

## BOOK REVIEW

*Rana Intrigues*. 1995. Promode Shamshere Rana Kathmandu: R. Rana.  
Price: N. Rs. 450.00

*Rana Intrigues*, the second publication in English after *Rana Nepal: An Insider's View* by Promode Shamshere Rana, is yet another addition to Nepal's Rana history written by a Nepali. The Rana rule, regarded to be the most colourful in Nepal's history began from 1846 and ended in 1951. From the very day Jang Bahadur, through a dramatic coup in 1846, usurped power right down to the day when Mohan Shamshere the last Rana prime minister who handed over power to the democratic revolutionary forces in 1951, holds the student of Nepal's political history spellbound to say the least.

What makes the 104-year Rana period interesting reading is not only the way the various Rana prime ministers ruled as a whole but also in their individual style of functioning, their idiosyncrasies, their personal habits, their private lives, their legendary retinue of concubines, etc. All this not only painted the Rana prime ministers larger than life like the Indian Maharajas but also projected them as magnificent anachronisms of modern times. Besides, Rana passion of those days for intrigues and counter intrigues, plots and counter plots, coups and counter coups, bloody assassinations and machiavellian decisions of opposite camps in the relentless jockeying for power adds further colour to the resplendent Rana canvas.

*Rana Intrigues*, the book under review written with the intention of bringing to light unrecorded aspects of Rana rule is, no doubt, a commendable effort. And this effort coming as it does from no other than Promode Shamshere, the author of *Rana Rule: An Insider's View* (1978) and the great grandson of Bir Shamshere is certainly most welcome. With his credentials, the author has deftly taken advantages of both documentary and verbal information available to him on the various facets of Rana rule, notably on the detailed accounts of some of the more intimate aspects of courtly and aristocratic life, the organisation of harems, the various forms of entertainment and the furnishing and architecture of the great stucco palaces. Equally interesting is the description of big game hunting, details of dancing girls, minute description of the ill-fated Seto Durbar hall, food and feasting etc.

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What is also of interest is Jang Bahadur beating his son Bhim Jang to death after a drunken confrontation; the young Ranas consuming bottles of French perfume to check the foul alcoholic smell prior to appearing before their father and being slow poisoned in the process (p. 41); the punishment meted out to Karabir Khatri by Jang Bahadur (p. 42) Jang's private ayurvedic pharmacy (p. 42); Jang's misuse of the state treasury (p. 46); a list of Jang's legally wedded wives and their respective titles (p. 51); Ranauddip Singh under the influence of hashish reprimanding Col. Lalit Jang Kunwar and whimsically promoting him to Major General the very next day (p. 57); the inside of Jagat Jang's Manohara Durbar (p. 62); the forced remarriage of Brahmin widower Chandra Kant Aryal against Hindu custom and tradition by Ranauddip Singh (p. 80); Bir Shamshere's strict following of the Hindu religious code while taking meals (p. 110); the talismanic armlet given to Bir Shamshere by the hermit of Reshunga and stolen under mysterious circumstances right from under his pillow (p. 111); Dev Shamshere's extravagant life style and love for luxuries, pomp and show, his request to Gehendra Shamshere for his favourite mistress (p. 119); the little known details of his overthrow, the case of mass *sati* on the banks of the Salinadi performed under duress (p. 113); the prophecy of the *Yogi* of Reshunga, Juddha Shamshere's love for vulgar talks and pornographic jokes (p. 191), etc. lend the book a unique flavour.

But as the title of the book may misleadingly suggest, it is not only about intrigues, nor does it unearth, as might be expected, *Rana Intrigues* unheard of before, it does not shed further light on some famous intrigues already known and covered in the book. Had the volume just concentrated on intrigues, big or small, and through research added further information regarding such events, the publication would have certainly been worthwhile. For instance, had new information been given on Ranauddip Singh's assassination, as to who actually fired the first fatal shot, whether it was with a revolver (as it is also believed) or with a carbine rifle (as the author suggests) or whether Khadga Shamshere really meant to stage a coup against his half brother Bir Shamshere or was painted the villain of the peace, it would have been of tremendous interest. For there are arguments to suggest that Khadga Shamshere may well have been a victim of circumstances especially of the ever suspicious nature of Bir Shamshere and his second influential Newar wife Tope Kumari with whom Khadga was not in the best of terms.

The book, as it stands, is just another rendering of Nepal's Rana history already known. Had it not been for the saving grace provided by the more intimate aspects of courtly and aristocratic life as mentioned, it would be no better than just an abridged version of Adrian Sever's *Nepal Under the Ranas*

published earlier. Even the washed out quality of the photographs are reminiscent of the earlier publication and appear to be from the same collection.

Except for Preface, Foreword and Introduction, the volume has been very sloppily edited with glaring errors in almost every page. At times the volume even gives the impression of the 'first' instead of the 'final draft' being unceremoniously hurried through the press by mistake. Nepali words, phrases, expressions and titles used abundantly are not italicized, and inconsistency in spelling and names of places further adds to the confusion. Besides, some of the references listed in the bibliography are not referred to in the text and some in the text are not found in the bibliography. The publication, as a whole leaves much to be desired and seems to have been written more with foreign readership in mind especially those acquainting themselves with Nepalese political history for the very first time.

- Ananda P. Shrestha