

***A History of Nepal* by John Whelpton. Cambridge: the University Press, 2005, 235 pages + Key events, 20 Illustrations, Tables, 6 Maps, Biographical Notes, Glossary, and Index. ISBN 0 521 67141 8 paperback.**

Reviewed by Kamal P. Malla, Kathmandu.

John Whelpton is a trained linguist and historian. He collaborated with the late Martin Hoftun and William Raeper on a book on the social and ideological analysis of contemporary Nepal. His *Kings, Soldiers and Priests: Nepalese Politics and the Rise of Jang Bahadur Rana 1830-1857* (New Delhi: 1991) was well received in the academic community in Nepal and abroad.

*A History of Nepal* is an overview of Nepal, particularly since the 1740s to 2003. Within the space of about 240 pages, Whelpton surveys the process of state formation in the Central Himalayas out of scores of principalities controlled by medieval feudatories. It is difficult to pinpoint in time when Nepal emerged as a state, either in the Claessen's or in the Kautalyan sense. In all likelihood, it was run by provincial governors of the Mauryas, Kushanas and then the Imperial Guptas who mention Nepal's ruler as a *pratyanta-nrpati* (border king) in ca. A.D. 360. This may very well be a cultural entity rather than a State. For one thing, even during the late Malla period the Nepal Valley did not have a standing army, though it had its own coinage or other paraphernalia and limbs of a political state. Because of its rugged topography, fragmented by mighty transversal rivers, snowy and intractable ranges, tribal chiefdom thrived late in historical times. Few paramount rulers could have held the realm single-handedly because of the incessant nature of migration from the north, south, east and the west.

Whelpton tries to sum up the process of political unification and cultural hegemony of Brahmanical values in the central Himalayas mainly as an outcome of the threat of Islam and the rising power of the East India Company on the sub-continent. This may be so in the initial days of the Gorkhali state, but this theory is half-baked when one reflects upon figures such as Rana Bahadur Shah who would have been delighted to live in Banaras on an East India Company's pension as long as he could, rather than reign or rule a kingdom torn apart by his own kinsmen and retinue. Neither "unification" nor "Sanskritization" are good or adequate terms to describe what was going on in Nepal since the 1740s because neither explains why it took Prithivi Narayan Shah three battles and 25 years of dogged belligerent determination, not to speak of treachery, espionage,

blockade and barbarous treatment, to conquer a tiny principality of less than 8,000 in Kirtipur, whereas the same Gorkhali power triumphed throughout the whole Himalayas from Kumaon-Garhwal to Tista River in less than 25 years.

Although he does not take a "dates-and-dynasties" approach to political history, Whelpton's interest focuses on the achievements and failures of the Shahas and the Ranas, more than on "classical or cultural" Nepal. So he treats the rest of Nepalese history too perfunctorily, telescoping nearly a millennium and a half in less than 10 pages. His chronology of "Key events" is even more revealing, compressing 130,000 B.C. to the Establishment of the Capuchin Mission in Kathmandu in 1715 in less than a page! In this sense, the title of Whelpton's book is misleading: it is only the History of Nepal: 1740 to 2003. Just as there are different "Nepals" there are also different "Histories", depending on one's preferences, as it were. Whelpton's is focused on "Great Men", on Prithivi Narayan Shah, "with a look of determination in his eyes, and his right hand pointing towards the sky" intent upon expansion, with the sky the limit. Chandra Man Maskey had painted a masterpiece of this man, seated upon the Chandragiri ridge, looking at the opulence of the Kathmandu Valley, with intent and gleaming eyes. It is merely a matter of interpretation whether one calls it a "vision" of unified Nepal or a vulture's gaze upon its prey. Perhaps, the only social scientist that divulged this mysterious gaze was the late economic historian, Mahesh C. Regmi, who said that the sole motivating dynamo of Gorkhali militarism was an unquenchable greed for land and income from it. At least, Prithivi Narayan's own letters from the trenches are in a totally different tenor from his so-called "Divine Counsel". The two are so different in style and substance that they could hardly be the work of the same man. Besides, coming from a rural Gorkha background, his espousing the cause of economic mercantilism is totally unconvincing in the history of economic ideas.

The fraternal feuds, among the brothers and sardars of Prithivi Narayan Shah following the occupation of the valley, for power sharing seems to prove nothing other than this acquisitive instinct of the rural elite. That the rise of Bhimsen Thapa, or of Jang Bahadur Kunwar Thapa Chetri or of Shumshers are only the apotheosis of this power-struggle, constantly being hatched in the Nepali court among the clans who descended from *takure* princelings. Among Whelpton's gallery of great men are, of course, the architects of dynastic fortunes founded on the ashes and ruins of each other - triggered by murder, bloodshed, banishment, and recurrent "revisions in the roll" of pure blue blood, proving the now trite dictum: Kingship knows no kinship. To label this power structure "a Hindu State" is a euphemism of a sort, because there

was only a despot or other at its head, commanding contingents of soldiers, always willing to kill or be killed. Before the rise of Bhimsen Thapa, the Gorkhali army was a ramshackle organization; the State only a brutally efficient organization for raising revenue and taxes of all kinds. Landownership was a matter of the patriarch's whim: to be granted or withdrawn on the evidence of personal loyalty. It was only with Jung Bahadur Kunwar's Mulki Ain of 1854 that the Gorkhali state began to have a semblance of civil and military structure to be administered by a legal code verifiable by courts of justice and revenue offices in place.

