

## REVIEW ARTICLE

Rana, Prabhakar S.J.B., Pashupati S.J.B. Rana, Gautam S.J.B. Rana 2003. *The Ranas of Nepal*. New Delhi: Timeless Books, 272 pp. 178 colour illustrations and 140 B/W. 1 map. ISBN: 2-8313-0374-5. NRs 5,600.

This lavishly produced volume was published in India (but printed at Jagadamba Press in Nepal) a year after the original Swiss edition.<sup>1</sup> The book is the work of many hands, including Prashant Panjari as photographer and Brindat Datta as designer, but it is primarily the work of three prominent members of the Rana clan. Prabhakar Shamsher is a great-grandson of Maharaja Juddha Shamsher and a highly successful businessman with interests in the hotel industry, hydro-electric power, tobacco and other fields. Pashupati, a grandson of Mohan Shamsher, is now a leader of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party as well as scholar and businessman. Gautam, a great-grandson of Chandra and nephew of Gorkha Parishad (and then Nepali Congress) leader, Bharat Shamsher. The title page carries acknowledgements to Rani Juni of Saira, who apparently inspired the project, and there are prefaces by the heirs to the royal houses of Mewar and Kashmir and to that of the central European state of Moldavia. The book is thus very much a production by the Nepalese aristocracy, stressing both their status within Nepal and also their links to their counterparts in India and beyond.

As one would expect from the coffee-table format, the book's strongest point is its illustrations. Some of the historic photographs reprinted here have been published before, in volumes such as Padma Prakash Shrestha's *Nepal Rediscovered* or Adrian Sever's *Nepal under the Ranas* but this new collection is a particularly impressive one. First, many of the illustrations are in colour, including both reproductions of conventional oil paintings and also monochrome photographs to which colour was added by hand; the latter was a natural development seeing that it was the Chitrakars, traditionally court painters, who also took many of the early photographs. Second, there are many particularly interesting illustrations which this reviewer at least has not come across before. These include the portrait of Mohan Shamsher with his many Indian in-laws on the occasion of his inauguration as Maharaja in 1948, a painting of the surrender of Nepalese forces to Ochterloney's expeditionary force at Makwanpu; another of Chandra Shamsher in the front rank of the Indian princes at the 1911 Delhi Darbar; and a photograph of Chandra bowing as he shakes hands with George V. This last gesture, of course, was not an acknowledgement of British sovereignty over Nepal but rather of the

king-emperor's status as head of state. Chandra himself, autocrat though he was in practice, was technically subordinate to the Shah king.

The text includes accounts of the Ranas' general life style, their eating habits, palace architecture, big game hunting, wedding ceremonies and other rituals, with essays on individual topics by one or other of the two senior authors whilst Gautam Shamsher contributes a section on their jewellery collection. Past and present are blended together in both texts and photographs, with pictures of weddings half a century or more ago juxtaposed with recent ones and Pashupati Shamsher and Prabhakar Shamsher adding personal childhood memories to more conventional cultural history. Among the most interesting modern material is a series of photographs of the biennial ceremony at the Panchayani Temple which involves the descendants of all seven original Kunwar brothers, whilst the fascinating vignettes from an earlier era include the account of ritual Dasain gambling in Singha Darbar, when vast sums were won or lost on the toss of a few corrie shells and debts settled the following morning by transporting cartloads of coins between the Rana residences. Pashupati Shamsher rightly stresses the contrast between the Ranas' westernised consumer habits (criticised from early on by nationalistically-inclined intellectuals) and their continuing adherence to a strongly traditionalist Hinduism. Right up until 1950, for example, English-educated Maharajas would still ritually purify themselves after shaking the hand of *mlecchas* such as the British ambassador. Here one might add the point made strongly by Mark Liechty, that foreign objects were valued not so much for their intrinsic attractiveness as because the elite's own superior status was confirmed by their access to something beyond the reach of the mass of the population. Much the same could be said of the earlier vogue in court circles both Nepal and other Hindu states for Moghul dress, or the preference for French fashions amongst 18<sup>th</sup> century European aristocrats.

