

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE *NEPĀLA-MAHĀTMYA*: A IX-CENTURY TEXT OR A PIOUS FRAUD?

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Of the too numerous testimonies of Nepal's religious history some of the most palpable ones are, perhaps, the textual evidence, particularly the manuscripts. Although Nepal has preserved an unbelievable quantity of manuscripts of Hindu as well as Buddhist persuasions, they are mostly in the form of copies, rather than original contributions to religious thought or critical/exegetical commentaries on the cults practised in Nepal. Most manuscripts of cultural or critical significance were at first brought to the Nepal Valley either by wandering scholars seeking royal patronage or fleeing immigrant men of learning—fleeing mainly from tumultuous events in the neighbouring kingdoms. These manuscripts have, at times, been devotedly worshipped, preserved and labouriously copied and decorated for a millennium by the pious copyists and scribes or by laymen who sought religious merit in getting these sacred texts copied and preserved at places of worship.

Religious texts actually written in Nepal by Nepalese scholars are far and few between. An interesting group of texts are the local *purāṇas* and *mahātmyas* which glorify and aggrandise the local shrines. These texts are modeled on classical Hindu *purāṇas* and *mahātmyas*, and at times transplanted into them as pious fraud, adapting and assembling from several of them. One such text is the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*. The Sanskrit text of this *mahātmya* was first published privately from Banaras in 1901 in devanāgarī transliteration by Pandit Muralidhar Jha, based on a Nepalese manuscript in the then Queen's College Library, Banaras. With Jha's text as basis, a Nepali language translation by Mukti Nath Khanal was published in 1968 by the Royal Nepal Academy. In 1970 Uebach published a German translation with Sanskrit text from the National Archives (wrongly numbered Cat. I:1209, following Regmi, II: 836, 1966), giving variant readings from the devanagari copy made for Levi, now deposited in the Institute for Indian Civilization, Paris. In the meantime, Pandit Kedar Nath Sharma has also published a Hindi

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translation based on the Jha edition (Sharma, 1977). Recently, the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* has been published in roman transliteration with an English translation by Jayaraj Acharya (1992). Mr Acharya's roman transliteration as well as English translation is based on Khanal's Nepali edition which in turn is based on the Jha edition of 1901. As Acharya does not seem to have consulted the Banaras manuscript, or for that matter any extant manuscript of the *Mahātmya*, this edition is at the third remove from the original texts.

Mr Acharya has, however, "freely corrected the most obvious grammatical and type errors." It is disquieting though reassuring to know that "the mistakes or corrections did not change much of the meaning of the text" (Preface). Although the Acharya edition is not a critical but a popular one, the liberties he takes with Jha's text or Khanal's text are typical of traditional Sanskritists who are intolerant of "grammatical mistakes", or any deviation(s) from the *sūtras* of Pāṇini. This is a little astonishing, particularly because Acharya, besides being a scholar trained in Sanskrit *Pāṭhaśālā* and *vidyāpīṭha*, is also a qualified linguist trained at home and abroad in the rigours of modern research. The Banaras manuscript or the Levi manuscript may have been inaccessible from Arlington, Virginia, USA--his work station, but it should not have been so difficult for an assiduous student like Acharya to consult at least some of the manuscripts in the National Archives, Kathmandu, where he has several well-placed relatives and friends. In the National Archives there are nearly a dozen *Nepāla-Mahātmya* manuscripts including the much disputed manuscript Cat. I: 984 (Microfilm No. A 332/13). Although Acharya quotes, analyses, emends and disputes the colophon of this manuscript (see Plate I) so passionately, no sensible textual scholar would launch himself on such a hazardous course as Acharya has done here without even consulting his primary sources.

The most controversial part of Mr Acharya's edition of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* is not his "grammatical improvement" on the original, but his 11-page Introduction to the transliteration and translation. For several reasons, no section of this Introduction should go uncontested.

Mr Acharya disputes the interpretation of the colophon of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* (manuscript No I:984 Microfilm No A 332/13) on the basis of its reading and interpretation published by Uebach (1970:12-14). Uebach relied on Petech for her analysis and interpretation of the colophon data, concluding that

śakābde sindhuvājīdharanī ca dharayute

is equivalent to Śaka 1174 or 1177 (*sindhu* = 4 or 7, *vājīn* = 7, *dharanī* = 1, *dhara* = 1) which gives a date equivalent to A.D. 1251 or 1254 November.

However, she confesses that the day of the week (Sunday), the *yoga* (*Sādhyā*), and the *nakṣatra* (*ruruśira*?) “cannot be clearly verified” (Uebach, 1970:14). This colophon has since been reexamined by Brinkhaus in his excellent study on the Pradyumna-Prabhāvatī legend in Nepal. His interpretation is based on “metrical considerations” (Brinkhaus 1987:80). Following Petech-Uebach, in his earlier paper on “References to Buddhism in *Nepālamahātmya*” (1980), Brinkhaus had dated the manuscript to A.D. 1251 or 1254. In 1982, during a personal meeting, I disputed this with him on the colophon evidence, which led Brinkhaus to reinterpret the colophon by rendering it this time “comprehensible by means of a metrically and grammatically necessary conjecture” (Brinkhaus, 1987:80). This time he reads it as, *śākābde sindhuvājīdharāṇī (ca) dharāyute*, interpreting the era, not as Śaka Saṃvat, but as Nepāla Saṃvat, which gives him A.D. 1653. Thus Brinkhaus believes that since this is, for him, the earliest dated manuscript of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*, A.D. 1653 October/November is the *terminus ad quen* for the text.

