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INTERVIEW

On the Topicality of History: An Interview with Mahesh Chandra Regmi

Martin Gaenzle

Having been tutored by his father he "never saw the inside of a school", and as he had to discontinue his university education after a B.A. at the age of eighteen, Mahesh Chandra Regmi, today the unquestioned authority on Nepal's economic history, started his academic career - as he says - "with hands tied behind the back". After four years at Trichandra College in Kathmandu the Rana government sent him to Patna University, where he stayed for two months to prepare for his B.A. examinations. He then tried to run a book shop, later a cloth shop, in Calcutta, but eventually returned to Kathmandu just before the changes in 1950.

It was only around 1956, when he met a Ford Foundation scholar who was doing research on the agricultural system of Nepal and asked him to translate some documents, that M.C. Regmi started to get interested in doing research on Nepal's economic history. In 1960 he received support from the University of California and in the following years he wrote the four volume study *Land*

Tenure and Taxation in Nepal, which still stands as the authoritative source on the subject. This was followed by several books on the economic history of Nepal: among others *A Study in Nepali Economic History* (1971), *Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19th Century Nepal* (1979), *The State and Economic Surplus: Production, Trade and Resource Mobilization in Early 19th Century Nepal* (1985).

Rather than striving for a university career, he set up his own private Regmi Research Institute, which provides several regular publications that are valuable sources for scholars on Nepal, such as the Nepal Press Digest, the Nepal Recorder, and - until recently - the Regmi Research Series. In 1977, Mahesh Chandra Regmi received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts. Though he usually prefers to stay away from the academic arena of seminars, conferences and workshops, he still

continues his studies, the latest product of which I had the opportunity to read in a draft version. This was one of the things we talked about during the interview, which was held on August 19, 1992 at his house in Lajim-path.

Q: The Regmi Research Series, which was much valued by scholars, has been suspended since 1990.

A: In 1989 December. I kept it up for twenty years. I started in November 1969, and finally gave it up in December 1989, because I couldn't keep it up.

Q: What were the reasons?

A: Well, the first thing was that it was selling only about forty copies, forty subscriptions. It did not generate enough resources to hire people, assistants, things like that. This was the main problem. Another problem was that I couldn't find anybody with the competence to translate the old documents in the style I used. So it was a one-man-show.

Q: So you did all the translations all yourself?

A: Of course. Do you think I could get easily somebody else to do that, to understand and interpret the old documents and translate them in good English language?

Q: You didn't want to do it yourself any longer?

A: The point is: there is a limit to everything. After crossing the age of sixty I don't want to work nine hours a day. That's not the goal of life. And then I decided to concentrate on my own writing, not just to give up the Regmi Research Series and sit quietly, playing with my grandchildren. What I want to do is spend more time on my own work.

Q: So it was also not the reason that you ran out of materials?

A: Well, I could keep it up for the next fifty years. There are tremendous volumes of materials now with me in this room, they are still untapped. And materials are coming in, you see, every day something new, documents, books, things like that. And you can always go to the Government Offices and procure more documents. Materials were not the problem. (...) The point is that I'm

glad that this publication has been used and appreciated by the academic world. (...) So my purpose is served, I have shown what I can do.

Q: Now as far as I know, your collection of manuscripts has been microfilmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project.

A: That's right. I am glad because I can't handle it. The paper is getting brittle, the ink is fading, nobody is able to use it. Now this is all a part of mankind's corpus of knowledge. Now it is safe.

Q: Has everything been microfilmed in your collection?

A: The only thing I wonder is who will look at these microfilms and when.

Q: Well, now there is this new microfilm house, you may have heard...