In the context of borrowings from western culture the authors might also have said a little more about the introduction to Nepal of photography itself, a subject analysed in detail by Pratyoush Onta (1998). The book does mention that Damber Shamsher, the Shamsher brother, who fired the first shot in the 1885 murder of their uncle Maharaja Ranoddip Singh, was probably also the first Nepalese photographer. It is silent, however, on the role of Clarence Taylor, the assistant resident who took the first photographs in Nepal in 1863 and for whom Jang Bahadur and other members of the political elite were immediately willing to pose.

The book begins with just over a hundred pages by Pashupati Shamsher briefly summarising Npal's earlier history and then giving an account of the Rana era itself. This is competently done, though, not surprisingly given the

complexity of the subject, there are a number of mistakes or questionable interpretations on points of detail. In his treatment of Jang's violent seizure of power in September 1846, the author states boldly that King Rajendra was behind the murder of Gagan Singh, which triggered the whole episode. Most historians in fact now believe that Jang Bahadur and other ministers in the coalition were either assisting the king in this or were themselves the originators of the assassination. The account of the Kot Massacre itself (pp. 39-40) has the violence start with the cutting down by one of Jang Bahadur's brothers of the son of prime minister Fateh Jang. In fact, it probably started with a volley of shots that hit Fateh Jang himself and two other ministers as they climbed steps to the room where Queen Rajyalakshmi Devi was waiting. This latter version was given in a report to Calcutta a few months after the events by the British Resident, probably the only full account independent of Jang Bahadur and his supporters.

In discussing the background to the Shamshers' 1885 coup (p.54), it is suggested that the eldest of the brothers was having an affair with Lalit Kumari, the mother of the infant King Prithvi, and that Khadga Shamsheer was similarly involved with Deep Kumari, Lalit's full sister and the wife of a cousin of the king. Bir certainly got on well with Lalit Kumari, with whom he had been brought up in Jang Bahadur's household. However, Kashinath Acharya Dixit, a priest attached to Deep Kumari's household, wrote in his memoirs that it was Khadga who was particularly close to both sisters and only suggested an improper relationship between Khadga and Deep Kumari (Dixit 1974/5:5, 13). Reconstructions of court intrigue are always conjectural, but Dixit's version is the one accepted by the leading modern authority on the period (Manandhar 186: 89).

There are similar small slips in the account of the Shamsher maharajas. Top Kumari was the name of Bir's Newar concubine, not of her rival, his original senior queen (p.58). It is only conjecture, not established fact that Chandra Shamsher's discussed his plans with Lord Curzon before the 1901 overthrow of his brother Dev (p.65), although he did certainly hint at his intentions in a letter to Col. Wylie, a former British resident. The author is probably also wrong in claiming that 200,000 Nepalis fought on the British side in World War 1. This is an oft-quoted figure, originating from a speech made in Kathmandu in 1923 by another British resident, but the actual total may have been nearer half this (Onta 1996: 104-6, cited in Chalmers 2003).

Dates are also occasionally inaccurate. Jang Bahadur's seizure of power is dated to 1845 on p. 40 (though 1846 had been given correctly two pages earlier) and the photo of the inauguration of the equestrian statue of Jang Bahadur on the Tundikhel, on pages 114-15, dates from 1884, not 1854. Finally, on pp.204-5, the marriage of Sharad Shamsher's daughter to a son of

the Maharaja of Jaisalmer is variously placed in April 1950, October 1950 (by implication) and also in 1951!

These are relatively minor matters but Pashupati Shamsheer's narrative does also take controversial approaches on some fundamental issues concerning the Rana period and its significance in Nepalese history. To start with the basic question of who Nepal's Ranas actually are, he accepts uncritically the truth of the legend that the Kunwars (as they were known in Nepal before 1849) were descended from a cadet branch of the ruling house of Mewar in Rajasthan. The reader new to the subject would thus remain blissfully unaware that such claims of a connection to prestigious Indian Rajput families were widespread in the Himalayas and that modern scholars are very dubious about their authenticity (Whelpton 1987). We can be certain that Jang Bahadur's great-grandfather, Ahiram Kunwar, did move from Kaski to Gorkha in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but no reliance can be put on family legends about their earlier history and the best guess must be that they were basically of Khas extraction.

