

Storm on the Roof of Heaven: Conflict in Nepal¹

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Nepal: An Invented, Arrested Shangri-La?

Land-locked Nepal is a tiny country covering much of the Himalayas. Geographically, it separates the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau. Although the Himalayas are the highest mountains in the world, they are not impregnable. Since antiquity, numerous mountain passes cutting across Nepal have been used as trading routes. Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital, straddles the principal trade route that links Tibet with India. Nepal, bordered by India to the south and China to the north, is a mosaic of different peoples, terrains and cultures.²

Although Nepal is the reputed birthplace of Buddha, Buddhists constitute only 20 per cent of the Nepalese population. Half of Nepal's people are *janjati*, or national minority groups conveniently classified as Hindu by the State. The Nepalese ruling class has decreed that the *janjati* population is Hindu, in order to legitimise the treatment of these people as inferior castes and to strengthen their claim that Nepal is a Hindu nation. Nevertheless, most *janjatis* evade this Hinduist imposition and follow animist religious practices.³

Nepal's geography favours its mosaic pattern of peoples and cultures. The mountains and three distinct river basins have, throughout Nepal's history, kept its populations isolated from one another. Poor peasants have eked a living from terrace

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² Robert Z. Apte, *Three Kingdoms on the Roof of the World: Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1990; Omar Sattaur, *Nepal: New Horizons?* Oxfam, Oxford, 1996.

³ Harka Gurung, *Sectoral Reports on Sustainable Development Agenda for Nepal (SDAN)*, Date Accessed: 27 June 2004, <<http://www.scdp.org.np/sdan/SDANrpt7.pdf>>

farming in the hills, or grazing cattle or goats on the high plateaus. The fertile Kathmandu valley is suited to rice cultivation and other forms of intensive agriculture. This rich agricultural region is dominated by Nepal's Hinduist feudal nobles, whose ancestors fled from India to escape the Moghul invasions of the 11th and 13th centuries. Their wealthy fiefdoms, built on the labour of successive generations of peasants, ensured their position as the dominant class.⁴

During the period of British colonialism on the Indian subcontinent, these feudal principalities were unified into the state of Nepal, which acted as a buffer state between the British Raj and Imperial China. Throughout the period of British colonialism in India, the Nepalese *janjatis* continued to pay tribute to their king. While half of contemporary Nepal's population are rural *janjati*, whereas other *janjati*, the urban Newars, the descendents of the early Buddhist inhabitants and traders of Kathmandu, continue to occupy posts in commerce and public life in the capital. Although an official Nepalese language has been established for two hundred years, only thirty per cent of the population use it as their native tongue.⁵

Most land in Nepal is owned either by the monarch or feudal landlords. The overwhelming majority of the peasantry are small tenant farmers, with a minority owning small plots of land. Through taxes and other onerous obligations, Nepal's peasants are subjected to different forms of exploitation and oppression by the Royalist State, absentee landowners and money-lenders. Perennial debt bondage has created forms of slavery in the poorest of Nepal's districts.⁶

⁴ B.H. Farmer, 'Nepal: Physical and Social Geography', in Lynn Daniel (ed) *The Far East and Australasia 2003*, Europa, London, 2003.

'Nepal: Roots of Revolution', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 906, (11 May 1997), <<http://rwor.org/a/v19/905-09/906/nepal.htm>>

⁵ Steven M. Parish, *Hierarchy and its Discontents: Culture and the Politics of Consciousness in Caste Society*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 1996;

Naresh Newar, 'Some reservations about reservation', *The Nepali Times*, Issue 185, 27 February – 4 March 2004, <http://www.nepalitimes.com/issue185/nation_2.htm>

⁶ Krishna Upadhynya, 'Bonded Labour in India, Pakistan and Nepal', in Christine Van den Anker (ed), *The Political Economy of New Slavery*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004, pp. 118-136.