A: Yes but people, people... You know the manuscripts I have given include a copy of a transcript of the *Ekadasi Mahatmya*. You know, the eleventh day of each fortnight is a very sacred day, *ekādaśī*. So one of my ancestors made a copy of that *Ekādaśī Mahātmya* and in that he has written a verse: *bhagna-priṣṭha-kaṭi-grīva-baddha-muṣṭīr-adho-mukhaṁ // kaṣṭhena likhitāṁ grānṭham yatnena paripālayet*, "With my back bent, my head bent, my fingers squeezed, holding a pen, I have written this book with great difficulty, and please preserve it carefully." That has gone to the microfilms.

Q: That could well be a motto over the entrance of the archives.

A: And it's a fact. Now I am glad that what I collected during the period of nearly twenty years is now safe, even if these actual paper volumes perish. I'm very glad.

Q: How do you judge the general state of archiving in Nepal. What are the most urgent tasks?

A: Well I don't know if you have gone to the *Lagat Phāt*. I have stopped working there nearly ten years ago. Has anybody gone and microfilmed those manuscripts?

Q: I think not, so far. That would probably be the most necessary...

A: Not only necessary but urgent. When, ten years ago, I sometimes went myself and made copies, some rolls were actually falling into pieces. I had to (make) copies with blank spaces where the insects had been earlier than I. So they are perishing. And the other thing is that beyond preserving something must be done to use them.

Q: Let me turn now to your most recent book which you have just sent for publication...

A: *Kings and Political Leaders in the Gorkhali Empire 1768-1814*.

Q: Could you roughly outline the idea of the book?

A: I have written quite a lot on the condition of the peasantry during the Gorkhali period, over-taxation, labour services, like that. I have discussed that in great detail, as a matter of fact most of my work has been devoted to a study of the conditions of the peasantry, workers and peasants. Now the question that came up before my mind after I finished this: Now why this? Suppose there is a traffic accident, a hit-and-run accident, the driver of a vehicle runs over a man and escapes from the site of the accident. Now everybody looks at the victim, he is bleeding and suffering, but nobody thinks of why this happened. The driver has fled. So in the same way, now if the peasant in the Gorkhali period or Rana period or maybe even now suffers, it is not due to his decision. Somebody made the decisions which shaped the course of his life. Now who made that decision? What was the catalytic factor that shaped the course of Nepali social and economic history? So I finally came to the point that (it was) the political leadership of Gorkha which decided that the state should expand. Once you make that decision the rest follows. You have to use the peoples' labour services, taxes, lots of things, so the rest follows. So the main catalytic factor is the decision of the political leadership of the Gorkhali state to expand their territories - that affected the life of the people.

Q: So as far as I see, you have shifted somewhat from your previous focus on economics, now you also include political

aspects.

A: I have made it rounder, I have seen it in a proper perspective. As I said, you look at the victim, that is part of the reality. The reality is that the political elites made the decision which affected the period and made the condition what it was. So I have not shifted the ground, I only want to study it in a broader perspective.

Q: Previously you have mainly described the Gorkha conquests in term of economic enrichment and exploitation. Now you also speak of the vision of the leadership, the vision to build a Himalayan Empire. Do you regard these early leaders primarily as Empire-builders or primarily as conquerors for their own personal benefits?

A: Both, the reality is both. Now what happened was that the leaders of Gorkha created a Himalayan state which still exists. And that is an achievement. Among all the social groups of what is now Nepal it appears that only the leaders of Gorkha had the vision to create a state, a state in the abstract sense, in a secular sense, not in the sense of tribe, or region or community, like that. Anything that has created this state, the unified state of Nepal now, must be regarded as a vision. It must be appreciated, shouldn't it be? But beyond, or rather beneath, that broad reality, it is a question of personal ambition. And then you have to make a distinction between the Empire-building phase and the phase of destructive conflict. What happened after 1804 was absolutely uncalled for.

Q: But wasn't it even before that that there was a shift away from a more visionary kind of Empire-building and, as you show in your book, that there was a mechanism that had its own dynamic, that called for that enlargement.