The ruling ideology of Shah-Rana despotism was neither Hinduism nor Brahmanism, though they showed a superficial respect for the cow, the Brahmin and the Hindu *dharmashastra*. To call their culture "Sanskritic" is only a parody of the timeless values enshrined in the tradition. The Shahs imitated the courtly practices of the Moguls and the Ranas were increasingly attracted to "Westernized" lifestyles, so visibly documented in their *mahals*, *darbars* and stucco palaces modelled on 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian mansions. There is no doubt that, despite their obscure social origins, they laid dubious claim to Rajput origins and made this claim a legitimate basis for all their social climbing, and the greedy Brahmin immigrant clientele from the plains supported these by lending them a political sacred thread to climb ever higher up the social ladder. It was not for nothing that from the time of Jang Bahadur Kunwar culminating in Chandra's tiger shooting expeditions with Emperors of British India, there was nothing less than a love-hate relationship between the Ranas and British India. The high tide of the Rana Rule was punctuated with two World Wars in which the Rana military and financial support to the British even surpassed the Jang's aid in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Thus Whelpton's claim that "the Shamshers projected themselves as the guardian of the social order enshrined in Nepal's legal system" is not the whole truth, nor is the statement "the Shamshers did try to foster a common Nepalese identity, centred, of course, around themselves". If ever the Ranas ever played what the author calls "the Hindu card" it was only when they thrashed the social reformer Madhav Raj Joshi for preaching a protestant interpretation of the Vedas or when a plebeian non-Brahmin, Madhav Raj's son, Sukra Raj Joshi addressed the first ever public meeting in the heart of Kathmandu and preached the doctrine of *karma* according to the *Gita*!

In itself, history is an uninteresting narrative if it ignores the causes underlying the events which punctuate it, the causes which bring changes not only to the rulers and dynasties, but also to social, economic, political, and above all, cultural life. As we come nearer to present time, Whelpton devotes some attention to these trends. But trends are not the causes, only their symptoms. As an analyst and observer, Whelpton is generous,

sympathetic, but he greatly generalizes in identifying "the trends". In Chapter 4, Whelpton surveys the troubled half-century between 1950-1991, under the heading "The Monarchy in Ascendance", covering both domestic politics and foreign relations. The "Krantī of 2007" was an unfinished project, patched-up hurriedly in the mid-stream by Nehru who saw a destabilized Nepal as a potential threat to India, particularly with the Communist takeover in China. In the following decade, the political parties, particularly the Nepali Congress and the Nepal Communist Party split into scores of rival political factions, contesting for royal favour and a place in the political sun. The case of the Communist Party is exemplary: founded in 1949, by 1960 it split into about 22 factions, each leader holding on to an individualized interpretation of the gospel. The fact was that Nepal never had political parties as mature political institutions based on explicit programmes to which their cadres were formally and morally committed. They were only loose groupings of individuals motivated by personal aspirations. So loyalty was to the individual who can give them a share in the pie, not to policies, programmes, much less to a democratic or radical "ideology". They were nurtured in a culture, which Max Weber would have called "patrimonial", and no wonder that the multiparty parliamentary democratic experiment failed after a decade of trial and error, with the Monarchy emerging as the uncontested source and seat of power. The role of China and India in the consolidation of the power of the King is only a footnote to the Teng Hsiao-Ping doctrine that, as long as the cat catches the mice, it doesn't matter whether it is Red or not.

Whelpton's treatment of the Panchayat decades is interesting: he seems to think that it was an outcome of "a freak in south Asian history, almost entirely an unexpected development of the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962". But for it, an Indian economic blockage in October 1962 in support of insurgent Nepali Congress would have put an effective brake on King Mahendra's autocratic ambitions. As Whelpton puts it, "the king was rescued by the outbreak of war between India and China the following month. India now needed Mahendra's cooperation, and on Nehru's request Suvarna called off the armed campaign." (p. 99) This is yet another example of "the Great Man of History" favoured by the turn of historical events, if you like. However, such interpretations disregard the social base of King Mahendra who, among other things, propounded the doctrine of "class coordination" so as not to hurt his feudal power base, harping upon the "Kingdom of the Soul and Heaven" based on ancient Hindu scriptures. Nationalism became the doctrinaire base for legitimizing the monarchy, the crown being the symbol of national unity and sovereignty. However, the annexation of Sikkim in 1974 and the emergence of Bangladesh out of dismembered Eastern Pakistan, with India as an emancipating midwife, narrowed the options of the Nepalese establishment, and the challenges to

the monolithic system, with all political power concentrated in royal hands, became more and more politically visible. There were as many as three amendments to the 1962 Constitution of Nepal finally ending in a referendum to endorse "a reformed Panchayat system " in 1980.

