
laid the foundations of present-day Nepal,
his son and successor Singh Pratap is said
to have invited the Capuchins to resume
their mission. Singh Pratap, who is considered
a weak, meak and insignificant ruler by native
historians, was held to be a polite and bene-
volent king by the missionaries who were
watching the Nepalese scenario carefully.

Prince Bahadur Shah, Singh Pratap’s
brother who was at odds with the queen for
power, is said to have had a very cordial
relation with the Capuchin fathers at Bettiah.
The mission was allowed to stay for some time.
After the end of his exile, he is said
to have invited the fathers to come and
resume their mission in Kathmandu, (Petech
1952-56: 1, 69; 187, n. 75). Fr. Giuseppe da
S. Marcello, an Italian Capuchin, went to
Kathmandu following the invitation in 1786.
In 1787, another Italian Capuchin, Fr. Carlo
Maria da Alatii, joined Fr. da S. Marcello,
but soon after his arrival he was called back
to Patna for another assignment. Then Fr. da
S. Marcello was also called by the Capuchin
authorities in India to cover a post in Varan-
si. The scarcity of missionary manpower in
several parts of India affected adversely the
missions in the Himalayan region.

In 1794, Fr. Romualdo da Senegalla was sent to Nepal. He too left soon due to serious health problems. In 1796 or 1997 Fr. Giuseppe da S. Marcello, already familiar with Nepal, was sent back to Nepal from Varanasi by the Capuchin authorities. He is said to have taken his job too "lightly" - mixing with local people, forgetting to "evangelize" them and keeping a local woman as a concubine. In 1803 he was ex-communicated by his superiors. At that point the Capuchin mission in Kathmandu was over. The missionary, however, did not leave. Fr. da S. Marcello remained in Nepal till the end of his life — without any missionary mandate and living on his own. In 1810, the missionary chapter was closed in Nepal with the death of Giuseppe da San Marcello (Petech 1952-56, 70-1).

Missions to Tibet

The first phase of missionary activities relating to the evangelization of Tibet was initiated by the Capuchins after the exploratory ventures of the Jesuits. In the early days of the Capuchin mission to Tibet (1707-1711) the missionaries accomplished very little. The beginning itself was problematic due to the difficult terrain, the distances involved, the insufficient manpower and the strangeness of the local environment. These problems were compounded by their failure to maintain contact and secure reinforcements from their Indian bases.

After a pause of a half-decade, the Capuchin fathers renewed their effort. In 1716 a few Capuchin missionaries reached Lhasa. To their surprise, they found an Italian Jesuit, Fr. Ippolito Desideri, who was already learning the local language and culture. The accounts of Fr. Ippolito Desideri, S.J. (1684-1733), native of Pistoia (Italy), constitute the most precious source of information regarding Tibet. He remained in Tibet for five consecutive years (1716-1722). The rivalry between the two societies resulted in a series of disputes and controversy for years. Upon leaving Lhasa, Fr. Ippolito Desideri travelled to other parts of the trans-Himalayas. In November 1721 he reached Kathmandu on his way to the Jesuit bases in India. After a month-long sojourn in Nepal, he proceeded towards India. His accounts of Tibet constitute an excellent ethnographic work. Even the memoirs of a short stay in Nepal is a very interesting work. His mastery over the local languages and his good rapport with the natives gave him an edge over the Capuchin fathers. His inclination to knowledge rather than "evangelization" contrasted with the Capuchin's naive self-righteousness and zeal for "evangelization".

The second phase of the Capuchin mission to Tibet (1716-1733) was a more fruitful in converts than the previous one. The Capuchins had acquired more knowledge of the language and slightly better rapport with the locals. But this phase also could not last long due to the lack of new reinforcements and regular contacts with other bases in India. The problems in adapting to the local food, climate and customs were equally pressing. Notwithstanding the formerly tolerant and indifferent attitude shown by the Tibetans, the missionary fathers were not viewed with good eyes by the local élites and authorities. In 1741, for the third time, the Capuchin tried to establish themselves in Tibet. Soon after their arrival hostilities from the Tibetans surfaced more clearly. The local neo-converts were socially marginalized. Some of them were even prosecuted by the local authorities. Harassments and hostilities to the Capuchins increased. Three out of the six missionaries left Tibet. Day by day, the other missionaries found it hard to continue. Having sensed the futility and hopelessness of their efforts, all the remaining Capuchin fathers left Tibet for India. Due to the mission in Tibet being abandoned. Immediately after their departure, a mob (most probably, incited by their preachers) is said to have demolished the Capuchin establishment (residence and chapel) - a symbolic action marking the end of the Christian presence.

