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Research Article

The Historical Trajectory and the Politics of Lakhan Thapa's Body: Redrawing from Nepali Experiences

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Abstract

This paper explores Lakhan Thapa's body in the historical trajectory, especially dealing with antipathy, empathy and apotheosis in the light of the New-historicist perspective. Lakhan Thapa, a military rebellion and the first martyr of Nepal, was executed by the Rana regime in 1877. It took 122 years to recognize his body as "a martyr," which was declared by the multiparty democratic government in 1999. In the past, the regime created by the Ranas and Panchayats accentuated Lakhan Thapa in different positions, capturing variegated emotional responses from the rulers and the public. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that Lakhan Thapa's body is a site of antipathy, empathy and apotheosis. For instance, when his body resisted the ruler Jung Bahadur Rana, it was dominantly occupied by antipathy, creating a threat against the ruler. As the democratic movement took place in the country in 1990, empathetic temperaments were discharged from the public, reckoning Lakhan Thapa's body as a site of emancipation and celebration. Therefore, Lakhan Thapa's body became ubiquitous and omnipresent when the democratically elected federal republican government of Nepal declared Lakhan Thapa "the first martyr of Nepal" in 2015. To address this issue, the study employs Michel Foucault's notion of the 'disciplined body' and Stephen Greenblatt's definition of 'resonance and wonder' for analysis. The study also exposes Lakhan Thapa's body as a site of contestation and celebration, which is largely shaped by the political transition. The body is not a static and neutral form of agency with apolitical materiality but rather a fluid and transitory state of representation, profoundly rooted in the nexus of power and politics.

Keywords: Body, historical trajectory, antipathy, empathy, apotheosis

Introduction

Understanding the body has undergone tremendous changes in terms of its conceivability, materiality and practicality. The body, which was comprehended within

the fixed properties of human physicality, has become a site of abstract entities, particularly a matter of unprecedented conglomeration in the conception of immaterial responses. More importantly, enabling the profundity of storing senses or sensory notions within, the body, in no sense, has got indispensable power to capture the versatility of human emotions. In this relevance, this paper explores Lakhan Thapa's body in association with its historical trajectories to examine how his body went through different phases as a site to capture abstract human values. In doing so, it focuses on three specific questions: what public sentiments were attached to the historical ambit while understanding Lakhan Thapa's body? Why are contestation and celebration inseparable conjectures of his body? And how does his body open a broader spectrum and avenues to understand the limitless boundaries of the human body?

To answer these questions, the paper embodies Stephen Greenblatt's notion of 'resonance and wonder' and Michel Foucault's notion of body, particularly, 'the body of the condemned' and 'docile body'. Since historical events are always pastness of the present and impossible to explore in the physical presence, reading history, as Greenblatt argues, is always reading the past from the present. Therefore, Greenblatt's notion of resonance and wonder is deliberately endorsed to unearth the distortion and deliberation imbued in Lakhan Thapa's body. By resonance, as Greenblatt suggests, "The power of the object displayed to reach out beyond formal boundaries to a large world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which as a metaphor of more simply as metonymy it may be taken by a viewer to stand" (228). Hence, by wonder he means: "The power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (228). Like Greenblatt, Foucault is more concerned about the body in the constant infliction of power and politics; thus, his notion is used to unravel the role of the power that enunciated the discourses, appealing to antipathy, empathy and apotheosis across the people.

This study is divided into two sections. The first section imprints the historical location of Lakhan Thapa's body in association with Jung Bahadur Rana, focusing on how Lakhan Thapa's body experienced resistance, threat and rupture ultimately creating discursivity of antipathy. The second section illustrates how the narratives changed in the historical development or how in the process of national democratization, after getting certain rights to subject people's aspirations and demands, Lakhan Thapa's body significantly got new avenues with distinct emotional overtones. It also demystifies the transmogrification of the body, which has surpassed the limitation of the human body, to a large extent, metamorphosing into a demigod.