We are referring to Brinkhaus’s “metrically and grammatically necessary conjecture” because Mr Acharya used the *same device*, i.e., metrically unacceptable extra syllable *ca*-hypothesis, without, of course, referring to Brinkhaus either in his Introduction or Bibliography. In his enthusiasm to demonstrate the antiquity of the text, Mr Acharya goes on to claim a hoary antiquity for the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* text, without consulting any of the extant 58 odd manuscripts! Whereas Brinkhaus thought that the year 774 was Nepāla Saṃvat because Śaka also means “a general name for any era”, Mr Acharya interprets the year 774 as Śaka Era, claiming that the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* text is dated A.D. 852 or A.D. 855. The central bone of my contention in this paper is that this is an *impossible* date for *Nepāla-Mahātmya* manuscript because of the following reasons.

The colophon of the manuscript is misinterpreted, not only by Uebach/Petech or by Mr Acharya, but also by Brinkhaus. The era is Śaka but *sindhu* is 7, *vājīn* is 7 too but *dharāṇī ca dharā* is not a one-place numeral 7 or *mountain*, but a chronogram for two-place numeral, *king*, i.e., 16. This gives us the Śaka year 1677, i.e., $1677 + 78 = \text{A.D. } 1755$. (See Sircar, 1965:230-233 for the numerical values of the chronograms). The manuscript in question is an ordinary thick white-paper manuscript written in late Newari script, not a palmleaf written in Bhujinmola or earlier scripts. Of the 58 manuscripts of the *Nepāla mahātmya* microfilmed by the National Archives, Kathmandu, there is no palmleaf nor any written in older Newari scripts. Among the dated ones, the earliest one is a manuscript in *haritāla* paper in the National Archives Cat I:894, Microfilm No A 332/15 with 128 folios, (see Plate II) with the following colophon:

**muni randhrai samudresca yute nepalavatsare bhādraca sitapakse tu
dvitīyayam ravaudine daivajña cakrasimhena nepala mahima likhetu**

Muni = 7, *randhra* = 9, *samudra* = 7, i.e., Nepāla Era 797, equivalent to A.D. 1676 August/September. In a private collection, there is a devanagari transliteration of a manuscript dated N.S. 989, (A.D. 1868), which according to its colophon, is a copy from an earlier manuscript dated Nepāla Samvat 790 (A.D. 1669). (See Microfilm No E 718/1)¹. Thus among 58 extant manuscripts of the *Nepala-Mahatmya* texts there is not a single manuscript dated earlier than the late seventeenth century A.D.

Mr Acharya gives the following five main arguments in favour of dating the *Nepāla Mahatmya* to the mid-9th century A.D.:

1. The text does not mention any post-Licchavi shrines or temples.
2. It mentions shrines and sites where the Licchavi inscriptions are found. There is a high correlation between the two.
3. Licchavi period Saiva-Vaiṣṇava shrines are mentioned in the text.
4. Śaka era is used in the text, an era used mostly by the Licchavi rulers.
5. There is no mention of any ruling king in the colophon, as is usual in the Malla period texts, etc.

The *Nepala-Mahātmya* mentions about 25 Siva *liṅgas*, out of a traditional total of 64 *liṅgas* listed in the popular 19th-century *Bhāṣā Vaṃśāvalī*s. Of these 25 *liṅgas*, the Maṅgaleśvara *liṅga* (VI:66-79), Hanumadisvara (III: 15-20), Somesvara in Suluñco, Bhaktapur (XIII:3-125; XXXVI:7-28) or Tañkeśvara are not Licchavi monuments. None of these *liṅgas* is attested in any Licchavi documents. Although the traditions recorded in the *Nepala-Mahātmya*, particularly concerning some of the well-known *liṅgas*, are at least older than the fourteenth century, the extant text is not older than the mid-seventeenth century. For example, at Kumbheśvara when an already dilapidated temple was built by a Jayabhīma during the rule of Sthitirāja Malla in A.D. 1392, it is recorded in an inscription, first published by Cecil Bendall (1886:83-87), that on this holy spot Kumbha *ṛṣi* had undergone severe penance to please Mahādeva. (Inscription IX, lines 9-11).

The *Nepala-Mahātmya* mentions 25 Siva *liṅgas* but the most important *liṅgas* of the Licchavi period, such as Māneśvara, Vijayaśvara, Anuparameśvara, Ratneśvara, Śūrabhogeśvara, Dakṣiṇeśvara, Laḍṭamaheśvara etc. are not mentioned in the text nor in the *ksētrapradaksinā*, whereas those obscure *liṅgas* mentioned nowhere in the Licchavi epigraphy comprise more than 95% of the *liṅgas* mentioned in the *Nepāla-Mahatmya*. Among the *Sakti pīṭhas*, it mentions Harisiddhi,

Vajrayoginī, and Vajravārāhī, none of which is attested in Licchavi inscriptions.