Shiva Sharma, 'Land Tenure and Poverty in Nepal', *The World Bank*, Date Accessed: 27 June 2004, <<http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdrpoverty/dhaka/sharma.pdf>>

'Slavery and Freedom in Nepal', *MS Nepal*, Date accessed: 27 June 2004, <http://nepal.ms.dk/articles/kamaiya_book/default.htm>

Nepal constitutes one of the world's poorest countries.⁷ Most of the peasantry are perennially undernourished. Apart from crafts designed for the tourist trade, industrial products are rare commodities for most of Nepal's people. There are no large-scale modern industries in Nepal. Most consumer commodities as well as oil products are imported from India. From the time of Indian independence, Nepal, economically and politically, has become a virtual neo-colony of India. In the early 1990s, oil exploration by both British Dutch Shell and the US corporation, Texana, has occurred in Nepal's southern border regions.⁸ As yet, sufficient quantities of oil have not been located. If they are, Nepal's oil will be foreign owned, without tangible benefit to the people of Nepal. Nepalese housing, which often lacks rudimentary sanitation, is reminiscent of the widespread squalor prevalent in the cities and countryside of the Third World. Nepal has 1,290 registered doctors, most of whom live in Kathmandu. There is a small number of rural doctors who serve the eighteen million Nepalese in the countryside.⁹ The average life expectancy for Nepalese is 59 years.¹⁰ These averages hide the large disparities between an affluent urban social stratum, and impoverished rural Nepal.¹¹

Nepalese women frequently die during childbirth, with one out of every one hundred women dying in labour. Marriage by kidnapping (after which payment to the bride's family is negotiated) is prevalent in some rural regions.¹² As remote Nepal is

⁷ 'At a Glance: Nepal', *UNICEF*, Date accessed: 27 June 2004, <<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nepal.html>>
'World's poorest under UN spotlight', *BBC News*, 16 May 2001, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/1332123.stm>>

⁸ 'The Oil Factor: Texana in Nepal', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1154, 9 June 2002, <<http://rwor.org/a/v24/1151-1160/1154/nepalandoil.htm>>
Anupama Airy, 'ONGC to pick 50% in US firm's Nepal blocks', *The Financial Express*, 25 October 2001, <<http://www.financialexpress.com/fe20011025/top3.html>>

⁹ 'Nepal: Roots of Revolution', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 906, (11 May 1997), <<http://rwor.org/a/v19/905-09/906/nepal.htm>>

¹⁰ 'Human Development Indicators 2003', *United Nations Development Programme*, Date Accessed: 27 June 2004, <http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/cty_f_NPL.html>

¹¹ 'Nepal: Roots of Revolution', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 906, (11 May 1997), <<http://rwor.org/a/v19/905-09/906/nepal.htm>>

¹² Li Onesto, 'Nepal: Women Hold Up Half the Sky!' *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1094, 11 March 2001, <http://rwor.org/a/v22/1090-99/1094/nepal_women.htm>
'Incidents of Dowry-Related Violence High in Capital', *Kathmandu Post*, 27 May 2003, <<http://www.trekinfo.com/news/news03-07.html>>

drawn into the market economy, larger numbers of peasant women have been forced into prostitution in the brothels of Kathmandu and northern India.¹³

Annually, huge numbers of young rural men and women leave Nepal to work as illegal migrants in India, the Gulf States, Southeast Asia, and Japan. The money they send back to their families through remittances is a largely unrecognised contribution to the Nepalese economy and the peasants' material existence. It is estimated that between thirteen and twenty-five per cent of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is derived from sums remitted to the kingdom by overseas Nepalese, as well as income delivered to relatives from those family members employed in other regions of Nepal.¹⁴

During the last four decades, large-scale tourism, with Royal assent, has developed in Nepal. Apart from Nepal's sublime scenery and excellent climate, the tourist trade is reliant upon the super-exploitation of the Sherpas and other *janjati* engaged in menial labour. Tourist 'development' is aimed at turning the country into a 'vacation paradise' for Western tourists and rich Indians who are blind to the human misery and suffering in the hills and valleys.¹⁵