Lakhan Thapa's Body and Discursivity of Antipathy

Laxman Singh Thapa, widely known as Lakhan Thapa—the first martyr of Nepal, was born in 1834 in Bungkot, Gorkha. Indeed, his body, though undoubtedly had a particular geographic origin, encapsulates contestations regarding the birthplace. Some people argue that he was born in Kaski; whereas, there are people who claim Lucknow to be Lakhan Thapa's place of origin. Nevertheless, V. K. Rana Magar argues, "To claim Lakhan Thapa Magar's birth in Arghau of Kaski and residence in Lucknow is a fallacy. Lakhan Thapa, born in Gorkha, to be his name seems to be the direct impact of Siddha Lakhan Thapa Magar" (74; My Trans.). Ale Magar not only objects to the discourse of contestations of Lakhan Thapa's body but also refutes the problematic assumption of Lakhan Thapa's origin. However, Ale Magar's document is merely one of the shreds of evidence that claims Lakhan Thapa unquestionably from Gorkha. More importantly, the rigidity in its association with the counter perspective persists to date, objecting to Ale

Magar's opinion. In this sense, Lakhan Thapa's body still lacks a fundamental ground to substantiate its genesis; it juxtaposes contradictory views in terms of his identity based on location, if not from historical situatedness.

Although Lakhan Thapa's body emanates a debate about its birthplace, people substantially agree that he joined the battalion, Purano Gorkha Gana [Old Gorkha Army Battalion], established by King Prithivi Narayan Shah, in 1854, during the reign of Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana. He participated in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which was against British imperialism, on behalf of a British force led by Jung Bahadur. Lakhan Thapa did not hesitate to condemn Jung Bahadur's proposition to help the British though he served as Jung Bahadur's militant. In fact, V. K Rana Magar illuminates that Lakhan Thapa used to say: "Jang Bahadur Rana has sold Nepal to the barbarians (*Mlecsha*), the people call for help. Displace Jang, relieve Mother Nepal!" (qtd. in Lecomte-Tilouine 246). His dissatisfaction emanated vivaciously that "he quit the army," according to Lecomte-Tilouine, "in 1869 and settled in the village of Bungkot, in Gorkha district" (246). As a result, after returning from the military, he built a utopian kingdom with his military friend, Jaya Simha Chumi Rana. Both acts, to castigate Jung Bahadur and leave the army, were a form of resistance against the dominant discourse dispersed by Jung Bahadur.

When Lakhan Thapa was rebelling against Jung Bahadur, undoubtedly Jung Bahadur was the most influential person in the state by then. The major historical events: the Kot Massacre of 1846, which was possibly the way to accentuate himself as the prime minister, the Royal Seal (*Lal Mohar*) that empowered him to rule the country for all practical purposes, and the *Panja Patra* [*Thumb Paper*] of 6 August 1856 that the king conferred all-important royal power to him, consecrated unquestionable authority to Jung Bahadur. Especially, in this regard, Chandra Prakash Singh proclaims, "The Sanad of 1856 had reduced the king to the status of political no entity. Subsequent developments further consolidated this position The Prime Minister and Rana family became the real rulers of Nepal and the king was a virtual captive. The royal seal remained in the physical possession of the Prime Minister who used it at his own discretion" (993). The confiscation of the power of the king and subsequent elevation of Jung Bahadur's position was not celebratory in the palace. With an asymmetric division of power, political dislocation upsurged for inevitable turmoil.

Since the state was confronting political upheaval as the political conspiracy was disparately spiked, in this case, Chandra Prakash Singh claims, "He drafted a new constitution known as Jang Bahadur's 'Ain' [The Legal Code]. By the Ain, all the administrative powers were centralized in the hands of the Premier" (993). In doing so, he was not merely promulgating a code of conduct to govern the state uniformly but also to confine folks into a disciplined framework. As Foucault claims, "Discipline is a political anatomy of detail" (139), Jung Bahadur, while reserving the authority of discipline, was interjecting the political behavior absorbed and practiced by the people in the state. Interestingly, C. K. Lal remarks: "The code indeed proved to be more useful than initially imagined: it helped the Rana family rule the country for over a century even as the shahs were forced to remain titular heads of the kingdom" (11). Jung Bahadur's formulation of discipline functioned as the backbone of the nation that significantly institutionalized the authority and legitimacy of the Rana regime.

