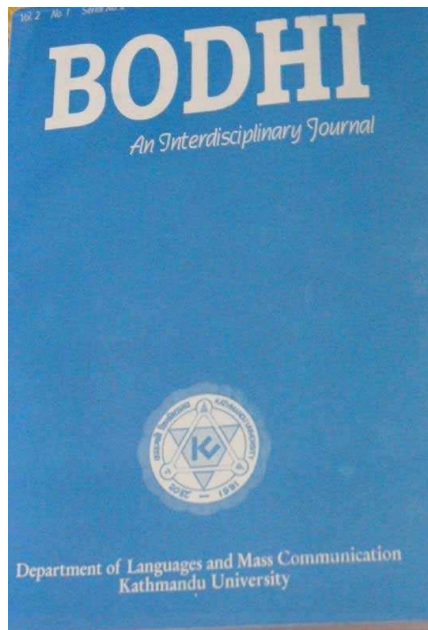


BODHI: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Vol. 2, No. 1, Serial No. 2, 2008



Published by

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND MASS
COMMUNICATION

KATHMANDU UNIVERSITY, DHULIKHEL, KAVRE, NEPAL

<http://www.ku.edu.np/media>

media@ku.edu.np

Prithvi Narayan Shah and Postcolonial Resistance

-- Hem Raj Kafle

Introduction

Nepalese monarchy fell under an inextricable political array after April 2006 as the country took radical directions in the hands of political parties. First, the reinstated parliament declared the country secular in June 2006, which undermined the religious-political significance attributed to Hindu kings. Second, the Maoists successively signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord with the government (November, 2006), and joined the parliament (January, 2007) and the coalition government (March, 2007). Third, the first historic constituent assembly elections took place (April, 2008). Then the constituent assembly declared the country a republic and formally abolished the monarchy (May, 2008). In other words, a collective upsurge of April 2006, which had started to fight monarchy, ended up abolishing in two years. Thereafter the country headed towards a new phase of history with a collective political thrust for restructuration into a federal republic.

The project of restructuring the country through the abolition of Shah Dynasty brought into question the historical recognition of the eighteenth-century unification. As a result, the long-established national veneration given to Prithvi Narayan Shah (hereafter P.N. Shah) as the leader of the unification, which Birendra Pandey (2007) frankly calls “the corpse of the grand narrative of the history of Nepal” (p.4), faced immediate public ire. As the Shah Dynasty went through public ire following the Revolution, all its historical roots were threatened and its symbols destroyed. The proofs are: demolition of the monuments of former Shah kings including those of P. N. Shah during frequent agitations, the government's decision not to solemnize Prithvi Jayanti from 2007, and renaming of places and institutions removing names connected to former monarchs. Even greater challenge came from Jaya Krishna

Goit, the leader of Janatantrik Mukti Morcha, an armed group fighting for the “liberation” of Terai. Goit declared a “quit Terai” campaign against the rulers of Nepal like Mahatma Gandhi’s “quit India” against the British. His principal claim (and dissatisfaction) has been that the Nepalese have been ruling the Terai as the British ruled India¹.

The end of monarchy leads to a new phase of interpretation about the role of P. N. Shah himself. The present paper presents a postcolonial reading of the eighteenth-century unification and P. N. Shah’s historical position. I take references from some of the available historical writings by both native and foreign writers. My reading of P.N. Shah’s role has become postcolonial for my concentration on the anti-colonial features underlying the unification and his policy of national integration. I base my discussion on the postulations of two postcolonial critics. I take from Elleke Boehmer (2006) such definitions of postcoloniality as “encounters between the West and non-West dating from the sixteenth century till the present day” (p. 340), “opposition and self-determination” (*ibid*), and “politics of nationalist, internationalist and anti-colonial struggle” (*ibid*). I also take from Stephen Slemon (2001) the idea that postcolonial studies take on “the problem of rethinking the category of history itself” (p. 109). In this sense, the whole essay reads like a “fragmented rewriting of original historical sources” (*ibid.*), and becomes a postcolonial critique of the history. My research shows that the unification was founded upon the need to resist British imperialism. It may, however, appear antithetical to the political critiques on P.N. Shah that he was a colonizer himself because my evidences will highlight his supposedly positive contributions to the consolidation of Nepal’s independent identity. However, the purpose of this paper is academic. It is only an endeavor to bring into discourse the often-ignored fact of Nepal’s postcolonial encounters. This study bears relevance of a moment when the historical event

¹ “The country Has Not Moved towards Peace Process’

Himal Khabar. 30 Jan. 2007.