Traditionally, many Nepalese men have become mercenaries in the British Army and, after Partition, the Indian Army. The Gorkha (Nepalese) regiments have played an important role in the British and Indian armies. As many as 500,000 Nepalese soldiers served in the British Army during World War II. At war's end, they were discharged without being paid a penny. Their return to Nepal brought a massive democratic upsurge during the years 1945 to 1951.¹⁶ This political moment in Nepal's history lessened the power of Royal absolutism and foreshadowed later Nepalese experiments in constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy.¹⁷ Another paradox of Nepalese mercenary tradition is that in this remote country,

¹³ David Seddon, Jagganath Adhikari, and Ganesh Gurung, 'Foreign Labour Migration and the Remittance Economy of Nepal', *Critical Asian Studies*, 34:1, (2002), p. 27.

¹⁴ David Seddon, Jagganath Adhikari, and Ganesh Gurung, 'Foreign Labour Migration and the Remittance Economy of Nepal', *Critical Asian Studies*, 34:1, (2002), pp. 20-22.

¹⁵ Christopher Pagdin, 'Assessing Tourism Impacts in the Third World: A Nepal Case Study', *Progress in Planning*, Volume 44, Part 3, (April 1995), pp. 186-266.

¹⁶ Netra B. Thapa, *A Short History of Nepal*, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1981.

¹⁷ Kaisher Bahadur, *Nepal After the Revolution of 1950*, Sharada Prakashan Griha, Kathmandu, 1976.

oppressed peoples have gained knowledge of military strategies and the handling of modern weapons.

Heaven on Earth? Sagarmatha above the Janjati

The Sagarmatha, or Mount Everest, which was named after a British colonial official, dominates the land of Nepal in the Himalayas. A historical and contemporary parallel can be drawn between this geographic reality and the dominance of the god-king over Nepal. In Nepalese mandala, god-kings are the intermediary between heaven and earth. Their spatial and temporal power is reflected in the location and architecture of their palaces. Nepalese god-kings traditionally have possessed absolute authority over matters of State. The dogma of god-kingship and its divine rights, paradoxically, has been at the centre of Nepal's transition to modernity.¹⁸

Modern Nepal remains an ancient kingdom, even after unification in the eighteenth century, and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy in the last decades of the twentieth century. While the mass of displaced and returning Nepalese soldiers after the Second World War, and the internal divisions within the Nepalese ruling class, brought certain democratic changes to the Nepalese political system, the power of the monarch remained inviolate.¹⁹ The divine rule of the king was still to be obeyed. To question the authority of the god-king was heresy.²⁰

The invented tradition of god-kingship has been riven with the problems of succession, despotism and contested power. Apart from its presumption that the Nepalese people would always remain loyal, devoted, and subservient, the kingship's inherent weakness was its incapacity to cede any power beyond itself. Nepal's past is littered with blood feuds, regicide, coups, and succession struggles. The royal massacre that occurred in June 2001 was not an aberration, but a continuation of Nepal's monarchical malaise. Since World War II and the granting of Indian independence, the Nepalese Royal House has, to a degree, acceded to certain

¹⁸ Sharmila Peres da Costa, *Nepal: Paradise in Crisis*, unpublished BA Honours (Politics) thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2003, pp. 41-49.

¹⁹ Manik Lal Bajracharya, *Birendra: The King with a Difference*, Hari Bhakta Shrestha, Kathmandu, 1974.