Later, Lakhan Thapa became one of the audacious rebellions to challenge Jung Bahadur's discipline, subverting the principle and legitimacy to disrupt the robustness proclaimed by Jung Bahadur. It was indeed a vehement resistance and mostly an undebatable reason why Lakhan Thapa's body absorbed antipathy from Jung Bahadur's position. Lakhan Thapa was not merely an individual threatening Jung Bahadur's

discipline but rather the body as a whole, an enigmatic and substantial force with an intermediating agency that could rupture the perpetual arms of the opposition. In this connection, how Jung Bahadur conceived Lakhan Thapa, Pudma Jung Bahadur Rana illustrates: "A rebellion of somewhat curious nature distributed the peace of the country . . . He imposed upon a large number of the ignorant classes, whom he induced to put faith in his imposture and join under his banner, in order to subvert the government of Jung Bahadur" (229). Here, Lakhan Thapa's body was resistive and admonitory; thus, the body became the marker of Lakhan Thapa's capability to accumulate resistive forces. In this case, as Pudma Jung Bahadur Rana further expostulates, "His graceful manners and persuasive tone soon procured him an armed following of 1,500 men, at the head of whom he threatened to march to the capital, and after assassinating Jung Bahadur, to seize the reigns of government, and inaugurated the golden age of Nepalese history" (229). The description of the rulers palpably discloses the observation of the power from the ruler's gaze. The way Lakhan Thapa was marching toward the impregnable state of invulnerability, the foundation of the discipline constructed by the rulers was gradually eroding.

The force that Lakhan Thapa's body encapsulated and the strength it endorsed were not merely menacing the rules but also constructing a colossus fence that could obstruct the visibility to its beyond. In this sense, Jung Bahadur probably realized that Lakhan Thapa was his mirror image, which could replace his position. Lakhan Thapa and Jung Bahadur were once armies of the ruler; they served the purpose of authority but later challenged the existing ruler to corroborate their leadership. Therefore, seeing Lakhan Thapa, Jung Bahadur could see the formidable force and his tactical steps approaching him as Bhuwan Lal Joshi and Leo E. Rose contend, "The leader [Lakhan Thapa] was an intelligent, resourceful person, who made use of symbols and legends of his district that would be effective in mobilizing the people of Gorkha" (43). In doing so, Purushottam Sham Shere J. B. Rana expostulates: "Thapa used to say he had been sent by the goddess Manakamana to be king of Nepal. He had already acquired some arms and a plan to kill Jung along his way from the western Terai to Kathmandu" (146). Lakhan Thapa's proclamation was against the grain of the disciplinary code of Jung Bahadur because according to *The Mulukī Ain of 1854: Nepal's First Legal Code*, "If someone deliberates on a matter . . . which threatens the life of the prime minister (mukhtiyāra) . . . he shall be executed" (96). Therefore, the legal code was the evidence to justify Lakhan Thapa's quilt and authority to punish as per the discipline.

If *The Muluki Ain* is considered, Lakhan Thapa's position was unquestionably beyond the horizon of the disciplinary domain. Since "Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Foucault 138), Lakhan Thapa's body is not apart from the docility. His plot against Jung Bahadur was sufficient enough to subject him to be a culprit, who deliberately planned to assassinate the prime minister. Therefore, to subdue the antagonistic forces, "Jung sent the Devidat Battalio to suppress the agitation and it did so, arresting Lakhan Thapa, his supporters, and five ringleaders" (Rana 146). After the successful detention, "The ringleader 'Lakhan' and twelve of his firmest supporters, whom he probably called his 'apostle,' were brought in bamboo cages, and the rest on foot" (Rana 230). As a decisive remark, "A trial was held at Thapathali, Jang's Private residence, and Lakhan and six of his followers were sentenced to death" (Joshi and Rose 44). The body with a resistive force, when it became a threat to the power, ended with an irresistible rupture. In fact, when he was executed in front of Manakamana, his body was not merely confronting the punishment; meanwhile, it was also becoming a reference to silence some other possible rebellions who would endeavor to go against the body of government. Lecomte-Tilouine assesses this particular event in the following ways:

Note that he was hung on the site where he had conducted his action—besides his house or the temple of Manakamana— after he had been judged in Kathmandu. It is significant that the execution took place there as if to show to his former partisans the particularly striking symbol of his defeat and his imposture. The goddess herself was made a witness to the death of her alleged elected devotee, in accordance with an extremely humiliating and cruel idea of Jang Bahadur. (261)

Lecomte-Tilouine describes how severely Lakhan Thapa's body was treated in front of the mass and in front of the godly place where he used to pray for power. The attitude complied by Jung Bahadur reflects that the tussle between these two people is not merely a squabble between the rulers and the rulebreakers or lawmakers and lawbreakers, but also an inevitable collision between two opposing forces or antipathy between the dead and the survivor. In this regard, Lakhan Thapa's body was capable of encompassing a sense of antipathy if analyzed from Jung Bahadur's perspective; it was powerful enough to initiate a resistive force; it was participatory to emanate a threat in the deep corner of Jung Bahadur's heart though it was ruptured at the end.

Lakhan Thapa's Body: From Empathy and Divinity

The tragic death of Lakhan Thapa became an inerasable historical event in Nepal that rejuvenated resistive apprehension against the dominant force. Ram Krishna Tiwari argues: "The revolt of Lakhan Thapa against Rana autocracy and other civil right movements directed to establish political rights and assert the socio-politico-economic identities of Nepali people" (218). However, since Lakhan Thapa's death was an inductive remark to dramatize the consequences of opposing the authority, his body, to a large extent, though transcribed in history, merely became a staged reality rather than a matter of widespread discussion. The discourse of Lakhan Thapa's body remained underneath the belly of the dominant rulers of the Rana regime subsequently followed by the panchayat regime. In this case, Narayan Khadka attests: "From December 1960 to April 1990, Nepal was ruled by an absolute monarchy, and its system of government was called partyless panchayat democracy. The king ruled under the partyless panchayat system both as a head of the state and the government, advised by two centers of political power, the Council of Ministers and his Palace Secretariat" (45). The power of the Panchayat regime concealed the autonomy of the common people and implemented rules and regulations, based on their interests. Indeed, the Panchayat regime exercised power to substantiate autocratic monarchy; however, in doing so, Lakhan Thapa's body did not get a chance to expose its vitality in a public discourse. In the political domination of the Panchayat regime, voices against the government were nullified though there were sparks of resistance.

After the democratic movement of 1990, the autocratic monarchical Panchayat system came to an end that laid the foundation of people's voices from different strata. This was not merely a political transition but an entirely new form of societal order, a shift of power and changes in the conditions of common people. "These changes," as Pratyoush Onta and Devraj Humagain argue, "made possible the realization of a different kind of public sphere in Nepal in which critical commentary on erstwhile off-limit subjects became a routine affair" (99). Especially the transition, as John Whelpton puts, "led to a great upsurge in ethnic activism as different groups . . . advanced claims to a greater share in economic resources and for recognition of their own language and culture" (178). The political consciousness of ethnic groups revamped the demand for long-lost cultural icons and symbols, ultimately remapping the boundaries of their space and time. The awakening of the civilians, especially the ethnic groups, included the

Magars to revitalize the significance of Lakhan Thapa. As cited by Onta and Humagain, the situation is described in this way: "During the 1990s, Janajati activists and scholars resuscitated the memory of Lakhan Thapa Magar as modern Nepal's first martyr and this article published in Kiran and another published in *Janajati Manch* later" (108). In this sense, the political dimension and its upheaval played a significant role in understanding the body of Lakhan Thapa. To be more precise, Lakhan Thapa's body embodied a fertile ground for discussion that could generate and regenerate diverse discourses in the political transition.