[<http://www.himalkhabar.com/front/morenews.php?id=1893>]

© 2008 Kathmandu University, Nepal. <http://www.ku.edu.np>

like the unification and the historical person like P. N. Shah have come under a political quibble and become the subject of re-characterization.

Postcoloniality in the Unification

Let us now briefly look at some of the obvious postcolonial features surrounding P. N. Shah and the project of unification. The first discernible feature concerns “opposition and resistance.” It is manifest first in the Nepali military encounter with the British army in 1767. In the battle of Sindhuligadhi the Gorkhalis defeated a British troop commanded by Captain Kinloch. This defeat had been of paramount importance to Nepal for two reasons. In the first place, it had stopped the potential British presence in the Kathmandu Valley. Kinloch's troop had advanced to Kathmandu Valley in order to assist Jaya Prakash Malla, the then king of Kathmandu, against the growing power of P. N. Shah. Success of the British to enter the valley at that time would be the beginning of a military presence of the colonizers, and could be a great hindrance in the course of unification. Secondly, the conquest of Sindhuligadhi foiled the British design to make Nepal a regular route to Tibet. Thus, this not only hindered the British policy of expansion, but also gave P. N. Shah the awareness that any further move of British to Nepal would be a greater threat to Nepal's sovereignty.

P. N. Shah knew that the extension of relationship with the British would require either a matching economic-political strength or the subordination of sovereignty. For Nepal, which had only begun to build its political identity through geographical expansion, “the policy of isolation” (Hasrat, 1971, p. lv) could therefore be a wiser choice. By forcing the policy P. N. Shah wanted to ensure that Nepal would choose to remain away from foreign interference in her internal affairs. The policy of isolation was mainly aimed to restrain commercial transaction with the British. But diplomatic relations would have to continue due to the geographical closeness between the two countries. Therefore, P. N. Shah tried to render his foreign

policy with the British more diplomatic than commercial (Upadhyaya, 1998, p.161). Besides, in view of potential future encounter with the British, and in order to ensure enough time for military and economic consolidation of the country, he tried to uphold a policy of defense and opposition. His Counsels, which are regarded as the ruling norms left by him for his descendents, clearly record his military policy: “Keep great friendship with the emperor of the south. But he is clever. He has suppressed India, and has established himself on our neighbouring plains. Do not attack yourself. Fight on a defensive basis [my translation]” (P.N. Shah, 1989, p.73).

Another important postcolonial characteristic seen in P. N. Shah is his strategy of “self-determination.” Embedded with the policy of resistance against and isolation from the British India, it is also manifest in the question of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, mainly in economy and culture. He wanted to ban foreign products to promote the indigenous goods and to stop country’s money from spilling out (*ibid*). He encouraged the cultivation of native crops and preservation of agricultural land. “His main aim was to make the people self-sufficient in food and clothing” (Bhattarai, 2001, p. 4), so that Nepalese would not have to depend on foreign imports. He must have been fully aware of this common adage of his time: “With the merchant comes the musket; and with the Bible comes the Bayonet.” This shows that he knew the causes of the rise of British in India -- their success in spreading their trade and Christianity. So, he removed the Capuchin Missionaries from Kathmandu as soon as he conquered it in 1768 (Sharma, 1976, pp. 232-3). He had to discourage the influence of foreign missionaries, mainly for two reasons. First, they had “abused Nepalese hospitality by clandestinely invoking British intervention in Nepal against [him]” (Hasrat, 1971, p. lv). Second, he wanted to make Nepal “the land of the Hindus uncontaminated by Muslim and Europeans” (R. Shah, 2001, p. 40). His action against the missionaries was justified in the light of his project of building greater resistance against the British India. Their expulsion was “not only symbolic but significant -- it closed the valley to the Europeans and foreigners” (Hasrat,

1971, p. lv). He also discouraged the Muslim merchants from intervening in the indigenous trade leading to their withdrawal from Kathmandu. Thus, his actions against the Christians and Muslims were important in two ways: first, for his progress towards the political goal of unification; second, for the process of economic and cultural reformations required for independent identity and strength.