²⁰ Sharmila Peres da Costa, *Nepal: Paradise in Crisis*, unpublished BA Honours (Politics) thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2003, p. 50.

democratic changes. From the 1951 Delhi Compromise, national elections, political parties, a constitution, and a semblance of parliamentary democracy was established in Nepal.²¹

Since 1951 until the present, Nepal has been governed under numerous constitutions. None of these constitutions have challenged or usurped the authority of the monarch. During this period, various parliaments have been dissolved and constitutions suspended as the monarch assumed direct rule. This carousel of apparent parliamentary political change was to end in 1990 when King Birendra proclaimed yet another constitution for Nepal. This constitution established a constitutional monarchy and a democratically elected multi-party government.²²

Monarchic authority has been paramount in each Nepalese constitution, and the 1990 constitution was no exception. The position of the throne is always guaranteed, and the constitution cannot affect the tradition of successive kingship. In the 1990 constitution, the monarch retained emergency powers to suspend articles of the constitution and assume authority in the event of a national crisis. These constitutional changes have no consideration for Nepalese democracy, but only the exalted position of the monarch.

In article 27 of the 1990 constitution, the monarch is to preserve and protect the constitution 'by keeping in view the best interests and welfare of the people of Nepal'. Article 29 excludes all expenditures and privileges of the king and the royal family from Nepalese law, and article 30 makes exempt 'the property and income of the king from any kind of tax, fee or comparable charge'. Under article 31, the actions of the king cannot be brought before any court, nor can the king be prosecuted under any law. Article 122 empowers the king to grant pardons and suspend any sentence passed by any court or administrative institution.²³

In sum, every one of Nepal's many constitutions has never threatened the absolute power of the monarch as the country has lurched from one political crisis to

²¹ Jonathan Gregson, *Blood Against the Snows: The Tragic Story of Nepal's Royal Dynasty*, Fourth Estate, London, 2002.

Sharmila Peres da Costa, *Nepal: Paradise in Crisis*, unpublished BA Honours (Politics) thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2003, pp. 52-53.

²² S. Chandrasekharan, 'Is Nepal still in search of a political order?' *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper number 481, 24 June 2002, <<http://www.saag.org/papers5/paper481.html>>

²³ 'Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal: Asian Studies Documents', *UCLA Center for East Asian Studies*, Date Accessed: 27 June 2004, <<http://www.isop.ucla.edu/eas/documents/nepal-constitution.htm>>

another. In spite of the leavening of Nepalese politics from the 1950s until the palace massacre of 2001, King Sagarmatha ruled over his Nepalese subjects with impunity.

The Beginning of the End or the Sense of an Ending?

The circumstances that led to the palace murders, which occurred on 1st June 2001, still remain unclear. The palace mayhem created its own bizarre aftermath when Prince Dipendra, who had supposedly murdered his father, mother, and other members of the royal family, was declared the new king of Nepal while lying in a coma, clinically brain-dead. Soon after the prince's death, Dipendra's uncle, Gyanendra, returned from his Indian vacation and assumed the throne. King Gyanendra proclaimed that the palace bloodshed was caused by accidental fire from an automatic weapon. The royal corpses were swiftly cremated according to Hindu tradition and any forensic evidence had turned to ashes. The royal murder mystery of usurpation and succession might be seen as the contemporary continuation of a royal Nepalese tradition.²⁴ Whatever happened behind the palace walls will never be known because it impinged on regal authority.

The events of 1st June 2001 might be mistakenly seen as the beginning of the end of the Nepalese Royal House. Yet, the new king, Gyanendra, sits firmly on the throne, despite sporadic popular demonstrations demanding the restoration of parliamentary democracy. Perhaps the fundamental change to Nepal can be found not in a bloodied palace, but in the mountainous countryside.

Since the early 1960s, popular and growing challenges to Nepal's feudal order have emanated from its poorest peoples. In 1966, disaffected members broke away from the existing Nepalese Communist Party and renounced the futility of parliamentary democracy and constitutional change within Royalist Nepal. With new methods of mass work and a revolutionary organisation that was to serve the vast majority of the poor of Nepal, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) was established in May 1966.²⁵

²⁴ Jonathan Gregson, *Blood Against the Snows: The Tragic Story of Nepal's Royal Dynasty*, Fourth Estate, London, 2002.

