

RESPONSE TO KAMAL PRAKASH MALLA'S REVIEW OF HISTORY OF NEPAL¹⁸⁰

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The editors of the European Bulletin of Himalayan Research have kindly offered me the chance to respond to Kamal Malla's review of my *History of Nepal*. I have known Professor Malla since 1972 when he attended a VSO briefing session in London for my batch of Nepal-bound volunteers, thus becoming the first Nepalese I ever met. Over the intervening years he has been a source of friendly advice and assistance whenever we have met and I have read with both pleasure and profit his published work on Nepalese history. His review is written in his usual forthright manner but I think the overall balance of praise and blame of my book is fair enough so I am not writing in any spirit of complaint. However, I still want to take the opportunity to reply in order to acknowledge some criticism which is fully justified, to point out one or two places where I think he misunderstood what I was trying to say and also to take up some important issues that he raises and which are well worth further discussion.

First, the book's most obvious failings. It is indeed "punctuated with a number of factual errors, particularly in dates and names". Although the main chapters were seen in draft by at least one prominent Nepalese or foreign scholar, these academics naturally focussed just on questions of general interpretation while, because of pressure of time, I did not have the biographical notes at the end checked by anyone. I was not sufficiently aware of how easily errors could creep in and should have had the whole book vetted carefully again just for accuracy of detail. I can only apologise and refer readers to the errata list to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Himalaya* (the former *Himalayan Research Bulletin*) and also to the reprinting of the South Asian edition, now in progress, which will incorporate all the corrections. Another misjudgement was over the title: the focus is so much on the post-1743 (and particularly post-1950) period that "History of Modern Nepal" might have been more appropriate. In fact, the publisher had originally wanted me to write just on the most recent decades whilst I wanted to cover earlier times also. The resulting compromise was the rather truncated account of the ancient and medieval periods, which other reviewers have also found unsatisfactory. I also resisted the publisher's suggestion to include "Modern" in the title because I thought it would invite confusion with Rishikesh Shah's *Modern Nepal: a Political History*. Again with hindsight, I should probably have risked the confusion!

¹⁸⁰ cf EBHR, 29-30, summer 2006: 178-183.

Turning to the apparent misunderstandings, Professor Malla states that I see “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”. In fact, when discussing the origin of the Thakuri rulers in the hills (p.22-23), I gave genuine refugees from Islamic incursions as just one stream, the others being Khas of local origin who falsely claimed Rajput origins and real Rajputs who moved north because of pressure on land in the plains. As for the British factor, I did not give this as a direct cause of the Gorkha conquest of the Valley but simply said that Prithvi Narayan’s establishment of his new kingdom, the East India Company’s seizure of Bengal and China’s assertion of control in Tibet and Sinkiang were all “part of a pattern of state-building and expansion across a wide area of Asia”. (p.27) I specifically rejected the theory advanced by “nationalist” historians of Nepal that Prithvi embarked on his campaigns to forestall British designs on the Himalayas and I suggested instead that the East India Company only became a major element in his thinking after Kinloch’s unsuccessful attempt to come to the aid of the Newar Valley kingdoms in 1767.

Secondly, Professor Malla thinks that I regard the Panchayat decades simply as a freak of history resulting from the Chinese attack on India in 1962 which compelled India to abandon its attempt, then on the verge of success, to force King Mahendra into a compromise with his Congress opponents. I certainly do believe that the outbreak of the Sino-Indian conflict rescued Mahendra from having to make a humiliating climb-down but, contrary to what the review suggests, I also acknowledge other factors that helped the Panchayat regime to endure, including Mahendra’s care not to antagonise major vested interests.

Similarly, the review suggests that the deeper reasons for the system’s collapse in 1990 are neglected and the focus placed instead on a specific individual: “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) The sentence alluded to here in fact came only after I had devoted two pages to detailing factors such as rising education levels, corruption scandals involving the royal palace and the rise of “civil society” organisations – a combustive mix to which the spark was put by the Indian blockade of 1989-90. My point about Marichman Singh’s ethnicity was not that it was a reason for his unpopularity but rather that, contrary to what some might have (naively!) expected, it did not boost his popularity among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley.

There may also be an element of misunderstanding in the dismissal of my conclusion on the 2001 Palace Massacre. The sentence quoted from

this, read in isolation, might suggest I completely endorsed the official report. In fact I accepted only what was reported by all the royal eye-witnesses — i.e that it was Dipendra alone who mowed down his family members inside the Tribhuvan Sadan. I left open the possibility that Dipendra himself might have been killed in the garden by someone else rather than committing suicide. That still, of course, leaves a real disagreement between us which boils down to an assessment of probabilities: like most foreign observers (though probably a minority of Nepalese ones), I find Dipendra's guilt less implausible than the various conspiracy theories that are offered as an alternative. To absolve Dipendra, one would have to believe either that the eye-witnesses were lying (and sticking to those lies even now that Gyanendra has been humbled) or that the disguise of the killer was so perfect that it deceived at close quarters so many who knew Dipendra intimately. I do, though, fully agree that the official enquiry was thoroughly unsatisfactory and I believe that even at this late stage a fuller enquiry should be launched. In correspondence after the publication of the review, Professor Malla reminded me of the claim in John Gregson's book (2002: 207-8) that a specimen of Dipendra's blood was secretly sent to Scotland. This is certainly something that could and should be looked into after the recent changes in Nepal.