In dealing with the Ranas' record as rulers, Pashupati, not unexpectedly, is often concerned to argue a case for the defence. This is particularly the case when he discusses his own immediate relatives, including his great-grandfather, Chandra, his grandfather, Mohan ('generous to a fault and the only Rana ruler unwilling to make personal use of state coffers') and his 'brilliant' father Bijay. He argues that the ruthlessness and autocratic nature of the early Rana maharajas have to be seen in the context of their times and the contributions made by both Jang Bahadur and Chandra to strengthening and consolidating the Nepalese state should be acknowledged. He sees the great failure in Rana statesmanship as the inability of later rulers to move with the times – a charge which Pashupati Shamsheer allows against his grandfather, even though lauding some of his personal qualities.

There has for many years been a 'revisionist' trend in Nepalese historiography questioning the kind of blanket condemnation of the Rana regime prevalent in the early years after 1951 and so many of the points that the author makes would be quite widely accepted. The contrast between the earlier and later parts of the Rana period is a valid one, and the author is also right to give Chandra credit for securing the UK's unequivocal recognition of Nepal's independence; to point out that it was the British opening of a rail route to Darjeeling, not Chandra's collaboration with the Younghusband expedition, which dealt the fatal blow to the Kathmandu Valley's entrepôt trade; and to praise Juddha's reconstruction efforts after the 1934 earthquake.

However, the author does go rather too far in his rehabilitation of Chandra. Whilst citing his foundation of Trichandra College as a constructive move, he fails to point out that a major aim was probably to reduce the numbers of wealthy Nepalese sending their sons to study in the increasingly radicalised atmosphere on campuses in Calcutta and other Indian universities.

He also claims that Chandra's abolition of slavery was accompanied by 'an immaculately well-planned programme for resettlement of the freed' (p.78). In fact, this was no more the case in 1924 than with the emancipation of the *kamaiyas* in 2000. As a recent study has shown, very few of the sixty thousand freed slaves accepted Chandra's offer of land in the unhealthy environment of Amalekhgunj ('Emancipationville') in the Tarai and the majority remained in de facto dependence on their former masters (Whyte 1998).

A policy of close co-operation with British India characterised the Rana regime from beginning to end. There was, however, also an initial wariness on Jang Bahadur's part and, although, throwing his support behind the British in the 1857 crisis, he obstructed British efforts to expand recruiting for their Gurkha regiments. Pashupati Shamsher credits Ranoddip with reaching an understanding with the British on this issue and he was indeed more accommodating than Jang had been. However, Ranoddip had given way reluctantly, and the book fails to point out that it was with the Shamshers' takeover in 1885 that full collaboration with the British became the norm. With Jang Bahadur's surviving sons in exile in India, Bir Shamsher was in no position to withstand British pressure for greater assistance but, in addition, the English-educated Shamshers did not share the intense suspicion of British intentions that characterised Jang and Ranoddip as it had earlier Nepalese leaders.

Pashupati Shamsher argues that collaboration with the British served Nepal's national interests down to the recognition of country's full independence in 1923 but that Juddha was unwise to commit Nepal's resources to the defence of a weakening British Empire in 1939-45. We are, of course, on very shaky ground trying to speculate what might have been had Chandra and Juddha made different decisions, particularly as we first have to decide whether we think Britain and her allies would still have won the global struggles without Nepal's substantial assistance. If, for example, Nepalese neutrality had tipped the military balance and allowed a Japanese invasion of India, would an authoritarian government under Subhas Chandra Bose have respected Nepalese independence or regarded it as princely state to be liberated and brought under New Delhi's control as Tibet was under Beijing's? However, there is certainly evidence that some of the Rana elite were afraid Juddha was backing the wrong horse. In contrast, Juddha himself is portrayed in most sources as always confident in the outcome, but there is evidence that he, too, had doubts, actually asking for the Gurkhas to be kept out of the Burma campaign lest their participation put Nepal in danger of Japanese retaliation (Cross 2002: 10).