Mr Acharya claims that Śaka era is used by the Licchavi rulers, and as this manuscript is dated in Śaka era it belongs to the Licchavi period. This is an incredible argument in support of the antiquity of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*. Mr Acharya might like to consult and scan the corpus of the Shah period inscriptions, *Lāl Mohars*, *Shyāha Mohars*, and the coins to discover for himself how late the Saka era persisted in Nepal. In silver coins, the Śaka era continued until 1911 when Chandra Shumshere officially adopted the era of Vikramaditya. As for the *purāṇa* manuscripts in Nepal dated in the Śaka era, let me arbitrarily list up the 17-19th century texts dated in Śaka era from Part VIII of the *Vṛhatsūcipatram: Purāṇetihāsaviśayakaḥ*) published by the National Archives in 1968: *Uṣacaritam* III: 126, Śaka 1760; *Kurma Purāṇa* V: 5350, Śaka 1697, *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* II: 47, Śaka 1679; *Skanda Purāṇa* V: 5846, Śaka 1697, and *Adhyatma Rāmāyaṇa* III: 734, Śaka 1761 etc.

Mr Acharya argues that the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* text belongs to the pre-Malla period because, unlike in the Malla-period texts, this manuscript makes no reference to the ruling monarch. This is yet another untenable argument—a naive argument which can only be marshaled by someone who is totally unfamiliar with the Nepalese manuscript-traditions and scribal vagaries. The Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project has by now microfilmed more than one million folios, including some 5000 palmleaf manuscripts in the public as well as private collections, but not all of them have colophons nor do all colophons, whenever there are any, mention the ruling king or the scribe, and that alone does not entitle us to dump these manuscripts to the so-called “Dark Period”, euphemistically called “the Transitional Period” (A.D. 750-1200). Mr Acharya takes the final fatal leap in logic when he writes:

According to Rocher (1986:237) Haraprasad Shastri and Cecil Bendall discovered, in the Durbar Library in Kathmandu, a manuscript of *Skanda-purāṇa* in Gupta Script, and on paleographic grounds, they decided that it was written before 659 A.D.. Given the popularity of *Skanda-purāṇa* in Nepal as early as 659 and the allegiance to *Skanda-purāṇa* claimed by the *Himavatkhaṇḍa* and by *Nepāla-Mahātmya* is evidence not only of the location of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* but also its date.

(Acharya, 1992:7)

The *Skanda Purāṇa* manuscript in question is listed in the National Archives *Catalogue* II: 229 and in Shastri's *Catalogue* Part I (1905:141-146). The manuscript is not dated but Shastri dates it on the basis of paleography, Gupta or later Licchavi script, by comparing it with a Nepalese manuscript, *Parameśvara Tantra*, dated Samvat 252. Bendall (1883:xl-xli) thought that the manuscript was dated in Harṣa Era, giving an equivalent of A.D. 858/59. Shastri, therefore, thought that the *Skanda Purāṇa* manuscript was paleographically at least 200 years older; thus it was *believed* to be dated A.D. 659. But unfortunately, Bendall's dating of the *Parameśvara Tantra* itself is questionable as no known manuscript in Nepal uses Harṣa Era, founded by Harṣavardhana in A.D. 606. So the whole of Acharya's argument is vitiated by his youthful zeal to prove the antiquity of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* text by proving the antiquity of *Skanda Purāṇa*. Even the proven antiquity of any *Skanda Purāṇa* manuscript has no relevance whatsoever to the dating of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* for the simple reason that the *Mahātmya* merely "claims" to be a part of the *purāṇa* which, evidently, is not the case. Numerous *khaṇḍas* and *mahātmyas* claim allegiance to the *Skanda Purāṇa* which seems to be "a basket for holding everything that cannot fit elsewhere". In the *Skanda Purāṇa* manuscript referred to by Mr Acharya there is no trace of *Himavat Khaṇḍa*, let alone of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*. In fact, as Shastri confesses in dismay

There is no mention of *Khaṇḍas* in any of the colophons of the *Skanda Purāṇa* in the Durbar Library It gradually branched out into so many *Khaṇḍas* and so many *Mahātmyas* ... that scholars thought that the *Skanda Purāṇa* hardly existed except in *Khaṇḍas* and *Mahātmyas*.

(Shastri, 1905: liii)

The whole edifice of Acharya's chronology collapses once we come to face this set of naked textual evidence staring at us. Mr Acharya seems to have rushed into *terra incognita* of secondary or tertiary sources, not fully realising what these sources are arguing about.

The *Nepāla Mahātmya* is not a IX-century text but a late-Malla period pious fraud, concocted by some overenthusiastic pundit who knew bits and pieces of local traditions and bits and pieces of puranic lore. That it is a pious fraud is painfully evident from the wild absence of structural unity in the text. For example, Chapter I on the Origin of the Pasupati *liṅga* and Chapters VIII-XII, dealing with the well-known *Harivamśa* legend-cycle of Pradyumna-Prabhāvatī, are almost bodily lifted word for word from the *Paśupati Purāṇa*. The earliest extant manuscript of this *purāṇa* is A.D. 1504 (Yogi Naraharinath, *Sanskrit Sandeśa* I:6, 2010, pp. 13-17: also Risal,

1969; Brinkhaus, 1987 for a detailed analysis of textual relations between these two texts). The absence of structural and thematic unity in the text is nowhere in greater evidence than in the transplantation of the Chapters XVI-XXVI, comprising nearly the one-third of the whole text, dealing with Rāvaṇa (and Laṅkā) who is reported to have observed dreadful penance at Gokaṛṇeśvara (XVI: 79-XXVI: 1). These chapters have more to do with Rāvaṇa or with Laṅkā than with Nepālamāṇḍala or its Śaivism. These chapters read more like *Laṅkā* or *Rāvaṇa-Mahātmya* than *Nepāla-Mahātmya*. Similarly, Chapter XXVI: the Story of Bhr̥ṅgi and Chapter XXVIII: the Story of Guṇadhya are a meandering and listless narrative whose only Nepalese connection is the so-called origin of the *liṅga* of Bhr̥ṅgāreśvara, the Bee-Lord incarnate who was Śiva's gate-keeper Bhr̥ṅgi, fallen out of the Lord's favour and condemned to be born a mortal who became the famous author Guṇadhya.