Whelpton does not offer any satisfactory answer to the annoying question: why did it take such a long time for the Panchayat to collapse? And why did it, when it finally fell apart? If it was not again a question of an auspicious and conducive "national and international environment", especially the role of the friends of democracy and of Nepali democrats, what triggered it? Whelpton seems to blame, of all great men of history, Marich Man Singh and his unpopularity, more naively for his being the first Newar Prime Minister or Mukhtiyar! (p. 111)

History, of course, means different things to different scholars and readers. To Whelpton, fortunately, it is not just an unrevealing account of dynastic and political upheavals. At least, in part he explores the underlying forces at work that stir these changes: demographic changes, economic growth, social and cultural influences penetrating the arteries of a society. Part of his explanation probably lies in the movement of peoples into the Himalayas from all cardinal directions, at first from west to east, then from north to south, now from the mountains to the Terai. More recently, the flow of displaced populations from rural poverty to the urban centres is only outdone by those displaced by political conflict. However, the failure of a planned and mixed economy in the last five decades to cope with the rising population and the soaring social and economic expectations are at the heart of social and political discontent. The State in Nepal has always been the stronghold of a few elite families, the so-called *thar-ghar*, and this has not changed. Superficial changes in the political system have not succeeded in making any dent in the exclusivist political structure over the last half a century. Whelpton rapidly surveys the development "achievements and failures" fuelling the disillusionment of a democratic Nepal. The onset of a deepening crisis was, however, not entirely caused by social, demographic and economic factors alone. Nepal's topography is in itself a major challenge to any development planner. So is its geopolitical location as a landlocked country surrounded on three sides by the Indian Republic and on the other side by the snow-clad northern borders, accessible only seasonally by limited narrow passes. Perhaps, the single factor that accelerated public disillusionment with the system was corruption, factionalism and the callous lack of legislative awareness of urgent social and economic issues. That the system is not flexible and responsive is all too nakedly evident when Parliament voted out the Bills for land ceiling, the reservations for dalits, ethnic minorities and women during Sher Bahadur Deuba's final days. The rise of social and ethnic movements and regional

autonomy in Limbuwan and Madhes in particular are mainly symptoms of this malaise. Among other issues the Maoist insurgents successfully took advantage of this.

Whelpton's treatment of the historicity of Nepal as a nation-state, now on the brink of being listed as a failed state, is based on the strong assumption that, "Nepal's emergence into the post-colonial world as an independent state was not preordained but the result of a chain of historical accidents. These included both the emergence of a leader of the calibre of Prithivi Narayan Shah at a crucial point in the seventeenth century (sic!) and also his successors' ability in the following century to adapt efficiently to the realities of British dominance in South Asia" (p. 235). He concludes with an ominous note, "the strength of the reality behind this formal façade (of independence – KPM) remains to be determined" (p. 235).

A *History of Nepal* lists more than 250 items in its bibliography; however, only five are in Nepali. It gives the reader the impression that the account is mostly based on secondary sources available in English and other Western languages. The 34-page long Chapter 6 on "Lifestyles, Values and Identities: Changes in Nepalese Society, 1951-1991 (pp. 154-188) is a fascinating store of personal observations, but whether it is empirical social history is arguable. The longish section on the Royal Palace Massacre of June 1, 2001 (pp. 211-216) ends in journalistic bathos: "a fresh and full enquiry into the whole affair would nevertheless be most likely to confirm the official version of the events within the Tribhuvan Sadan" (p.216). This is a most unlikely statement from an aspiring historian of Nepal, well versed in courtly affairs.

The book has some useful tables, charts, maps and a glossary of unfamiliar terms for newcomers to the field. Its "Biographical Notes" on about 82 historical and colourful persons is a disproportionately mixed bag of patricians and plebeians, with too many Shahs and Ranas, perhaps. Sadly, the text is punctuated with a number of factual errors, particularly in dates and names. However, the book is a pleasant surprise and easy reading. At least, it is not yet another "historical account" by a pontificating British civil servant, or a medical surgeon, a postmaster general, a military colonel, or a travelling emissary with no formal academic training in the rigours of historiography. The choice of an unsavoury picture of a street scene in Birganj in the early 1970s on the cover-page seems to have nothing to do with history nor with Nepal – ancient, modern or in the making.