What could give the newly acquired territories the sense of unity but the identity of a common culture? P. N. Shah wanted to promote such spirit in the country, and saw the need to curb the influence from the south. He believed that indulgence in music and dance of the south would weaken the spirit of the natives, and also steal secrets of the country's strength ("Counsels", p. 76). In this connection, he must have been too familiar with the stories of Indian Nawabs, who had been so much indulged in luxury and extravagance as to neglect the affairs of their countries and lose their sovereignty into the hands of British.² This must have awakened him to acquire a policy of resisting the possible invasion of foreign culture and thus advocate "watching the dances of the Newars of the three cities of Nepal, as instructed in the native scriptures" (*ibid*). His idea of promoting local culture depicts his aims for consolidating the indigenous identity as a means of independence from imperial influence.

Western Viewpoints on the Unification

The analysis of Western perspective on the issues of "the colonial encounters between the West and non-West," like the tension between the British colonizer and a veteran nationalist like P. N. Shah, can always be an appropriate subject for postcolonial inquiries. Let us briefly point out some remarks on P.N. Shah by the representatives of the British colonial rule in India. The British were always critical and even disapproving of the rise of P.N. Shah and that of Nepal as a unified country,

² Munshi Premchand's story "The Chess Players" presents a fine literary representation of this type of historical situation in India.

even after hundred years of the event of unification. They were particularly unhappy after the defeat of Kinloch, which had formally foiled their plan to extend their trade in Kathmandu and Tibet. The remarks of A. Campbell (1971) a few decades after the unification, though extremely derisive, point out the fact that P. N. Shah was a great obstacle in their way. Campbell says, “the rise and progress of Gorkhas disturbed our peaceful intercourse with Nepal, and the invasion of the Valley by Prithvinarayana, the chief and leader of the tribe, commences the first era of our political relations with this State” (p.172). In this note of discontent, he very clearly reveals the nature of resistance imposed by P. N. Shah, that is, the forced end of their economic intercourse with Nepal. The following piece of Campbell's narrative even more evidently asserts the rise of Gorkha power:

The Gorkha power in the space of thirty years had risen from being a small band of plundering soldiers to be the possessors of a tract of country lying along the frontier of our central and richest provinces. ...with its authority firmly established throughout this space, and with a considerable army of hardy and bold soldiers, trained from birth to war and plunder, and finding in the conquest of petty and disunited states of the hills, the strongest incentives to an application of somehow similar course of cunning and rapacity to purposes of encroachment on the plains likewise. (p. 179)

Campbell's remarks are naturally acerbic, for his obvious dissatisfaction with the growing strength of Nepal and British inability to force their way into Nepal through commercial and political means. He however acknowledges P. N. Shah's success in establishing firm authority over the conquered states, which were once “disunited.” He also admits that the conquest had given “incentives,” to further unification process. The above narrative is at the same time the proof of how the Westerner described the Easterner. To borrow Neil Lazarus's perception, it is the Western perspective of the non-Western version of nationalistic resistance. Lazarus (1999) points out that the West categorizes any non-Western indigenous means

of resistance and remaking under the rubrics of “atavism, anarchy, irrationality and power-mongering” (p. 69). Campbell's remarks stand as one of those stereotypic European viewpoints on the power and identity of a non-Western nationalist P.N. Shah. Hasrat considers his narratives not only “cursory and misleading” (p. liv), but also “one sided and prejudiced” (*ibid*). But, here, they can be taken as his [Campbell's] confession that Nepal was growing into a greater power.

We can see similar perspective in the accounts of Nepal by Daniel Wright (1990). Wright describes P. N. Shah as “a savage conqueror” (p. 18), thereby reflecting the aforementioned Western viewpoint. More importantly, he maintains that even in his own time the British attempt to establish trade with Tibet was impracticable as long as Nepal was held by Gorkhas (*ibid*). This is the assertion of a long-term impact of P. N. Shah's policy of resistance on the British motive of expansion through Nepal. This same policy was mainly referred to as the “jealousy of Goorkhas” (Preface, 1986, p iv), during the initial British attempts to establish diplomatic relations with Nepal in the early 1790s. Wright also reiterates the same perspective in his description of the Nepalese: “The Nepalese are particularly proud of their independence, and most jealous of any interference with their domestic policy” (p. 71). This description, though critical in its intention, shows his admission of Nepal's national pride rooted in Nepali identity. It also reaffirms the influence of the principle of national identity envisioned by P. N. Shah more than hundred years before Wright was writing about Nepal. Moreover, the remarks by the foreigners support the view that P.N. Shah was a staunch anti-colonialist. Or, at least, the foreigners have agreed that the unification was as much the means of Nepali sovereignty as the resistance against British imperialism.

