

RESEARCH NOTE

DOES DIVINITY PROTECT THE KING? RITUAL AND POLITICS IN NEPAL

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Nepal is a country with a ritual tradition that is accumulative to such an extent that it indeed seems as if each and every trend that once entered the Valley of Kathmandu has been preserved and readily absorbed into the already existing body of observances without a commensurate loss. Added to this capacity of absorption a considerable indigenous creativity must be assumed for giving shape to a ritual calendar in which hardly a day can pass without particular observances. The degree of Newar originality is subject to discussion, with some scholars holding that almost every indigenous conception has at one or the other time found its origin in prevalent Indian currents of thought and expression.¹ Others, and not in the last place local scholars, have maintained that the bulk of tradition has acquired its distinctive features in Nepal itself, as a result of the rich imagination and refinement of the Valley's millennia-old civilisation. It is a question which to a large extent depends on reconstruction of a sometimes indefinite past and as such will not bother us here.

There is enough evidence of the early and on-going Sanskritization of Nepal here taken in its original sense as referring to the Valley of Kathmandu and its perimeters. Equally striking however is the distinctive shape the culture of its Newar inhabitants has assumed within the larger context of South Asian civilisation. Newar ritual, whether of Hindu or Buddhist persuasion, is often characterized as *Tantric*, a label that tends to obscure the just-mentioned cumulative nature of tradition and the many archaic elements contained by it. The absorptive capacity can for example be found in the fire-sacrifice to which I have drawn attention in the last KOTA conference.

But ritual in Nepal has not only been fostered with devotion, it has also been persistently subject to political manipulation. One of the most

recent and also one of the most obvious examples has been the panchayat system. This so-called partyless form of four-tiered government councils headed by the king has for the past thirty years been described as belonging to Nepal's most ancient tradition, thus being part and parcel of its cultural identity -- here, it should be noted, Nepal refers to the modern, territorially defined nation.

After this panchayat system was finally brought down by popular pressure last April, the government media almost overnight started to praise the multi-party democracy in virtually the same phrasing. Without even a change of tune the martyrs of the ancient regime (commemorating the overthrow of the Rana rule) were replaced by the martyrs of Yesterday's enemy, the movement for democracy. Most strikingly king Birendra of Nepal, himself closely identified with panchayat rule, succeeded in saving his throne in an almost elegant and for outsiders (and some insiders) hardly intelligible way. Two days after an unscheduled popular march on the palace left scores of people killed by army forces, and after a night of frantic last-minute talks between the king and opposition leaders, the Press Secretariat of the Palace gracefully announced: "His Majesty Initiates Political Reform in accordance with Popular Will" (heading *Rising Nepal* 9-4-90). In a short royal bulletin the thirty-years old ban on political parties had been lifted and the panchayat system thereby abolished. Opposition leaders suddenly appeared on government controlled television. Remarkable were the words of Congress leader Mr. Krishna Prasad Bhattarai (later to become prime minister), who had just been received in audience by His Majesty for the first time in his life: "His Majesty is a very gentle person. His liberal disposition and his love for his people is truly deep. That is why he accepted our request for a multi-party system in Nepal. His Majesty wants development for the happiness of the people" (quoted in *Rising Nepal* ib.). Had not the palace been virtually under siege and were not the people outside asking for the King's just acquitted prime minister, Marich Man Singh, to be hanged? What was it that gave the King this capacity of instantly rising above his disgraced allies, a capacity that would not leave him during the whole critical process of negotiations that was yet to follow?

During the height of the turmoil the Nepalese King's divine status, or rather his imminent loss of it, was broadly measured out in the World Press. The World's last God-Ruler, it was stated in headlines, the Embodiment of Lord Visnu, finally had to step down to earth and face democracy. This blatant show of simplicity may live up to the expectations of the readership, but it cannot really hide the obvious questions implied by it: If the King is indeed considered a God, how can he be supposed to loose that identity all of a sudden? What is the precise nature of his identification with Lord Visnu? Is

it the kingship to which divinity is attached or the person of the King? Or is it all political forgery, a construct fabricated to serve the interests of the court and the ruling class?

When Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha had finally conquered the whole of Nepal Valley in 1769, very soon a variant of *Graeca cepit Romam cepit* presented itself. Sure, the conquerors remained proud of the brave virtues of their life in the hills and their warrior status, but they could not avoid becoming a part of the culture they had conquered. And, at least partly, they have also consciously strived to achieve that state. As Burghart² has observed, an important way for the Gorkhali kings to expand their realm was to include the deities of other kingdoms in it by offering respects and gifts, thus enhancing the sanctity of their greater realm and their status as universal rulers. According to a widespread story circulating in Kathmandu, Prithvi Narayan Shah submitted to the ritual of the tutelary Goddess of the Malla kings already at the very moment of his conquest. At that time the yearly festival of Indra, the King of the Gods, happened to be celebrated there. A very important element of the festival is the blessing which the virgin incarnation of the tutelary goddess bestows upon the ruler. By applying a red *tika* (a mark of blessing) on the forehead of the king she ensures his reign for the year to come. Up to the present day a large crowd attends the function including the corps diplomatique and foreign guests who assemble on the balcony of the old royal palace to await the auspicious moment standing in the blazing heat.

The story goes that Prithvi Narayan had chosen this very day for his successful assault on Kathmandu. On his arrival at the palace square the royal Kumari -- the virgin incarnation of the Goddess --- was about to bestow her mark of bliss on the ruler of Kathmandu. Without hesitation she placed the *tika* on the forehead of the conqueror Prithvi Narayan, and with that, a new dynasty came into power.

Whatever its factual truth, the story of the royal Kumari blessing the new rulers leads us to one of the central questions concerning the royal rituals as performed to the present days. How can it be explained that the ever-changing political circumstances, especially of the last two centuries, are accompanied by the persistence of rituals of an utterly conservative nature? The most significant rituals which at present concern kingship, or with which the king is foremost concerned, at least date back to the reign of the Malla dynasty half a millennium ago and even to the times beyond that epoch. The royal rituals of Nepal not only survived the change of dynasty in the 18th century, but also the virtual seclusion of the kings in the country that the Rana prime ministers were the de facto hereditary rulers of Nepal -- a period which lasted until 1951. They lived through the restoration of the

monarchy in a modern, democratic context as well as through the subsequent period in which the Kings Mahendra and Birendra once again tried to concentrate power in the palace -- the period which just ended. And, finally, it looks as if both the king and the rituals of kingship will survive the latest turn-over and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Nepal. What can be inferred from this unchanging character of ritual with regard to its legitimizing function or its social significance in other respects? If the rituals of the state, however indirectly, would form a reflection of prevalent ideology, how is it to be explained that the rituals of kingship remain virtually unchanged even during the most drastic of political changes? Should we conclude that this very unchangeability of ritual suits its legitimizing function or exactly the opposite, that this state of affairs is demonstrating that the ritual does not pertain to social and political realities at all? Instead of forcing our way out, the problem may be further qualified and, if possible, made to bear on the question from which our inquiry started: how to conceive of the king's divinity?

Early anthropology has tended to make this question the subject of generalization. As such it had already given rise to endless mystification before it again became a fashionable subject in current anthropology. Divine or sacred kings, or most often the legacy they left behind, are once more discovered all over the world. Or rather, they form a focus of attraction for a western mind that turned extremely sensitive to matters of sacrality -- particularly those pertaining to the highest levels of power. But, turning to Nepal again, the divine dimension in kingship is certainly there, though perhaps not in conformity with our expectations. Briefly the divine aspect of kingship has very little to do with power politics and even less with ethical standards in conducting those. This point will be considered in more detail below. Just to clear the way and not to boil down the issue completely, it should also be noted that among the Nepalese people not the slightest confusion exists regarding the identity of the king and that of the God he is assumed to incarnate. A clear distinction is perceived between the worship due to the God and the respects due to the king. In that regard Gerald Toffin³ is completely right arguing against a concept of identification that would render the king equal to Lord Vishnu, the God. Yet it would also be wrong to put the relationship on an altogether metaphorical plane. Evidently there is something in between, a kind of excluded middle, in which the God is humanized and the king is deified, approaching each other without meeting in one and the same identity. Toffin tries to solve the issue by contextualizing it: like some dancers who incorporate divinity only after putting on their masks, the kings of Nepal in certain festivals and at certain highlights assume a divine identity. Toffin goes on stating that in this regard