Chapter XXIX: *Kṣetrapradakṣiṇā* or Circumambulation of the Sacred Places is a kind of hurried resumé that ties up all the loose ends into an instant guide-book for the pious Hindu pilgrim. Perhaps, this is the only section of the text of some interest to modern students of Nepalese religious history, particularly to gain Śaivite perspective on the holy sites of the Nepal Valley. In this guide-book there are two critical points worth noting. Even for the *Śakti pīthas* it mentions only Guhyeśvari, Rājarājyeśvari, Vatsalā and Jayavāgeśvari—all in the environs of Paśupati complex. The only other *Śakti pīthas* mentioned elsewhere are Caṇḍeśvari of Banepa, Harisiddhi, Vajrayoginī, and Vajravārahi. None of these Śakti cults is known in Licchavi documents.

Following Lévi (1905:205-212) and other scholars following him uncritically, Acharya believes that the "*Nepāla-Mahātmya* puts Śiva, Viṣṇu and Buddha, not only at the same level, but as one and the same" (Acharya, 1992:8). Already more than a decade ago Brinkhaus (1980) has incisively exploded this half-truth about religious syncretism in the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*. The text does not put the Buddha at the same level as Śiva or Viṣṇu, let alone consider him as "one and the same". The Buddha is clearly made to play a subordinate role here—subordinate to Śiva-Pārvaṭī. He is shown practising austerities to please Pārvaṭī who, pleased with the Buddha, appeared under the name of Vajrayoginī, and instructed the Buddha to erect a *liṅga* (Kāruṇikeśvara) at the confluence of Vāgmatī and Maṇimatī, at Śāṅkhamūla or Sāṅkhū, because the *liṅga* is also known as Maṇilingeśvara (Chapter I:56-67).

In the history of Nepalese Śaivism the cult of *liṅga* has a place of utmost significance. There are some 25 *liṅgas* besides the Paśupati *liṅga*, which belong to the Licchavi period. The original *liṅga* of Paśupati was vandalised

by Shamsud-din Ilyas in November 1349. This desecrated four-faced *liṅga* stood abandoned on the way to Mrigasthali before it was stolen in June 1987! The present phallus was installed by Jaya Simha Rama in 1380. Undoubtedly, the Paśupati complex was already a sacred area by A.D. 533. The finest piece of Śaiva sculpture belonging to the Licchavi period, with distinctly Gupta style and features, now located in a damaged state in Kailash, is dated between A.D. 500-550 by art historians (Pal, 1974:83-86; Bangdel, 1982:53). Among the principal features of the *liṅga* cult in Licchavi period, the most significant appears to be the installation of a Śiva *liṅga* in the name of the living or dead mortals. For example, in A.D. 477, Ratnasangha installed a *liṅga* which he named after himself--Ratneśvara. Some years later, the same donor installed another *liṅga* in the name of Prabhusingha, and called it Prabhukeśvara. Similarly, Jayavarma or Jayalambha installed a *liṅga* and called it Jayaśvara. In A.D. 505, Vijayāvati, Mānadeva's daughter born of Queen Śrī Bhoginī, installed a *liṅga* in Suryaghata, Paśupati, in commemoration of her deceased father and called it Vijayaśvara. The most brilliant instance of this Śaiva practice is documented in Bhaumagupta's mother, Abhirī Gomini's inscription dated Śaka 462 (A.D. 540). Abhirī Gomini installed a *liṅga* dedicated to the memory of her deceased husband, Anuparam, and called it Anuparemeśvara. For worship and maintenance of this *liṅga* she allocated *guhī* lands as well. The Paśupati *liṅga* may very well have been founded in the same tradition as all other Licchavi Śiva *liṅgas* by a contemporary historical person with committed temporal or spiritual motive. If the Pāśupata sect of Śaivism was founded by Lakulin about the 2nd century B.C. (Bhandarkar, 1928: 116-117), the sect might have penetrated Nepal only a few centuries later. From Aṃśuvarṃā (died A.D. 621) who styled himself as *bhagavatpaśupatibhaṭṭāarakapādānugrahito* (favourite of the feet of Lord Paśupati) to Jayadeva II (ca. A.D. 733), the prominent rulers of the Licchavi Nepal were staunch adherents of Śaivism, without being too sectarian in their religious belief and practice. However, none of the *liṅgas* that were installed in the Licchavi period had any divine-miraculous-mythical origin stories attached to them--perhaps, not even the original *liṅga* of Paśupati which has not been dated earlier than the 5th-6th century A.D. on stylistic grounds. On the contrary, everyone of the Licchavi-period *liṅgas* was verifiably installed by contemporary historical personages with unmitigated ulterior motives, as it were. The donor always wished for the well-being of the near and dear living ones (father, mother, relative or the king), for unmixed *punya-vṛiddhi* (earning religious merit), or simply *moksa* (liberation) or *svarga-prapti* (attainment of bliss in heaven) for the deceased relative. The miraculous origin stories of the *liṅgas*, with divine intervention in a mythical context, are much later embellishments. Inspired by strong

influence of Brahminism (See Uebach, 1970), to glorify and aggrandise the holy *liṅgas* and shrines, the local pundits framed up bizarre narratives punctuated with boring dialogues between the benign Hindu gods and the sanguine *ṛsis* who seem to have little else to do than providing puranic legitimacy to the Śiva *liṅgas* in the Nepālamaṇḍala.