The missionaries did not succeed in their efforts to evangelize the Himalayas but their expeditions left a wealth of information for historians and ethnologists.

Reflections

Christianity originated as a spiritual movement in the Middle East, a region criss-crossed by many civilizational and religious-philosophical currents. Politically it was a part of the Roman empire. The Christian movement grew in a relatively cosmopolitan environment and its message was imbued with transcultural and universalistic outlook. Among many other favourable circumstances, the spread of Christianity in other parts of the Roman empire was facilitated by two novelties: a deep ethico-existential concern and a radical universalism.

With the official adoption of Christianity by the Roman emperor Constantine (three centuries after Christ), Christianity ceased to be a spiritual movement and became an established religion operating from the urban centre-stages. The initial Christian urge to spread the spiritual message was an immediate and natural consequence of the "prophetic eruption". With the institutionalization of Christianity "universalism" and "movementism" acquired new significances. When the urge to spread the spiritual message was forcefully stretched beyond the contextual and temporal range of the "prophetic eruption" (i.e. Christ event) it transformed into an official campaign of converting the non-Christians living beyond the shores of the eastern Mediterranean.

The advent of Islam, another universalistic religion from the same Abrahamic (Semitic) roots, stopped the outward expansion of Christianity for a long time. In the 17th century, the Chinese, the Turks and the Mongols, became strong bulwarks against the Christian march into Asia Interior. Nevertheless, in a sporadic way, Christian missionaries kept on trying.

During the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries numerous missionary expeditions in the Asian hinterlands were attempted. The Himalayas were also approached in that particular period.

Western man has always been, since the times of the ancient Greeks, curious and practical-minded. The combination of religious zeal in the Judaic-Christian tradition, the curiosity and passion for unknown horizons (Greek element) and the practically and expansionism (Roman characters) produced what we may call the western activism. As long as the religious vision dominated, the quest was for the unknown "skies" (as in medieval Christian and Islamic cosmology) through intense inward movements. As soon as the religious vision was diluted with social and material aspirations, the quest turned towards the unknown "surfaces". With the Renaissance, western man "lost" the paradise but gained "freedom" from absolutist theocentric vision. The quest for adventure, a psychic residue of the mystique of the wilderness, exploded during the transitional period from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and beyond. Since that period western activism has manifested itself in great artistic, intellectual and material achievements. On the other hand, it has also been reflected in the westerners' restless, trouble-shooting and encroaching behaviour throughout the transitional and modern periods. Christian missionaries, as westerners, are no exception; they reflect both aspects of the western activism.

Meanwhile the Gorkhali campaign to unite the central Himalayan principalities gathered momentum and swept across the southern flank of the Himalayas. The campaign was imbued with a pronounced anti-colonial sentiment. In the mean time, the Capuchin were in their most crucial phase of mission in Nepal. The mission in Tibet depended heavily upon the mission bases in Nepal and India since the way to China from Tibet was longer and much more arduous. The Gorkhali élites (Brahmins and Kshatriyas, orthodox Śāива Hindus) were
quite suspicious of the western missionaries' presence in the Valley, whom they linked with the politico-military network of European powers. Even to this date many people in Nepal think in the same way. With the Gorkhali take-over of the valley the mission was destined to fail.

The attempt to evangelize the Himalayas failed. The harsh topography, the long distances and the lack of political support (for Nepal and Tibet were never colonized by western powers) determined the outcome of the missionary attempts. The apparently tolerant but quite stiff and stubborn attitude of the locals also contributed to the mission's lack of success. The predominantly Savite Nepalese and Mahayana Buddhist Tibetans have a permissive, flexible and polyhedric religiosity. So they did not mind the presence of Christianity among them, which was just one more cult and avadāra in an archipelago of uncontrollable cults and avadāras.