Bijay Shamsher, Pashupati Shamsher's father, was a key figure in the negotiations with India during the 1950-51 crisis. His son portrays him as an

advocate of compromise and a member of a soft-line faction including his uncle, Krishna, who had been an assistant to Maharaja Padma and went into voluntary exile after Mohan took over in 1948. The importance of Bijay's personal role in the internal debate is perhaps exaggerated but the overall account is plausible and more or less tallies with that of Rishikesh Shaha, whose version of these events (Shaha 1990: II, 204-40) is the best yet published. Shaha was himself an associate of Padma Shamsher, and later a member of the Nepali Democratic Congress, but relied to some extent on information from Kaiser Shamsher, brother of Mohan and Krishna and one of the conservative groups who Pashupati Shamsher sees as vying with the progressives for Mohan's support. Both authors agree that had the Ranas added to the 1948 constitution a commitment to fully representative government as a long-term aim, this would have been sufficient to prevent the Indian government from throwing in its lot with the anti-Rana dissidents.

After Tribhuvan's flight to India and the Nepali Congress's launching of an armed struggle, Pashupati Shamsher, like many others, sees the defection of the Palpa garrison in January 1951 as the decisive event. It is, though, clear from Shaha's account that even before the end of 1951 the regime was already veering towards acceptance of the return of King Tribhuvan. This perhaps strengthens the likelihood that apprehension by individual Ranas that their assets in India might be confiscated was an important consideration.

Pashupati Shamsher presents Bijay as a progressive not only in the politics of 1945-1950 but also in earlier discussions on economic policy under Juddha. He claims that he wanted to mobilise the private fortunes of the Rana elite for industrial development in Nepal. More detailed research would be needed to substantiate this, but in any case Juddha's hopes for industrialisation were dependent on securing suitable tariff arrangements with India, and this was never achieved.

In his concluding reflections on the regime, the author argues that, though exploitative, it did succeed in maintaining law-and-order, in dramatic contrast to Nepal's current situation. This assertion is a fair one, but the additional claim that 'no hint of corruption' was tolerated needs to be qualified. Corruption in the sense of clandestine and illegal diversion of public money to individual government employees was negligible in comparison to today, but not entirely unknown. More importantly, the practice of the reigning maharaja treating any surplus of revenue over current expenditure as his personal income might itself be regarded as corruption on a grand scale. In addition, the demands which officials were permitted to make openly on ordinary citizens could be as vexatious as demands for under-the-table payments made by their more modern counterparts.

Although the 'History' section stops at 1951, the book includes material on the prominent life still played by many Ranas in public life, including profiles of the authors and some of their relatives in an additional chapter authored by Dubby Bhagat and Nikesh Sinha. A glaring omission is any mention of the relationship between Pashupati Shamsher's daughter Devyani and Crown Prince Dipendra and its role in the build-up to Dipendra's massacre of family members in 2001. Devyani is not even named, in the book, which refers only to Pashupati Shamsher's 'two daughters'. The personal and political reasons for passing over so much in silence are readily understandable and, indeed, readers may suspect that one motive behind the writing of the book was to provide some favourable publicity for the family to offset the tragic events of three years ago. However, even that aim might perhaps have been better served by briefly acknowledging those events rather than ignoring them.

The book would also have been improved if the tone had been a little less self-congratulatory, with an acknowledgement that the present-day Ranas must accept a share of responsibility for the country's present condition. This is not because they are Ranas but simply because they are now members of a broader elite which has failed to overcome the challenges presented to Nepal after 1951.

Overall, *The Ranas of Nepal* is a useful addition to the literature and has certainly proved a best-seller— a second Indian edition has already been released. However, those seeking a general introduction to Rana history are still better served by the work of Rishikesh Shaha (1990), Ludwig Stiller (1993) and Adrian Sever (1993).

— John Whelpton

#### Note

- 1 Geneva: Naef.Kister (for Credit Suisse), 2002. ISBN: 2-8313-0377-x. Approx. NR 8,250. The book is also published in French as: *Nepal – art et civilisation des Ràna*. Geneva: Naef.Kister, 2002. ISBN: 2-8313-0374-5. Euros 44.50. The Indian edition is available leather-bound at NR 7,200.

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