The *Nepāla-Mahātmya* also betrays another syndrome of later Brahminic texts in Nepal written in clear reaction against the Buddhist attempts to assimilate the Śaiva *liṅgas* into the cultural jurisdiction of Newar Buddhism. For example, already in the earliest dated text of *Svayambhū Purāṇa*, dated Nepāla Saṃvat 644 (A.D. 1624), deposited at the Asiatic Society Library in Calcutta, there is an attempt to absorb the following eight famous Śiva *liṅgas* into the Buddhist cultural geography: 1. Maṇilingeśvara 2. Gokarneśvara 3. Kileśvara 4. Kumbheśvara 5. Phaṇigarteśvara 6. Phaṇilingeśvara 7. Garteśvara, and 8. **Vikrameśvara**. These palpable Śiva *liṅgas* were analysed and reinterpreted as Eight *Vītarāgas*, the Eight Passionless Beings, by the Buddhist myth-makers of the Nepal Valley. In the later lists of Śiva *liṅgas*, in response to this “cultural imperialism” of the Buddhists, the number 8 is multiplied by 8 to make a total of 64 *liṅgas*, mainly to outdo the Buddhists in their own cultural game, as it were. If the Śaiva scribe in the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* makes the Buddha follow Pārvaṭī’s instructions and install a Śiva *liṅga* one should not have been surprised at all. That the Newar Buddhists considered Śaivism as the single most powerful rival faith is all too evident from the verses which close a manuscript of the *Svayambhū Purāṇa*, edited by Haraprasad Shastri: (1900:500)².

It is against this background that one must place the Śaiva texts such as the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*. One should not be astonished at the route of holy circumambulation prescribed in this text. It begins and ends with the shrine of Paśupati, making even the Buddhist shrines such as Vajrayoginī a Śaiva-Śākta shrine, deserving a visit only *en route* to the Paśupati’s temple which becomes the be-all and end-all of the holy man’s existence.

With all his academic credentials in linguistics, Acharya does not even hesitate to recommend the attention of “anthropologists” to the folk interpretation of the word *Nepāla*, offered in the text of the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*, “because this land in the lap of the Himalayas was protected by the Muni Nemi, with pious deeds, it was named *Nepāla*., (literally, protected by Nemi).” (Acharya, 1992:10)

The *Ne-muni* of the *Paśupati Purāṇa* (XXII:1) has undergone a mysterious transformation into *Ne-mi* in the hands of the learned scribe who assembled the *Nepāla-Mahātmya* (XI:61)³. The compiler of the *Gopālarājvaṃśāvalī* refers to *Nepa* the cowherd; the compiler of the 19th-century Buddhist *Vaṃśāvalī*, Padmagiri, interprets *Ne* as the Ādi Buddha. Evidently, *Ne-muni*

has all the essential credentials of being a legitimate child of fertile scribal imagination (see Malla 1983b, for the archaeology of the word, *Nepāla*).

Mr Jayaraj Acharya deserves credit for diligently transliterating the Muralidhara Jha-Muktinatha Khanal text into roman. His translation into English may be faithful to the Sanskrit text published by Jha and emended by Acharya, but not incontestable. This is evident from a cursory comparison of his English translation of the crucial Chapter I verses 57-67 with Brinkhaus's translation (1980:276-277). Like his "grammatical improvements" in the original text, Mr Acharya seems also to take editorial liberties to improve upon the religious semantics of this Śaiva text to make it more readable to modern Western readers.

Assuming that Mr Jayaraj Acharya has either time or patience in the thick of his too busy diplomatic assignments to peruse some of the popular 19th-century *Bhāṣā Vamśāvalīs*, composed between ca. the 1830s to the 1880s, he could have effortlessly identified all the Siva *liṅgas* mentioned in the *Nepāla-Mahātmya*, including, of course, the neglected and abandoned Somaliṅga, for which both Mr Acharya and his text lament so eloquently:

Nobody really knows the importance of the Somaliṅga in the Kali Yuga.
(Preface, page 6 and the text XVI: 33)

Perhaps. But not everyone is *such* an infidel even at this high noon of the Kali Yuga.

Notes

१. सं १८९ फल्गुण सु १ रो ६ न्याला बिया च्वका कया ध्व सफू श्री श्री दत्तदेवया जुल
॥ सुनानं लोभ यातसा पंचपातक लाइ ॥ ७९० सालं वकनिम्हया रविरामन च्वया तवगु
सफुली श्वया चोत शुभं ॥

Colophon of a *Nepāla-Mahātmya* manuscript in a private collection dated N.S. 989 (A.D. 1868), being a copy of an earlier manuscript dated N.S. 790 (A.D. 1669). Microfilm No. E 718/1.