Nepal is different from hinduized kingdoms in South East Asia where the king was really treated as a divinity. One wonders whether this contrast is indeed brought about by different native conceptions or by the sources primarily consulted in either case. The humanity of the Nepalese king is testified by present day observations, but if one were confined to epigraphical and literary sources those might easily lead us to conclude that the king is no less a divinity in Nepal than in South-East Asia. The very panegyric or straight-forward hagiographic character of extant sources makes one believe that the kings of Nepal have, all through its known history, been *cakravartins* or worldrulers in whom Lord Visnu had descended. Till the present day a taboo rests on the king to have a sight of the most ancient and hallowed statue of Vishnu. Facing it e could incur the risk of contamination and hence the dissolution of his person --- with all the consequences for the kingdom.

A similar identification with Lord Siva, who in his form of Pasupatinatha equally pervades epigraphical record, does however not occur. In all his public addresses the present king of Nepal still evokes the blessings of Lord Pasupatinatha on the country and the people. The royal *samskaras* or life cycle rituals of the kings are also performed at Pasupatinatha on the banks of the holy Bagmati river. In this case there is no danger of contamination and yet there exists, at least since the times of the Malla kings, a peculiar relationship between the king and his tutelary Goddess who in turn is intimately linked to Lord Siva. Stories which we cannot dwell upon here hint at the subdued erotic character of the relationship between the king and the Goddess Taleju. Like Lord Siva himself, the king derives his *sakti*, his power of action, from his proximity to the Goddess, an alliance which tends to render the human queen into a kind of anomaly, often charged with intrigue or magic. During the recent upsurge the story circulated that it was the queen who most vehemently resisted the popular wishes and tried to poison her husband for giving in to them.

The relationships which the king of Nepal further entertains with a host of other deities all point to the fact that he is able to communicate both on the divine and on the human level, partaking of both identities. It is moreover clear that the divine quality is not of an abstract nature in the sense of being attached to the institution of kingship rather than to the king himself-- as Lingat⁴ would have it. Indeed, an empty throne is worse than the most evil of kings, because it breaks up the sanctity of the realm, guaranteed only by the king's presence. Finally it is also not the king as a person, who is divine by the simple fact of his royal descent-- for a king dislodged loses his divinity. So we are left with the last remaining possibility, namely that it is the king occupying the throne and acting accordingly who embodies

divinity and extends his relationships into the realm of the divine. It is therefore of utmost importance for understanding kingship in Nepal to determine the nature and quality of the royal acts *par excellence*.

In his illuminating analysis of kingship in ancient Indian law, Lingat emphasizes the king's prerogative of danda, punishment. Danda (lit. "club") itself is again personified as a deity emanated from Brahma. In the execution of punishment the king does not inflict himself with impurity, just like the sacrificer does not incur impurity by slaying the victim. The performance of kingship is thus comparable with a protracted sacrifice. It should, however, be noted that the king and his danda do not stand alone in upholding the dharma or divine order. Brahmin and king together maintain that order, the first one by his wisdom and his giving advice, the second one by his justice and his employing violence. A similar configuration can indeed be found in Nepal, where the honorific of the king is *Sri Panc*, "five times lustre" and that of his rājguru, the brahmin, *Sri Cha* "six times lustre". The divinity of the brahmin, of course, has always been beyond question in Indian tradition. It is the divinity of the king which is puzzling with its apparent ambivalence and transience. By attributing divinity to the institution of kingship and its specific priestly function—the purification of the sinner by executing punishment — Lingat seems to have found a way out of the problem. His argument, however, adds up to the identification of the king with Danda and leaves open the question of the king's identifications with other gods, most notably Vishnu.