A: I bring it out more clearly in this study which was not contained in the earlier draft I gave you. The point is that by 1790 the Gorkhali state had probably reached the viable limits of its expansion. It had occupied Kumaon and made a vassal state of Garhwal. Between 1792 and 1804 there was no mili-

tary activity of any kind. It stopped. And after 1804, what did they do? They went beyond Kumaon to Garhwal, I called that a Quixotic enterprise. Now granted that they wanted to build an independent Empire, but within what limits?

Q: So what was this decision like?

A: This decision was due to the fact that in Kathmandu you had a leadership, there was a big coup, lots of people were massacred and Bhimsen Thapa came to power. Now he was a very junior member of the Gorkhali elite who had never had any experience with actual fighting, and there were lots of people who were more senior, more experienced than him, but by chance, by these fortuitous circumstances he was catapulted to power, after the assassination of Rana Bahadur, and he used this programme of expansion to strengthen his own political position in the Gorkhali state.

Q: So that was a political decision rather than a decision of just trying for economic advancement?

A: Certainly. So there are two phases of expansion. Incidentally, what was acquired after 1804 was all lost, Kumaon, Garhwal, Kangra... was all lost. Whereas what was gained after 1792 was more or less retained with the exception of Kumaon. You know the British signed a treaty with Nepal in 1801, a friendship treaty. It remained valid for nearly two years. In that treaty they accepted Nepal's territories with provisions for adjustments of border disputes, but that means they had accepted Nepal's ownership of Kumaon. But the post-1804 adventurers, Bhimsen Thapa and his group, and before that the political elites of Kathmandu, the *bhardārs*, were so interested in only their own petty designs that they missed the opportunity to gain acceptance from the East India Company Government in Calcutta. So the rest followed. Can you imagine Kathmandu fighting a war in Kangra?

Q: That's quite a difficult thing.

A: Quite difficult, logistics was a big problem, and the other thing, the Gorkhali were experts in mountain warfare. They

never fought a pitched battle with any enemy, but now they went into Kangra ... battles (with the) Sikhs and all this. After 1804, if you study their careers in detail, they don't come out in good light. Amar Singh Thapa, the hero of Kangra, for example, he was such an obtruse person. You know he went up to Kangra and crossed the Sutlej and - I have used the word - played imperial war games in the Sutlej region. Did Gorkha have the capacity to do that?

Q: But wasn't this expansion also due to the fact that the political elite was becoming larger and larger?

A: That comes later. When you imagine the situation, Bhimsen Thapa and his group are in power, now they have much more senior people around them. Now you have to find work for them. Or they will compete with you in Kathmandu. So they were all sent out.

Now let me add one thing. Historical reality is a complex thing. However deep your interpretation may be, there is always a "maybe, if it had not been so". So I don't say that what I have written is the absolute truth, it is one way of looking at things. I don't know the truth, do you? Does anybody? But your explanation must fit in with the facts. So how else can you explain this old man Amar Singh Thapa going to Kangra and fighting with Ranjit Singh and all that. (...)

Q: You mentioned earlier your next project of writing will be something on Kumaon. Will that be more in a political vein?

A: My next project... no, it is mainly political, administrative, agrarian. You see, what I want to do is to analyse the nature of Gorkhali administration in Kumaon. And what burden did it impose on the people of Kumaon, and other areas. Because what happened was that Kumaon was on the way toward Garhwal and Kangra, it lay on the route. So up to 1804, between 1790 when it was annexed by Gorkha and 1804, Kumaon was just a frontier province. But after 1804, it lay on the route, its borders on all four sides became dynamic, active borders. So people, troops, soldiers were travelling through the Kumaon territory all the time. This created

burdens for the local people, taxes, provisions, forced labour, slavery, etc. So now don't ask me what I am going to write because I don't know myself [laughs]. But beyond that it is not a study of political history, it will be a study what should be called rather political economy or something like that. You know these narrow confines of economic history are or political history is not satisfying any more. (...)