२. यदा भविष्ये काले च अत्र नेपालमण्डले ।
शैवधर्म प्रवर्त्तते दुभिक्षञ्च भविष्यति ॥
यथा यथा शैवधर्म प्रवर्त्तते अत्र मण्डले ।
तथा तथा च अत्यर्थ दुःखपीडा भविष्यति ॥
बौद्धलोका गणायैर्पि शैवधर्म करिष्यति ।
ते सर्वे कृतपापा(च)च्च नारकञ्च गमिष्यति ॥

Svayambhū Purāṇa, edited by Shastri: 1900:500

३. नेनाम्ना मुनिना पूर्व पालनात्पुण्य कर्मणा ।
अयं हि हिमवत् कुक्षौ नेपाला इति चोच्यते ॥
Paśupati Purāna, XXII:1

नेमिना मुनिना यस्मात् पालितं पुण्यकर्मणा ।
क्षेत्रं हिमवतः कुक्षातो नेपालसंज्ञकम् ॥
Nepāla-Mahātmya, XI:61

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BOOK REVIEW

Mustang Bhot in Fragments. 1992. Manjushree Thapa. Himal Books, Lalitpur, Nepal. Pages 139. Price: NC Rs. 285.

It is not frequent that one comes across a general non-academic English writing in Nepal, and from a native born at that. Therefore, the publication of "*Mustang Bhot in Fragments*" by Manjushree Thapa is a welcome addition to the volumes on contemporary Nepal. The book is basically an "identity trip" by the author to find an "unsplintered" identity for herself and the broader Nepali society.

Though the work is based on Thapa's two sojourns into Mustang in the aftermath of the political upheavals that wracked Nepal in 1990, it is, nevertheless liberally sprinkled with generalizations and experiences emanating from upper class, *America returned* and developmental credentials.

The author must be given credit for lack of pretensions regarding her work. True to its name, the book is rather fragmentarily presented. The slim volume is arbitrarily apportioned into seven chapters, with considerable white space to spare in and between units. The overall efficiency of the book would have been somewhat enhanced by better organization of the ideas and units.

However, the minor structural defects of the work need not detain us from the main strength of the book which is its ability to raise a number of salient issues discussion. Foremost among these are the questions of identity, cultural change, politics, tourism and development.

Much of the book is the author's own involvement, written in a breezy journalistic first person. After spending nine long years in the United States of America, but still unable to "... embrace the American dream," she returns to find her destiny in what she terms "... an open, liberal, developing Nepal."

With her convent propriety upbringing, western education and high caste/class pedigree, she naturally lands in the developmental field. It is the arena where the upwardly mobile youths of Nepal carve out their niches and

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fortune. So no surprise that she finds herself in the midst of heavy preaching and professing on ecological degradation, gender, caste, class and, of course, *development*. This developmental circle appears "... open and liberal and quick to distance themselves from their feudal culture."

Delving a little further into the multilayered reality, the author rightly discovers that the same champions of democracy and development carry a different facet at another level. Thus, environmentalists turned out to be cynical businessmen, "... social servants swindlers, women's development officers, patriarches." The institutions she finds no better: "... bone corrupt and revolutionary at the same time."

Obviously, the first flowering of the democratic euphoria has worn off. It is an incisive insight into the contemporary social pretensions and middle class mindset. But given the amount of development dollars, foreign trips and international recognition involved, it should come as no surprise. In Nepal it *pays* to wear your democratic, developmental and environmental labels on your forehead.

The barren and rocky landscape of upper Mustang conjures up visions of Santa Fe and the Grand Canyon for the author. While good for comparative perspective transplantation of borrowed visions may distort the ground reality. The first thing in understanding Nepal is to grasp its topo-climatic diversity and not attribute "exotic" flavour to it. As Nepalese, let us leave that for the tourists.

The liberal use of alien terms and categories that do not always relate well with the local context is not limited to the description of the terrain alone. The "Hindu" temple of Muktinath is a place of worship and pilgrimage equally sacred and important for both the so-called "Hindus" and "Buddhists." These absolute and mutually exclusive terms cannot reflect the reality of religion in Nepal as it is a wonderful blending of animism, mysticism and the universal precepts of eastern spiritualism. The total outcome is a *sui generis* entity, immensely richer than any one of the components and uniquely harmonized with the local cosmobiological and geophysical elements.

Muktinath and many other such pilgrimages help integrate diverse linguistic, ethnic and caste groups together on a spiritual and religious level. The etic view that imposes duality where none exists can only distort objective reality. In the long run it carries seeds for mischief if the people themselves adopt the categories tagged on them to generate fissionary tendencies. It is in similar vein that she describes women as "Hinduized"

from their pierced noses and a particular design of blouse they wear. Here too she falls in the trap of employing categories and concepts borrowed from western analytical science, itself based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Nose piercing is not a strictly Hindu practice; we see perfectly "Hindu" Newars who do not do it.

It is from this erroneous standpoint that the author laments the subsumption of Buddhism by the all "embracing Hindus." At a time when various spots around the globe have become flashpoints of religious bigotry and when some of the outcome is lapping at our very doorsteps, our religious traditions must be given full credit for seeking to embrace differences rather than to exclude, and accommodate rather than eliminate.

The nature of our indigenous folk religion is such that there are no strict boundaries. Ask village folks what religion they belong to, and the reply will be a look of incomprehension because a structured and church-like religion does not exist here. The dichotomy of Hinduism and Buddhism is an alien notion at the popular level. But these labels are being relentlessly imposed upon the people; they are being told: you are Hindu, he is a Buddhist. Similarly with dress, there are no clear-cut territories. Instead, there are continuous gradations of influence, acculturation and physical needs.