Lakhan Thapa's body was condemned during the Rana regime and was made docile because of the disciplined code of conduct; however, it transmogrified its materiality and got a new space where it became the need and necessity for at least a certain group of people after 1990. Both in the Rana regime and the Panchayat regime, power was concentrated within a limited authority that could merely work as an apparatus to serve their interest, demeaning the condition of the people. They, therefore, either through discipline or through power, control and monitor the body of every individual. Since discipline is something that works as a mechanism to filter the potency of the body because "it dissociates power from the body . . . it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection" (Foucault 138), Lakhan Thapa's body was structurally made vulnerable, sidelining the possibility of its outcome. In terms of law, Lakhan Thapa's body was deduced into an imposter, and on the basis of emotional responses, it was converted into a site of hostility. To make it more practical, the ruler used their power to silence the opposition and discipline to circumscribe Lakhan Thapa's body.

Although the Panchayat regime explicitly did not involve itself in the discourse of Lakhan Thapa's body, the way King Mahendra imposed power to govern the state was sufficient enough to nullify the possibility of the recognition of Lakhan Thapa. In other words, the Panchayat regime capacitated its restrictive forces through the power to minuscule the outrageous vigor of Lakhan Thapa's body. However, ethnic consciousness not merely freed the constraints strangled in Lakhan Thapa's body but also made it visible to those who were not willing to see it. It was possible because, as Greenblatt argues, "Certain aesthetic and political structures work to contain the subversion perceptions they generate, not that those perceptions simply wither away" (223). Instead, he emphasizes: "They may be pried loose from the order with which they were bound up and may serve to fashion a new and radically different set of structures" (223). The political domination and the exercise of power probably might have temporarily blocked the ways to palpability; however, the ethnic consciousness burst Lakhan Thapa's body with a new fashion. The old hatred and disdainful body with full of antipathy became a site of empathy, icon and necessity.

The public's empathetic sentiments were inextricably attached to the body of Lakhan Thapa. People started voicing for the recognition of Lakhan Thapa's revolutionary actions against the irresistible forces and the body that clutched the fertility of emancipation of civilians. Delving into the historical backdrops, Siddhi B Ranjitkar opines: "Lakhan Thapa has remained unrecognized for his deeds until the government declared Lakhan Thapa a martyr in 1999 but has not declared him a first martyr, yet" (1). Lakhan Thapa's body was always a threatening agency to the dominant. More importantly, Lakhan Thapa's body was always a challenge to the dominant force whether it was the Rana regime or the Panchayat regime. It was thus a political reason that subdued the recognition of Lakhan Thapa's body, though the 1990 democratic movement followed by Maoist insurgency, evaporating the supremacy of dictatorial

government, ultimately brought Lakhan Thapa onto the stage declaring him the first martyr of Nepal on 15 September 2015 (Onlinekhabar).

The government indeed lately, approximately 122 years later, declared Lakhan Thapa to be the first martyr of Nepal; nevertheless, people from the Magar community were actively participating in different social platforms for the recognition of Lakhan Thapa's body since 1990. For instance, in 1992, for the first time, artist Debela Moktan sketched the portrait of Lakhan Thapa. In the subsequent stages, different artists were involved in portraying Lakhan Thapa's picture. However, B. B. Thapa Magar's portrait got the most popularity, among many, along with the national recognition which became the identity marker of martyr Lakhan Thapa. Jeevan Ale Magar exclaims: "With respect to Lakhan Thapa, the Nepal government, introduced the Hulak [Postal] ticket of the same portrait, which was sealed for the very first time on 16 November 2016" (65; My Trans.). Similarly, in the joint association of the Nepal Magar Association and the residence, in the revolutionary territory of Lakhan Thapa, his up-soldier sculpture was for the first time made on 15 February 2004.

Being everywhere, Lakhan Thapa was nowhere when the dominant power was ruling the society but when people got liberated, Lakhan Thapa appeared everywhere being nowhere, at least physically. This resembles the hidden empathy of the people who were unable to express their feelings because of oppression. As soon as they got liberated, they started proclaiming the vitality of Lakhan Thapa's body. The empathetic temperaments are abstract entities of human beings even though these intangible features were reflected through the tangible elements like painting and sculpture, to name but a few, of Lakhan Thapa. In historical trajectories, after the 1990 restoration of democracy in Nepal, the body of Lakhan Thapa created an increasing opacity. The body was not confined within the periphery of an individual but rather it spread its vibrant tangibility in the community, especially among the Magars which then was recognized in an entire nation. The condemned, docile and punished body became a national figure. As it was ubiquitous and omnipresent throughout, it created an apotheosis. As a result, he is now recognized as a divine figure.