P. N. Shah's Historical Position

The antagonism against monarchy and the prevalent attempts to uproot its historical icons may confuse the readers of existing history with a single question: whether the eighteenth century unification of Nepal was an act of colonization. The situation has further posed a dilemma between eliminating and acknowledging the role of P. N. Shah in the course of rewriting the history of Nepal. In fact, the assumptions about the wake of Modern Nepal along with the unification seem to lose ground in the days to come. A common apprehension remains among Nepali intellectuals: whether the present political move to eliminate the rule of the Shahs will not “throw away the baby with the bathwater” by distorting or even deleting the supposedly glorious event of unification. The glory attached to P. N. Shah so far in the history is one of the roots of Nepali nationalism for more than two centuries. This is the glory tenaciously attached to Nepal in general by the mainstream Nepali history though today's critical political scrutiny sees in it the roots of a long-standing rule of dominance over and marginalization of many ethnic communities.

History reveals that if not P. N. Shah, there would be the British to take over the good lands now owned by Nepal. The British were trying to take advantage of the feud among the “disunited states” and to extend their “transactions” with and authority over Nepal. Kathmandu would not only be a commercial station and route for them, but also a geographically favourable habitation. Wright has very clearly expressed such temptation in this remark: “What a magnificent sanatorium the Valley would be for the inhabitants of Calcutta!” (p. 75). It is somewhat impractical to believe that the British would not attempt to colonize Nepal in absence of strong resistance like that of P. N. Shah.

The postulations that P.N. Shah was an invader and colonizer somehow reflect the aforesaid Western opinions about him. Perspectives of the natives sometimes owe influence of the

outsiders. The readers of Kirkpatrick,³ Father Giuseppe,⁴ Campbell and Wright may be instigated to believe that modern Nepal was founded upon atrocity and bloodbath. Responsible readers of history, however, should not go after one viewpoint only. To see only weaknesses of P.N. Shah by highlighting the myths of cruelties is to be deliberately blind and deaf towards his contributions. The process of unification inevitably meant the conquest and integration of several semi-independent principalities, and the use of military force was essential. Thus, the result could be the necessary use of oppression and resistance against opponents, which was required of a king engaged in the process of establishing a country (Acharya, 2005, p. 555; Prashrit, 2007, p. 6). The acts of vandalizing P. N. Shah's monuments and the decision to exclude him from public veneration, Mod Nath Prashrit contends, is the result of the "lack of proper reflection and objective reasoning on the issue of study, analysis and conservation of historical icons [my translation]" (p. 6). Prashrit actually inquires whether it is wise to indiscriminately wipe out the symbolic value of P. N. Shah from the history of Nepal.

One problem underlying the process of reflection on Nepali history today is that one is caught by 'Ifs' and 'Buts' each time the issues of Madhesis, Janjatis and Newars of Kathmandu dominate the discussion on the unification and establishment of Nepal. Assumptions prevail in these communities that P.N. Shah had done injustice by colonizing the Terai, the Kirant regions and the Kathmandu valley. But such assumptions might imply that he had made a mistake by securing these areas from the British colonizers. To disregard P. N. Shah's success in shunning the British means to be complacent with our ignorance about the roots of our national identity. Nepali historians and historiographers have a common consensus that

³ Kirkpatrick was the first British envoy to visit Nepal in 1791 with a diplomatic and commercial mission.

⁴ Fahter Giuseppe was the head of the Capuchin Missionaries expelled from Nepal in 1768. His account of P. N. Shah's conquest of the valley have been used by Kirkpatrick, Campbell and Wright.

without the emergence of a person like P.N Shah and without his annexation of the erstwhile kingdoms, the present Nepal would not have come into existence (Nepal, 1995, p. iii; Sharma, 1976, p. 232; Regmi, 1975, p. 219; Prashrit, 2007, p. 6). His failure in the course of unification “would have only helped the forces of disintegration and kept the [erstwhile] division intact,” and in the wake of his defeat, “the British colonial interest was sure to acquire a firm footing” (Regmi, 1975, p. 219). As such, P. N. Shah's success in unifying the country in defiance of the expansionist British holds the credit of being the root of Nepali national identity till today.