Li Onesto, 'Nepal: Murder in the Palace, Maoists in the Mountains', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1107, 17 June 2001, <http://rwor.org/a/v23/1100-99/1107/nepal_royals.htm>

²⁵ Commentary from Dr. Baburam Bhattarai in Nepal, 'Birth Pangs of Democracy in Nepal', *Monthly Review*, January 2002, <<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0102bhattarai.htm>>
'The First Days of People's War in Nepal', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 870, 25 August 1996, <<http://rwor.org/a/firstvol/nepal.htm>>

From tentative beginnings, a movement of people's war was launched which has spread throughout the Nepalese countryside. The palace and most other commentators have denounced the people's war as a Maoist insurgency based on rape, torture, murder, drug running, and the cowering of the Nepalese peasantry.²⁶ Nevertheless, since February 1996 9,000 Nepalese have been killed, most of whom are peasants, the people's war has spread to almost all of Nepal's 75 districts. Seventy-five per cent of these deaths occurred between 2002 and 2004.²⁷

Nepal's ruling class emphasises that the insurgency is based on the Maoists' terrorising of villagers. Although Amnesty International and other human rights organisations have recorded violations by both the guerrilla insurgents and the Nepalese police, what is never explained is the continuing popular support throughout Nepal for the people's war, despite its apparent outrages.

It is argued that although the rural insurgency may be endemic, it cannot overthrow the existing social order. From 1996, the Nepalese government has been in a constant state of crisis over how to eliminate, if not contain, the popular insurgency that has gained control in the 'red-base areas' of the western districts of Rolpa, Rukum and beyond. Hundreds of rural youth, both female and male, have joined the popular armed resistance, which has been condemned for establishing children's armies.²⁸

As far as is known, compulsion through the barrel of a gun has not been exercised in this recruitment of poor, young, illiterate people who constitute an overwhelming majority among the rural population. The revolutionary combatants throughout many of Nepal's rural districts have ransacked government offices, robbed banks, destroyed police headquarters, burnt documents from land revenue and tax offices, and freed prisoners from police cells. They have raided police arsenals and stolen weapons and ammunition.²⁹

²⁶ Li Onesto, 'Nepal: Murder in the Palace, Maoists in the Mountains', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1107, 17 June 2001, <http://rwor.org/a/v23/1100-99/1107/nepal_royals.htm>

²⁷ Major General (Retired) Dipankar Banerjee, Director, 'Nepal Current Situation and Future Challenges', *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 26 March 2004, <www.ipcs.org/ipcs/new/newIpcsSeminars.jsp>

²⁸ 'Nepal: Maoists launch a daring new offensive', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1130, 9 December 2001, <<http://rwor.org/a/v23/1130-39/1130/nepal.htm>>

²⁹ B. Raman, 'Maoists' Tet-Like Offensive in Nepal', *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper number 368, 27 November 2001, <<http://www.saag.org/papers4/paper368.html>>

Whatever their faults, this ragtag people's army are seeking their liberation from kingly rule and feudal oppression. Despite the threat from below, the Nepalese State remains largely unshaken. A situation of contending dual power between the Nepalese State and the forces of rural insurgency has not come into existence. If it does, constitutional monarchic feudalism may be in its death throes. Nevertheless, in some districts, the popular forces have redistributed land and established rudimentary schools and hospitals in which women play a dominant role.³⁰ The mere rustle of leaves may indicate to the ruling order in Kathmandu the last of their days.

The Palace Offensive

Immediately after the assumption of power by King Gyanendra, parliament was suspended, political parties were banned and areas beyond Kathmandu were under martial law. Nepal's police forces throughout the countryside were being routed by the insurgent masses. They could not impose the royal order of the palace. From the beginning of the popular insurgency until the palace massacre, the Royal Nepalese Army was stationed strategically around the national capital. Gyanendra ordered divisions of the army into the most rebellious districts to liquidate the popular opposition. To date, the operations of the army have dispersed but not destroyed the emergent insurrection.