Instead of trying to solve the matter in his turn, Heesterman⁵ focuses attention on a series of contradictions inherent to the notion of kingship in ancient India. The king is of course supposed to uphold the dharma and be its embodiment himself. But in the Vedic prose texts already, he is also called the eater of his people, and in the celebrated dharmasastra of Manu he is compared to a butcher who keeps a hundred slaughterhouses. Evidently his divine quality does not employ his righteousness.

What then, exactly, does it imply? According to Heesterman there is a single certain which transcends the conflicting statements on other claims to divinity, namely that the king must be *abhisikta*, being consecrated by a brahmin. In fact, Heesterman argues, this means nothing else than that the king thereby becomes a *diksita*, a consecrated sacrificer, be it, of course, the most important one in his realm. It is here, in his capacity as the principal celebrant of sacrifice, that we can trace the ultimate divinity of the king. It is also exactly this quality which is exhibited by the Nepalese kings, past and present, and in which we thus find the clue to their divinity. It is a divinity which does not relate at all to the power of the king over his subjects or to the justice or injustice of his rule. But it is certainly conditional on his

being in power, for only as master of his realm can he be the principal celebrant of sacrifice, a sacrifice which in last instance is being conceived of as his own. Very revealing in this respect is a passage in the Satapatha Brahmana which comes close to a parable of the situation in Nepal. Sacrifice, it must be understood, is a contest comparable to the struggle for power but on a different level, with other rewards. In the passage I am referring to (SBXIV,1,1) a number of Gods set out on a sacrificial session to achieve their wishes or to attain immortal glory-- for such are the rewards of sacrifice, they agree that whoever among them shall be first in encompassing the ultimate end of sacrifice through austerity, fervour etc. shall be the most excellent of them and they say, "shall then be in common to us all". The enigmatic phrasing is characteristic of sacrificial texts, as indeed the secret of sacrifice is not something to be given away in clear-cut language. Yet the passage immediately following reveals quite a bit of it and I therefore quote it in full⁶: "Visnu first attained it (i.e. the ultimate end of sacrifice) and he became the most excellent of the gods; whence people say, "Visnu is the most excellent of the gods". Now he who is this Visnu is the sacrifice; and he who is this sacrifice is yonder Aditya (the sun). But, indeed, Visnu was unable to control that (love of) glory of his; and so even now not every one can control that (love of) glory of his.

Taking his bow, together with three arrows, he stepped forth. He stood, resting his head in the end of the bow. Not daring to attack him, the gods sat themselves down all around him. Then the ants said..... "What would ye give to him who should gnaw the bowstring?" "We would give him the (constant) enjoyment of food, and he would find water even in the desert..... "So be it", they said.

Having gone nigh unto him, they gnawed his bowstring. When it was cut, the ends of the bow, springing asunder, cut off Visnu's head."

The more or less hidden message of the passage tells us the winner of the sacrificial session only comes to his full attainment by being slain himself. He is the head of the sacrifice and from his body flows the *prasad* (implicitly the drink of immortality) which the other gods absorb to attain their glory. Visnu became, as previewed in the enigmatic formula at the start of the contest, verily "in common to them all". The charming peculiarity of the story as given here is that the puny ants are effecting the sacrifice to take that course. While the identification of the sacrificer with the sacrifice already occurs in the Rgveda, the role of the ants in the text considered here, aptly turns the common message into a parable of the king and his unseen subjects. Enveloped in his pride the king thus meets his destiny, in spite of himself.

The king who embodies Visnu -- and kings like that are not confined to Nepal, does so by the grace of sacrifice. In practice he will replace the sacrifice of his own self with other sacrificial ingredients and gifts to the gods, but his divinity derives from being its very substance and enactment himself. The discrepancy between political change and ritual continuity finds its explanation in the contrasting values that underlie the ways of obtaining power and those of obtaining sacrificial merit. Yet, as there is no power greater than that engendered by sacrifice, those initially divergent ways of achievement are bound to meet each other in a single victory or catastrophe. In the strategies of competent king, a delicate balance between the stage of power and that of sacrifice is essential. For although the value attached to the latter is vastly superior, the king must avoid being left with nothing to sacrifice except himself -- that is, if he wants to stay in power.