Finally, the complaint that only five of the titles in the bibliography are in Nepali and that the book appears based mainly on "secondary sources in English and other western languages" suggests a misunderstanding of what the book aimed to do. It was not a presentation of original, front-line research but rather an attempt to produce, principally for the international English-reading public, a synthesis of what previous research has revealed.

The first of the really substantial and interesting points that Professor Malla makes is his questioning of the authenticity of the *Divya Upadesh* on the grounds that its style is so different from that of Prithvi Narayan's extant correspondence and that the merchantilist economic philosophy advanced in it could not have been conceived by someone from the king's "rural Gorkha background". This reminded me of a conversation at six years ago at CNAS with anthropologist Bert van den Hoek. He remarked to me at CNAS that, since Prithvi had lived for some time in the palace in Bhaktapur, he would not have had to have someone identify the valley cities for him as he gazed down upon them from one of the surrounding hills. Neither Malla's or van Hoek's arguments are in themselves conclusive. Leaving aside the possibility that the king had a "ghost writer", variations in style between writing in different genres by the same individual are quite possible and Gorkha had been part of a network of international exchange from long before the conquest of the Valley so

its king was hardly a country bumpkin, particularly as he had himself visited Benares. As for his needing landmarks pointed out to him, even someone who had visited the Valley might have been disorientated when viewing it from an unfamiliar vantage point. There still remains a question mark, however, particularly because the document apparently lay undiscovered for so long. Doubt did cross my own mind when writing the book, but because so many reputable historians had accepted the document as genuine (one of these, Ludwig Stiller, actually centring his first monograph (1968) around it) I decided it was safe to follow an apparent near-consensus among scholars. Professor Malla challenged that consensus in his review and, in our subsequent correspondence, expanded his attack:

the “upadesh” is a literary harlequin’s dress, pieced together by the heroic-nationalist Gorkhali historians such as Surya Vikram Gewali and Baburam Acharya from dusty fragments stored in the Basnet family at Kilagal and Baneswar in the early 1950s. Both stylistically and thematically it falls apart at too many places. It was brought to political limelight by King Mahendra and through the personal efforts of Yogi Naraharinath in the late 1950s as a part of his political campaign to aggrandize the magnanimity of the Shaha monarchy.

Malla also reminded me of his published criticism of Naya Raj Pant’s *Shri Panch Prithvinarayan Shahko Upadesh* (1968/9) in his 1983 review of Mary Slusser’s *Nepal Mandala* and again in his 1984 pamphlet responding to Mahesh Raj Pant’s defence of his father’s work. However, on both occasions Malla’s target was not the *Dibya Upadesh* itself but Naya Raj Pant’s treatment of it and, in the *Nepal Mandala* review, he praises Ludwig Stiller’s work, which, as mentioned above, does not question the *Dibya Upadesh*’s authenticity. Clearly then, Malla ought now to publish a full critique of the document (on the lines of his 1992 attack on the attempt to date the *Nepal-Mahatmya* to the 9th century) and thus allow specialists on the period to consider and respond to his arguments. The alternatives to be debated are not, of course, simply those of a forgery or a speech actually delivered on one single occasion: the *Upadesh* might conceivably be a compilation of remarks made by the king at different times.

It may be worth adding that a similar question mark has been raised over a key document for the study of early English history. This is the Latin account of the life of King Alfred the Great, the ruler who led resistance to the Viking invasion in the 9th Century A.D. The author identifies himself as Bishop Asser, a confidante of the king, but the document has been denounced as a forgery by one prominent historian of the period (Smyth, 1995). Most Anglo-Saxonists still accept the biography as genuine and I suspect that Malla will equally fail to convince historians of 18th century Nepal, but he ought to go ahead and make an attempt.

A second, much broader issue Malla raises concerns the evaluation of the political strongmen of Nepalese history, and particularly of Prithvi Narayan Shah. His review suggested that I treated them too sympathetically and he made the same point even more strongly in our correspondence: “so much of your narrative reads like an ... apologia for the Shahas and the Ranas”. As regards the Shah dynasty, there is some irony here because one consignment of the book was actually impounded under Gyanendra’s direct rule and, although it was never formally banned, a number of booksellers were unwilling to risk placing it on their shelves. It is true, however, that I think that some of the more extreme denunciations of the ruling families reflect contemporary political agendas rather than sober assessment of their record and that in *History of Nepal*, as in other things I have written, I tried to steer a middle course between such a purely negative view and the hagiographical line taken by royalist historians. To the strongest critics of the Shahas and the Ranas, my approach will thus, inevitably, appear as a defence of their regimes.