After September 11, 2001, the Bush administration predicted that the growing civil war in Nepal would render that nation a failed state and a possible haven for international terrorists.³¹ The popular insurgency in Nepal has become an example of 'Himalayan terrorism'. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) was listed, along with Al-Qaeda, Abu-Sayaf and Hezbollah, on the U.S. State Department's Terrorist Watch List. In February 2002, Michael E. Malinowski, the U.S. ambassador to Nepal, has advocated 'an all-out military offensive aimed at the insurgency', believing that the CPNM "literally have to be bent back to the table".³²

B. Raman, 'The Maoists of Nepal: Three Perspectives', *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper number 277, 13 July 2001, <<http://www.saag.org/papers3/paper277.html>>

³⁰ R. Radhakrishna, 'Maoist Insurgency in Nepal', *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, April 2004, <<http://www.ipcs.org>>

³¹ Nick Bryant, 'U.S. courts Nepal as anti-terror partner', *BBC News*, 6 April 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3593849.stm>

'Interpol "Alert" for Nepal Maoists', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1164, 25 August 2002, <<http://rwor.org/a/v24/1161-1170/1164/nepal-interpol.htm>>

In the past two years, the Royal Nepal Army has increased its numbers from 53,000 to 70,000. In contrast, it is estimated that the Maoists have '4,000 core members and 15,000 or so militia supporters'.³³ Nearly 80 per cent of the Nepalese armed forces are deployed in defending the capital, Kathmandu. As few young male Nepalese have enlisted voluntarily, the government has imposed universal military conscription.³⁴ In 2003, the United States gave Nepal \$US17 million in military aid and the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) provided \$US14 million in 'insurgency relevant aid'.³⁵ With the influx of highly lethal modern assault rifles, submachine guns and helicopter gunships, the casualties amongst the insurgents have spiralled.³⁶ Conveniently, the Royal House of Nepal, with the assistance of the Bush administration, has attempted to convert a growing popular insurgency into a palace offensive on rural terrorism.

³² Conn Hallinan, "'Wrong, Wrong Wrong': Nepal, Bush and WMDs", *Counterpunch*, 31 January - 1 February 2004, <<http://www.counterpunch.org/hallinan01312004.html>>

³³ 'Armed Conflicts Report 2003: Nepal', *Project Ploughshares*, Date Accessed: 27 June 2004, <<http://www.ploughshares.ca/CONTENT/ACR/ACR00/ACR00-Nepal.html>>

³⁴ R. Radhakrishna, 'Maoist Insurgency in Nepal', *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, April 2004, <<http://www.ipcs.org>>

³⁵ Conn Hallinan suggests this figure in "'Wrong, Wrong Wrong': Nepal, Bush and WMDs", *Counterpunch*, 31 January - 1 February 2004, <<http://www.counterpunch.org/hallinan01312004.html>> whereas a figure of \$US29.5 million in military aid to Nepal has been calculated by Tamar Gabelnick and Matt Schroeder of the Federation of the American Scientists Arms Sales Monitoring Project. See 'GUNS 'R' U.S.', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January-February 2003, <<http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/2003/jf03/jf03gabelnick.pdf>>

³⁶ 'Armed Conflicts Report 2003: Nepal', *Project Ploughshares*, Date Accessed: 27 June 2004, <<http://www.ploughshares.ca/CONTENT/ACR/ACR00/ACR00-Nepal.html>>
'U.S. Escalates Intervention in Nepal', *Revolutionary Worker*, Issue 1184, 26 January 2003, <<http://rwor.org/a/v24/1181-1190/1184/nepal.htm>>
W.A. Sunil, 'US provides military assistance to Nepal to crush Maoist guerrillas', *World Socialist Web Site*, 2 May 2002, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/may2002/nepa-m02_prn.shtml>
Shusham Shrestha, 'Senior US envoy in Nepal to discuss security', *The Daily Times*, 27 June 2004, <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_14-12-2002_pg4_20>