Returning to the present Nepalese scene, the king appears to have surmounted the crisis after it seemed at first that he had fatally entangled himself with a power-eager clique. Moreover he reacted quite late to the inevitable collapse. On the eighteenth of February already when a government procession including the cabinet and the prime minister himself was welcomed with a shower of stones in the main streets of Kathmandu, the ways of power were visibly exhausted: it was a complete loss of face. In the following seven weeks total defeat for this Majesty's Government came closer step by step. Only when the ants had started gnawing his throne did the king react--but then he had a lot of things left with him to sacrifice, his prime minister to start with. The king truly assumed his sacrificial role, the role which he and his predecessors have since ancient times been engaged in. He professed *tyaga*, abandonment, of possessions and people, thus conforming to the principal characteristic of the sacrificer. He lived up to abandonment in such a measure that he did not need to take the ultimate step of self-abandonment. Much to the surprise of outside observers the combined opposition of congress and United Left Front instead invited the king to head a new Opposition Government on April 16th, only ten days after the brutal massacre of citizens in front of the palace. His Majesty prudently, and expectedly, declined the offer, but significant is that it was made at all. Instead of being dragged along by the political process that brought about the downfall of his pawns, the king was asked to play a pivotal role again. Appeals were issued to the king for restoring order with the very powers he was asked to sacrifice. If the king will keep to his pledge, this throne will almost certainly be saved.

To a modern mind it may appear that the Constitution now being drafted will finally replace the divinity of both brahmin and king by possessing its own sanctity. The Constitution will no doubt take care of

power distribution and human rights, but, as we have seen, the divinity of the king lies on the entirely different plane. Although the king has by popular pressure been forced to relinquish his accumulated powers, he is likely to remain the country's chief sacrificer, absorbing in his works the sins and virtues of his people and redistributing the sacrificial merits among them in the form of the country's prosperity. As the principal celebrant of sacrifices -- including those of punishment and war -- the king has always run the risk of becoming himself the victim. The very source of his divinity may, in contrast to that of the brahmin, turn against him and put his life at stake. Truly devout kings, in which ancient Nepalese history abounds, may even choose for abandonment instead of fulfilling kingship with all its concomittant ambivalence and violence. By choosing that path they in fact become like brahmins, no longer sacrificing for the country but for and with themselves alone. Although the Nepalese king can in certain occasions be seen to be dependent on his brahmin for performing his principal act of sacrifice, this dependency can by no means be generalized. It does not even pertain to the crucial sacrificial acts which the king performs for the goddess who, as his *Sakti*, empowers him to rule. Although the relationship with his subjects is intrinsically delicate and ambivalent, the king's own source of divinity is recognized by the people. A single sight of the king is widely believed to absolve people from the sins and defilements they may have incurred that very day. However, the king's divinity does no more protect him than it did Lord Visnu himself in the brahmana passage treated above. And least of all, it must be concluded, does it protect him from his own people.

Notes

1. E.G. Gellner, David N.: Language, Caste, Religion and Territory. Newar Identity ancient and modern, in: *European Journal of Sociology* XXVII (1986) 102-148.
2. Burghart, Richard: The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State in Nepal, in: *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol XLIV no. 1 (1984) 101-125.
3. Toffin, Gerard: Dieux souverains et rois devots dans l'ancienne royaume de la vallée du Népal, in: *L'Homme* 99, vol XXVI (1986) 71-94.
4. Lingat, R.: *Les Sources du droit dans le systeme traditonel de L'Inde*, Paris, Mouton & Co., 1967
5. Heesterman, J.C.: *The Conundrum of the King's Authority*, in: J.F. Richards (ed.) *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Madison 1978.
6. Eggeling, Julius: *The Satapatha Brahmana* (transl.), Part V (p. 411-442) Sacred Books of the East Series, first published by Clarendon Press, 1900.