In the crux of P.N. Shah's national policy lay his desire to integrate all the castes and classes into a single ruling scale. According to Babu Ram Acharya, he did not mean to isolate himself from the category of a common Nepali; he wanted to become as much a part of the kingdom as a common Nepali citizen was (p. 555). Though the outsiders allege the Gorkhas to have “used Nepal as a springboard for their expansionist tendencies” (Williams, 1971, p. v), “it would be wrong to take Gorkha conquest as an event of empire building [because] no alien people were involved in the process” (Regmi, p. 219). His conquest was not only directed towards expansion and militancy, but also was a way of allowing the newly acquired territories to assimilate into unity. Historians concede that he could not do much for the internal reformation and integration. Rishikesh Shah (2001) opines, “Since [his] energies were so largely engaged in expanding his kingdom, he had no time left to consolidate his newly acquired territories” (p. 40). This could be one of the reasons why the myths about his invasion and atrocities gained grounds in the annals of the conquered areas such as Kiritpur, Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. People did not see much of his contributions as a king in stability. But his “Divine Counsels” reveal that he had the desire to work towards reformations in line with former kings like Ram Shah, Jayasthiti Malla and Mahindra Malla (p.73).

Conclusion

On the whole, the emergence of P. N. Shah can itself be taken as a timely historical event. To use Sharma's words, he "was a historical necessity for the eighteenth century Nepal [translated]" (p. 232). His encounter with the British colonizers was one of the early anti-colonial events in the history of South Asia itself. Any attempt to study his policies and contributions takes the form of a postcolonial discourse. The debate about his being an invader and a colonizer calls for extensive historical-political inquiries. Such inquiries can gain objectivity only if his role is reevaluated through a larger corpus of historical writings. Existing history of Nepal has established the unification as a landmark and timely contribution towards nation building, which had taken shape of anti-colonial resistance and national self-determination. For this contribution, P.N. Shah deserves a space in any attempt of objective historiography.

References

- Acharya, B. R. (2005). *Shree Panch Badamaharajadhiraj Prithvi Narayan Shahko samskhyipta jeevani (A short biography of great king Prithivi Narayan Shah)*. Kathmandu: The Royal Palace.
- Bhattarai, G. D. (2001, January 11). Prithvi Narayan Shah the great: Architect of modern Nepal. *Rising Nepal*, p.4.
- Boehmer, E. (2006). Postcolonialism. In P. Waugh (Ed.), *Literary theory and criticism: An Oxford guide* (pp.340-361). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, A. (1971). A sketch of political relations with Nepal. In B.J. Hasrat (Ed.), *History of Nepal: as told by its own and contemporary chronicles* (pp. 171-95). Punjab: Hasrat.
- Hasrat, B. J. (1971). Prolegomena. In B. J. Hasrat (Ed.), *History of Nepal: as told by its own and contemporary chronicles* (pp. xv- lxxiv). Punjab: Hasrat.

-
- Lazarus, N. (1999). *Nationalism and cultural practice in the postcolonial world*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nepal, G. M. (1995). *Nepalko Mahabharat (The Mahabharata of Nepal)* (2nd ed). Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan.
- Pandey, B. (2007, March 10). Towards culture of rhetoric(s). *The Kathmandu Post*, p. 4.
- Prashrit, M. N. (2007, January 13). Prithvi jayanti: pakshya pratipakshya. *Kantipur Daily*, 6.
- Preface. (1986). In Colonel Kirkpatrick, *An account of THE KINGDOM OF NEPAL* (pp.iii-xv). New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Regmi, D. R. (1975). *Modern Nepal* (2nd ed.) (Vol.1). Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya.
- Shah, P. N. (1989). Upadesh (Counsels). In Ishwar Baral (Ed.), *Sayapatri* (4th ed.) (pp 73-76). Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan.
- Shah, R. (2001). *Modern Nepal: a political history 1769-1955* (Vol. 1). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Sharma, B. C. (1976). *Nepalko aitihāsik ruprekha (Historical sketch of Nepal)*. (4th ed.). Venaras: Krishna Kumari Devi.
- Slemon, S. (2001). Postcolonial critical theories. In G.Castle (Ed.), *Postcolonial discourses: an anthology* (pp. 99-116). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Upadhyaya, S. P. (1998). *Nepalko samiksyatmak itihās (A critical history of Nepal)*. Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan.
- Williams, D. (1971). Foreword. In B. J. Hasrat (Ed.), *History of Nepal: as told by its own and contemporary chronicles* (pp. v-vi). Panjab: Hasrat.
- Wright, D.(1990). *History of Nepal*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.