In fact, the Christian missionaries were welcomed by the locals in the beginning. Soon they realized that the newcomers were overbearing in their insistence in making the people accept their "their" religion (a very disgusting behaviour as per Oriental standards) and abandon their own old "things" (e.g. polygamy or polyandry; rites and ceremonies, polytheism, etc.) as well as disobeying their traditional authorities (i.e. Brahmins, Lama etc.). Such exclusivism was unknown to Himalayan people. The combination of insistence to convert and exclusivist preaching came to be seen as the "danger" of Christian proselytism. The concept and practice of conversion is absent in local traditions. Dharmā-paritāvanā (change, or 'reversal', of dharmā sounds negative to local ears).

In the same way, the modern fashion of adopting Oriental religion or mysticism by a section of the westerners is not appreciated at all by the authentically traditional Hindu and Buddhists. A westerner is disregarded or suspected as soon as he/she pretends to convert or induce behavioural changes, or, for the same reason, behaves in a self-denying, "converted" way (e.g. Hare Krishna, Rajneesh-followers, the "white Lamas" etc.). Even, too much insistence from western curches in the "dialogue" could provoke uneasiness. For them the all-pervading and self-evident (i.e. Dharma) must not be abstracted, extrapolated and made the object of formal discourses. The different ways (mārgā) to conceive and sustain the Order (Dharma) should be equally respected (Sarva-dharma-samā-bhāva).

A note on missionary archives in Italy

ARCHIVIO GENERALE dei FRATI MINORI CAPPUCINI, Rome. Analecta Ordinis Minorum Cappuccinorum, Rome

ARCHIVIO della SANTA CONGREGAZIONE de PROPAGANDA FIDE, Rome. This archive is the one which contains the biggest part of the missionary activities abroad. See two sections within this archives: (i) Scritture riferite nelle congregazioni generali; (ii) Scritture riferite nelle congregazioni particolari per la Cina e per le Indie orientali (this section contains most of the documents related to the missionary activities in eastern Asia).

NECROLOGIO dei FRATI MINORI CAPPUCINI della PROVINCIA PICENA, ed. by Giuseppe della Fermo, to be found in Ancona (central Italy). This is a succinct biographical list of all the dead Capuchin Fathers and contains some information about the Capuchin missionaries.

ARCHIVIO della CURIA PROVINCIALE dei CAPPUCINI, Ancona. This contains most of the information on those Capuchin missionaries who organized the first substantial and established missions in Kathmandu valley and Lhasa.

ARCHIVIO VATICANO, Vatican City, Rome. It contains many of the edited and unedited documents on the missionaries to all directions.

ARCHIVIO STORICO ITALIANO, Florence, contains materials on Italian travellers and explorers including the missionaries (e.g. the Jesuit father Ippolito Desideri).

BIBLIOTECA APOSTOLICA VATICANA, Vatican City. It contains edited materials by and on the missionaries.

BIBLIOTECA NAZIONALE VITTORIO EMANUELE II, Rome. It contains some materials regarding the Italian explorers abroad (e.g. Ippolito Desideri's IL MANUALE MISSIONARIO DI P. DESIDERI)

ARCHIVIUM HISTORICUM SOCIETATIS IESU, Rome. Most of the materials and notes on the Jesuit missionaries are to be found in this archive (e.g. Andrade and other early Portuguese missionaries)

There is a huge documentation by C. Sommervogel, BIBLIOTHEQUE DE LA COMPAGNIE DE JESUS (10 volumes), Brussels-Paris, 1890-1900, which is to be found in many important libraries of the Jesuit institutions.

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INTERVIEW

On the Topicality of History: An Interview with Mahesh Chandra Regmi

Martin Gaenszle

Having been tutored by his father he "never saw the inside of a school", and as he had to discontinue his university education after a B.A. at the age of eighteen, Mahesh Chandra Regmi, today the unquestioned authority on Nepal's economic history, started his academic career - as he says - "with hands tied behind the back". After four years at Trichandra College in Kathmandu the Rana government sent him to Patna University, where he stayed for two months to prepare for his B.A. examinations. He then tried to run a book shop, later a cloth shop, in Calcutta, but eventually returned to Kathmandu just before the changes in 1950.