Thapa mentions that people in Mustang often get "Hindu" second names such as Rajendra, Surendra or Manju from their school teachers. While this could be true for individual cases, there might be pitfalls in generalizing the phenomenon. We could begin suspecting St. Xavier fathers for the increasing instances of "Christian" names. To a great extent people choose what they think elevating and civilizing.

Not only are the people of Mustang colonized, as the author contends, but liberated intellectuals and academicians condemned to adopt and implant inappropriate foreign categories could also be under a subtle form of subjugation. In her enthusiasm to see the contradictions in Nepali society, the author unnecessarily fragments the issue where fragmentation does not exist. Concepts and categories are not value neutral, those who use them inappropriately run the risk of projecting the underlying premises and prejudices inherent in these categories. It is in similar romantic spirit that Thapa bemoans the people who have gone the way of money in upper Mustang: and whether that "entailed Hinduising or westernising or Nepalisising mattered little." Given the reality of upper Mustang as "... farming in the spring, animal husbandry in the summer..." and increasingly wider trade networks and travels, is it not rather wishful to expect the culture to remain pristine, if such a thing ever existed?

Given the vogue that culture is in, the author was bound to take up the cultural issue. The first thing to understand about culture is that it is man's

adaptation mechanism fashioned to suit a particular physical and social environment. A culture will transform both in form and content, if the conditions of subsistence alter. The interplay of ecology, history and economy must be taken into consideration before singing a eulogy on the erosion of romantically exotic cultures.

It would be naive to consider Mustang as sort of a mystical Shangrila and a land that time forgot until the tourists arrived to break the enchanted spell. The "sequestered" image is part of the tourism myth and anthropological romanticism that underplays the fact that Mustang has long been wedded into the global economy and culture before either official "development" or the latter day saviours, the tourists, arrived. Due to economic and demographic factors, Bhotias are more mobile than the *Rongbas* of the mid-hills. The extensive trading links of the northern people in Tibet, Nepal, India and overseas, as well as their distant pilgrimages, attest to this. Each foray out of Mustang brought back bits and pieces of the global cultural traits.

Various writers and apologetics of the northern cultures may have sought to mislead us with the halo of "Tibeto-Burmans" as an egalitarian people, devoid of any class or cultural hierarchy. Sherry Ortner revealed the existence of a complex Khadeu and Khamendeu hierarchy among the Sherpas. Now Thapa has brought to light the Kudak (Bista)/Loba distinctions in fabled Mustang Bhot.

While dealing with the question of cultural decline, the book seeks to link the dilapidated state of some *gompas* (monastery) to the present poverty of the people. But are not awe inspiring religious monuments the result of religious fervour and organization of the community and not wealth alone? Due to developmental and tourism dollars, Kathmandu is incomparably richer than ancient Nepal, but we hardly expect to see another Changu Narayan. So the "deep seated" religiosity of the community in upper Bhot is perhaps not that deep, and poverty certainly should not be the problem if people there can afford designer clothes, silk, satin and videos.

Mustang Bhot in Fragments provides an insightful commentary on political wranglings in rural Nepal. The tradition of state politics in Nepal has been one characterized by parochial views and clique loyalties rather than guided by mass - based associational organizations and ideologies. There is "... no room for truth in this system, only for factions that claim to know the truth....," which now, nevertheless, is laced with trappings of modern political rhetoric and ideological pretensions.

External interventions such as developmental programmes and ideology seem to have further deepened the community cleavages in some cases. Instead of enlightening the populace to make rational choices, the practitioners of modern politics seem to be preying upon the vulnerability of

the community, reinforcing "old schisms" and running campaigns filled with "rhetoric, lies and impossible promises."

Whatever the extent of internal schisms, the recent democratic movement has certainly made it fashionable to raise strident calls of separateness and aloofness from the mainstream along ethnic and linguistic lines. But the innate strength and harmony of our traditions must be credited for preventing these divisive tendencies from disrupting day to day community life.

Thapa intelligently sought to interlink the issue of development with the nature of community politics and local leadership. Indeed, local development works, especially the variety requiring community participation and involvement, cannot hope for any degree of success unless they are based on proper understandings of community relationships and the nature of local leadership. The community operated hydel projects in Jharkot and Purang are a success due to the vitality of leaders, fewer distinctions within the community and the ability of these communities to use the electricity for income generating purposes like tourist lodges. On the other hand, similar schemes in upper Mustang are plagued by mutual suspicion, jealousy and non-cooperation. The communities are too fragmented on Bista/Loba lines, the traditional leaders have lost credibility, and there seems to be no monetary use for *bijuli* at present. As one villager puts it in exasperation, "Whatever you do, don't involve us. We can't trust each other."

The author succinctly records the pitfalls of current rhetoric on participation and voluntary labour. The small hydel project in Charang extracted equal amounts of monetary contribution (Rs. 500 and one wooden pole) and labour input (a months voluntary labour) from each household. But when it came to sharing the benefits, some would be plugging in twenty-six bulbs, stoves and VCRs, while many would be hard pressed to afford one bulb. No wonder the peasants get sceptical and think of "participation" as another scheme to exploit them. The development pundits, on the other hand, get perplexed that their visions of blissful pastoral cooperation find no ready takers among the ignorant laity.