It is not to argue that Lakhan Thapa did not retain divine quality in the past but rather to reconsider how the political development of history changed the perception of the observer to comprehend Lakhan Thapa's body. In fact, Lakhan Thapa was considered to be a divine incarnation of Saint Lakhan Thapa, a divine priest of Manakamana Temple; apart from people believe he had a prophetic vision as Lecomte-Tilouine narrates what Jaya Simha's grandson said, "Lakhan Thapa the corpse, Jang Bahadur the *Sati*" (269); thus, Jung Bahadur, who was physically fit and healthy, died seven days after Lakhan Thapa's demise. Moreover, Lakhan Thapa used to say, as Shivalal Thapa Magar writes, "After execution, if my body rots and falls to the ground, know that I am dead. But if my body dries and shrinks, know that Lakhan Thapa is alive" (6), and astonishingly, as Jeevan Ale Magar claims, "according to senior citizens of the place, Lakhan's corpse shrunken instead of rotting" (39). There are contestations in these realities and nobody is for sure whether it did really happen. Nonetheless, these stories are still narrated, with several varieties, in different parts of Nepal.

Lakhan Thapa's body was a subject of divinity, and now it is revitalized. No doubt Jung Bahadur could not understand or understood more than necessary; his verdict was profoundly based on the political threat from Lakhan Thapa; thus, he cleared his way through legal authenticity. However, "Certainly, the 'crimes' and 'offenses' on which judgment is passed are judicial objects defined by code, but judgment is also passed on the passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effects of environment or hereditary" (Foucault 17). In this sense, Jung Bahadur's charge is

questionable but whatsoever the case is history has observed the righteousness and wrong hood, resulting in Lakhan Thapa's body as a site of divinity and Lakhan Thapa himself as a demigod.

Conclusion

The discussions above show that Lakhan Thapa's body is a confluence of antipathy, empathy and apotheosis. The historical trajectories, in association with political transition, played a significant role in comprehending his body from different locations. Although his body accumulated variant emotional responses from the rulers and the common people, either antipathy, empathy, or apotheosis, it became dominant in a particular historical epoch. These qualities are explicit and more flexible to create a separate space in defining the multiple dimensions of the body. It presents the multifaceted nature of human identity as it, within individuals, interplays with contrasting forces. The diverse recognition of the body was, nevertheless, because of the Rana regime as his body was in a state of antipathy. His body was treated as an opposition and one having antagonistic character traits. However, after the restoration of democracy in Nepal, especially after the Maoist rebellion, the positionality of his body shifted and gained empathy. The empathetic quality that his body embodied established connections with many people of distinct backgrounds which helped a dislocated body to be introduced at the utmost pace of celebration. Experiencing the mode of transfiguration, the body gradually earned its identity as a god figure and was recognized as the body of apotheosis.

The transformation of Lakhan Thapa's body symbolizes the transcendental elevation as it connected his physicality with the sacred status. This, moreover, possesses his body to establish a distinct degree of flexibility that represents a spiritual ascent elevating the comprehension of a body to the extended degree of mortality. The metamorphosis of his body embodies sets his auratic identity, apart from other ordinary individuals, which became a body that vocalizes the profundity of eternal flames that reverberates the essence of materiality, permitting the vastness of exegesis and echolalia in the spatio-temporality of the historical epoch. The body that was disillusioned once, now, with its vibrancy addresses the possible veracity of interest and identity. As the body transcends its physicality, it conveys messages that articulate the intensity which, indeed, symbolizes the eternal flame that vocalizes power. Thus, the body communicates the hidden messages that serve as a gateway to acknowledge the depths of knowledge along with the essence of existence.

The body, although it might have temporal existence in terms of physicality, has inerasable traces in the pages of history. As the historical pages turn, so does the distinct definition and interpretation it emanates. The body is capable of holding colors of justification but it changes over time and the responses it stimulates in the audience profoundly depend on the political sphere it observes.

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