It was only around 1956, when he met a Ford Foundation scholar who was doing research on the agricultural system of Nepal and asked him to translate some documents, that M.C. Regmi started to get interested in doing research on Nepal's economic history. In 1960 he received support from the University of California and in the following years he wrote the four volume study Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal, which still stands as the authoritative source on the subject. This was followed by several books on the economic history of Nepal: among others A Study in Nepali Economic History (1971), Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19th Century Nepal (1979), The State and Economic Surplus: Production, Trade and Resource Mobilization in Early 19th Century Nepal (1985).

Rather than striving for a university career, he set up his own private Regmi Research Institute, which provides several regular publications that are valuable sources for scholars on Nepal, such as the Nepal Press Digest, the Nepal Recorder, and - until recently - the Regmi Research Series. In 1977, Mahesh Chandra Regmi received the Ramon Magaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts. Though he usually prefers to stay away from the academic arena of seminars, conferences and workshops, he still continues his studies, the latest product of which I had the opportunity to read in a draft version. This was one of the things we talked about during the interview, which was held on August 19, 1992 at his house in Lajim-path.

Q: The Regmi Research Series, which was much valued by scholars, has been suspended since 1990.
A: In 1989 December. I kept it up for twenty years. I started in November 1969, and finally gave it up in December 1989, because I couldn't keep it up.
Q: What were the reasons?
A: Well, the first thing was that it was selling only about forty copies, forty subscriptions. It did not generate enough resources to hire people, assistants, things like that. This was the main problem. Another problem was that I couldn't find anybody with the competence to translate the old documents in the style I used. So it was a one-man-show.
Q: So did you do all the translations all yourself?
A: Of course. Do you think I could get easily somebody else do to that, to understand and interpret the old documents and translate them in good English language?
Q: You didn't want to do it yourself any longer?
A: The point is: there is a limit to everything. After crossing the age of sixty I don't want to work nine hours a day. That's not the goal of life. And then I decided to concentrate on my own writing, not just to give up the Regmi Research Series and sit quietly, playing with my grandchildren. What I want to do is spend more time on my own work.
Q: So it was also not the reason that you ran out of materials?
A: Well, I could keep it up for the next fifty years. There are tremendous volumes of materials now with me in this room, they are still untapped. And materials are coming in, you see, every day something new, documents, books, things like that. And you can always go to the Government Offices and procure more documents. Materials were not the problem. (...) The point is that I'm glad that this publication has been used and appreciated by the academic world. (...) So my purpose is served, I have shown what I can do.
Q: Now as far as I know, your collection of manuscripts has been microfilmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project.
A: That's right. I am glad because I can't handle it. The paper is getting brittle, the ink is fading, nobody is able to use it. Now this is all a part of mankind's corpus of knowledge. Now it is safe.
Q: Has everything been microfilmed in your collection?
A: The only thing I wonder is who will look at these microfilms and when.
Q: Well, now there is this new microfilm house, you may have heard...
A: Yes but people, people... You know the manuscripts I have given include a copy of a manuscript of the Ekadasi Mahatmya. You know, the eleventh day of each fortnight is a very sacred day, for Ekadasi. So one of my ancestors made a copy of that Ekadasi Mahatmya and in that he has written a verse: bhaga-pritha-kati-griva-baddha-mustir-adho-mukham // kastra likhitam grantham yatanena paraipalaye, "With my back bent, my head bent, my fingers squeezed, holding a pen, I have written this book with great difficulty, and please preserve it carefully." That has gone to the microfilms.
Q: That would well be a motto over the entrance of the archives.
A: And it's a fact. Now I am glad that what I collected during the period of nearly twenty years is now safe, even if these actual paper volumes perish. I'm very glad.
Q: How do you judge the general state of archivization in Nepal.
A: Well I don't know if you have gone to the Lagat Phat. I have stopped working there nearly ten years ago. Has anybody gone and microfilmed those manuscripts?
Q: I think not, so far. That would probably be the most necessary...