Mustang has been touted as the last touristic frontier in Nepal and the question of its "opening" or restriction was a matter of controversy in the industry and environment circles for quite a while. Upper Mustang was finally opened, and the book has done an excellent job in exposing the various interests behind the decision. In rather condescending terms, the "low-scale highcost" tourism was officially deemed suitable in the culturally and ecologically "fragile" region in the local people's interest. Furthermore, the government, voicing the industry's line, argued that this version of elite tourism was the only viable option available for the uplift of the area and the people.

Through its US \$500 entry fee and organized group tour requirements for Mustang, the government played into the hands of a few powerful interests within the tourism industry. These exclusiveist regulations meant small and local operators of the area could not partake in the tourism dollars. To the local Mustangis' feeble claims that a certain portion of the operations in the area be reserved for them, the official retort reads something like: "If you run tourism here, you will ruin your culture and environment, we know how to run it best for you; and as for benefit sharing, you can become porters," that is, "if we decide not to bring them from Kathmandu." So despite democratic credentials, the government still choose to play "god" and hand top-down decisions.

Given the obviously low tourism dollar retention rate (as low as fifteen cents per dollar) for Mustang, it is yet to be seen how the much heralded high-cost, high-altitude tourism will benefit the local economy, despite its people and environment friendly labels. One is tempted to hope for the sake of the people that tourism is prevented from becoming a sort of a rough and ready justice: all cultural and environmental burdens on the locals, and profits to the operators.

In a sense Mustang's mystical halo will be its own undoing as far as "preserving culture" is concerned. No matter what kind of tourism is introduced into the area, it cannot be totally insulated from the local cultural processes because people and cultures are not inert entities. But that's a normal cost of doing business, as far as the operators are concerned. Given the inevitability of Mustang's cultural and ecological transformation due to tourism and other contemporary processes, some justice would still be served if the *lobas* could make something out of the deal. Otherwise, it might, as the Magars say, be "*Eei lang bhrasta, woo lang Bhrasta*" for the Manangis.

At the end the author comes close to what she was in search of: identity and self. Her position of "first world possibilities in a third world society" is not a produce of her efforts alone but also to a great extent the result of generations of accumulated privileges and power that is "... borne by impoverished, disempowered suffering Nepalis." This is a critical statement on the working of the rigid stratification system in Nepal and how it determines people's life chances. To a large extent being born in the "right" place is what counts.

But the seeker of self must be content with partial illumination because "living this schismmed identity is what it mean to be like a Nepali." Maybe the *Lobas* of this country deal with the identity crisis better, except for the worries of *Tasampa* and mundanities, they don't seem to be raked by the perennially confounding.

At another level, however, the question of identity is a problem for the whole new generation that is restless and aspires out of the rural context: from Kagbeni's lodge owner who despises his *dhindo* and dreams of the "good life" in India, or Norbu Nepali, an unabashed champion of Thak, who in his inner self desperately desires *bidesh*. But in a sense, don't we all? Depending upon our skills, education and connections, the land of our heart's desire lies elsewhere, whether it be India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan or the western shores. The glorified *Lahoure* tradition is alive at every level of society - in varying degrees, various forms. Otherwise, why would we communicate about Nepal in foreign tongues in Nepal? The lingua franca or any other local dialects are considered incapable for higher expressions, thus unviable for development and academics. We may be talking about Nepal, but we are not talking to Nepal and Nepalis; our significant audience lies elsewhere. It is ironic that even in this outward flight, the ablest get the farthest out.

It is always tempting to fragment the issues and portray the reality in isolation for conceptual as well as analytical convenience. But the Nepalese situation, instead of coming in a black and white dichotomy, is often a subtle continuum of organic gradations. This holistic realization would perhaps lead to better appreciation of the various issues involved in the questions of development/underdevelopment, politics, culture and identity.

– Saubhagya Shah

Notes to Contributors

Manuscripts should be typed double-space on A4 paper with a 4 cm margin on all four sides. The top copy should be submitted and photo/carbon copy retained by the author. The author should underline nothing except words which are to be italicised. Notes and references should be typed double-spaced on separate pages and will be included at the end of the article. The text should refer to notes numbered consecutively throughout the article, using raised numbers; bibliographical references should be cited in the text by the author's last name, date of publication, and page number, e.g., (Bista 1965:105) or if the author's name is mentioned in the text, by the date and page reference only, (1965:105). Entries in the references should be in alphabetical and chronological order of authors. They should include the details in the following order: name of the author (s)—surname first, date, title, name of the periodical, volume number (Arabic numerals to be used throughout), pagination (for articles in periodicals and books with several authors), place of publication (and name of the publisher for a book). Examples of the style to be used are as follows:

Bista, D.B. 1965. *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar

Dhungel, Basundhara. 1980. "The Newars." In Sudha Paneru (ed.), *Traditional and Prevailing Child-Rearing Practices Among Different Communities in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan university, pp. 31-53

Shrestha, Ananda. 1979. "Error Analysis." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 6:2, pp. 1-9.

Shrestha, Ramesh. 1977. "Adult Literacy in Nepal: a Report." Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University. Mimeographed.

Stone, Linda. 1977. "Illness, Hierarchy and Food Symbolism Hindu Nepal." Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis. Brown University.

Tables should be submitted on separate pages, numbered and with headings. Maps and text figures should be drawn in black waterproof ink about twice the intended final size, with lettering in soft pencil. Notations in the text should indicate where these are to appear. Plates should not be less than intended final size. They should be printed on glossy paper. They should be titled and numbered.