Malla is particularly concerned to discount any suggestion of commitment to Hindu ideology for Nepal’s rulers, arguing that they acted out of straightforward personal ambition. Here we are up against a problem when looking at the motives of any actor on the political stage and my own gut feeling is that whilst the political beliefs of major political may in practical effect be self-serving ones they are nevertheless often genuinely held. I think its more likely that, for example, Mao and Stalin were genuine Marxists, and also that Prithvi Narayan Shaha genuinely believed he was fulfilling the *dharma* of a Hindu king in his drive for expansion. To see his actions as simply hunger for land and the revenue from it is too reductionist an interpretation and it is significant that even Mahesh Chandra Regmi, whom Malla cites with approval, eventually retreated from his earlier straightforward economism, and, a year or two before his death, told me personally: “I was wrong to think that the control of land was the only thing that mattered”. My own feeling is that Prithvi Narayan Shaha wanted to be a successful Hindu king, and that meant more land and revenue but also the upholding of the Hindu social order. The case for this interpretation is, of course, strengthened if the *Dibya Upadesh* is accepted as authentic but would still remain plausible even if we accepted Malla’s contention that the document is a later compilation.

Just as he is reluctant to see Hinduism as a motivating ideology for either Shahs or Ranas, Malla also argues that “to call their culture ‘Sanskritic’ is only a parody of the timeless values enshrined in that tradition”. The target of his criticism here is my use of the term “sanskritisation” in the title of the chapter dealing with the period from Prithvi Narayan Shah to the seizure of power by the Shamsher Ranas. As

another reviewer has pointed out (Toffin, 2005), I failed to explain precisely what I meant by this term and so I cannot complain too much if I am again slightly misinterpreted. I was not implying any judgment on the Nepal's cultural and spiritual standards during this period but thinking of any kind of convergence with high caste norms by a group "lower" in the caste hierarchy whether as a deliberate tactic on the part of members of that group to raise their own status (Sanskritisation in Srinivas's sense) or because of the enforcement of orthodox Hindu values from above. Both of these mechanisms certainly were operating in 19th century Nepal, though I acknowledge that social change of any sort was slow in the decades after Nepal's territorial expansion had been halted.

The same chapter heading also uses the term "unification" and Malla, like Kumar Pradhan (1991), prefers to see the expansion of the Gorkha state described as a "conquest". The problem here rests, of course, on the sense in which "unification" is used. If it implies the bringing together of populations that either already felt a strong common bond, or immediately started to feel one, then it clearly is inappropriate. However, Prithvi certainly did bring the many populations in the central and eastern Himalayas under a single government and we could also understand "unification" in that sense. In any case, unifications in this second sense, which coerce people into accepting a common overlord, may in the long-term result in a real sense of identity with the state so formed. Qin Shi Huang, for example, the man who forged a united Chinese state at the end of the 3rd century B.C., was every bit as ruthless as Prithvi Narayan Shah. As his successors enlarged the areas under their control, and Han Chinese settlers moved into new lands, the treatment of the indigenous population was no gentler than in eastern Nepal: a major reason that in China today *janajati* groups make up only 10% of the total population as against 30-40% in Nepal is that so many were either physically eliminated or assimilated. Yet the end result has certainly been a strong, shared sense of "Chineseness" among both the Han and even a considerable number amongst the surviving minorities. It also needs to be stressed that even in other cases where there was a strong pre-existing sense of unity, a significant proportion of the population often opposed the process of political unification and the balance between sullen acquiescence and actual enthusiasm for the coming of the new order is difficult to assess. My own feeling is, therefore, that, whatever judgment we may make of Prithvi's conduct, we can still speak of Nepalese unification; and, indeed, even Pradhan retains the word, without 'scare quotes', in the sub-title of his book.

I shall end, as Professor Malla ends, with the book's front cover, which shows a street scene in Birganj in the early 1970s. This picture was not my own original choice; I had submitted a rather conventional mountain view

(still displayed in error on the Amazon.com page for the book!) but my editor at CUP thought that the Birganj shot, which I had intended only as an illustration within the text, was more suitable because it focused on people rather than just the physical backdrop. I readily accepted this suggestion because, without her having in any way intending it, she had made an important political point: achieving a fully shared sense of identity in Nepal requires that all cultural traditions within the country's present boundaries be accepted as genuinely Nepalese. Professor Malla, in contrast, complains that the cover "seems to have nothing to do ... with Nepal — ancient, modern or in the making". Evidently, for him "Nepal" still has the primary meaning of "Nepal Mandala", or, at most, the hill country, and it can never include the Tarai communities who share language and culture with those across the border. Considering Professor Malla's roots in the Newar culture of the Kathmandu Valley, and his own considerable contribution to elucidating that culture's history, this feeling is understandable. The implications, though, are disturbing: if it were truly impossible for the Bhojpuri/Hindi culture of most citizens of Birganj to be accepted as genuinely Nepalese then the whole project of building a new, inclusive Nepal within the country's present borders would be an impossible dream. Would not Professor Malla really prefer to revise his evaluation rather than accept this dismal conclusion?

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