The main thing is that the people of Nepal have a history. It is a big thing to have a history, lots of communities don't have it. They don't have written records. Now Nepal is a nation in the making, or a state, because it has a definite history. Otherwise there is no difference between the Karens of Burma or the Gorkhali of Nepal. (...) You have developed in definite way, you have a definite historical experience behind you, that has made you what you (are). (...) So this colonial experience, now can you tell me where this Gorkhali swagger and bluster come from? Despising *madesis* and all this blabber: Nepal *bīr*, Gorkhali brave, this bluff and bluster and swagger come from? I think this comes from the Nepali colonial experience. So can you understand the people of Nepal and forget their colonial experience? You shouldn't.

Q: What do you mean by colonial experience?

A: Kumaon was a colony, a colony of the Gorkhali state. Gorkhali imperialism was in control of a subject population, the population has no voice in anything. You were geographically connected, physically connected, (...) for example Moscow controlled the central Asian republics as colonies, didn't it? In the former Soviet Union all the central Asian republics were virtual colonies of Moscow, despite the geographical proximity. So I should say there was definitely a Gorkhali Empire and that the Gorkhali Empire had acquired colonies. Maybe even the entire territory west of the Bheri river were colonies, Doti, Jumla, ...

Q: That's what I was wondering, then how do you distinguish between colonies and non-

colonies, was the East of Nepal also a colony?

A: Definitely, the Gorkhali heartland, as I think I have written in this draft, was the area between Dudh Kosi and Kali Gandaki, or Bheri. You can probably go up to Bheri, certainly up to Marsyandi. They didn't have provinces, they didn't have definite administrative units, you can see the difference very (clearly) ... Now the Limbus of Pallo Kirat, didn't they suffer colonial domination under the Gorkhali?

Q: You can call it that way...

A: At this stage I avoid making this definition. I concentrate on Kumaon. Because Kumaon, there are certain advantages. One is that there is definite space, there is a definite time-limit, twenty-five years, a definite geographical area. And to be more banal, when I write about the Gorkhali rule in Kumaon, which is now a part of India, I believe I will sell some copies of my book to Indians [laughs]. Well that's not serious of course. (...)

Q: You often emphasize the importance of history for understanding the present. Where do you see the major difficulties now in the new multi-party democracy.

A: The multi-party democracy seems to think that 1990 is the year one. Not only now, but even in 1959/60 when the Nepali Congress was in power they didn't know many things and they committed very serious mistakes.

Q: So what do you see as the major mistakes?

A: For example in 1959 they passed the *birā* abolition law, and they abolished something without abolishing it... They only taxed it. They divided *birā* into two categories: one belonging to big Ranas, what they called A category, and the B category owned by other people. What they did was simply to tax it, and let the owners remain in possession. But they called it abolition, which raised everybody's hackles. That confrontation was not necessary.

We had a long tradition for example of homestead taxes, now they abolished homestead taxes and reintroduced it under a

different name. They abolished *kīpaṭ* control of land and forests, and now they say community control of forests. I think one could build up on the traditional institutions, and not throw all of them over board.

Q: The same with the *guṭhi* system. I think now there are many people who realize that actually the *guṭhi* system was important for conserving the temples, but now it all has gone to the Guthi Corporation...

A: It has been not nationalized, stateized - or something like that. Well they could have build on... I hope you remember my small article. [During a seminar in 1990 "From Town to City and Beyond" Mr. egmi contributed a paper titled "Kathmandu City and the *guṭhi* system today".]

Q: I think it should be published, because this is really what many people feel. That came also out in the discussion during that seminar: that many people realized that for saving *bāhās* and all these different temples the *guṭhi* system was important.

A: Not only that. Creating new institutions. Do you realize that at present there is no law under which you can reinstate a *guṭhi*? Now suppose I want to create a *guṭhi*, there is no law under which I can register it. (...)

There is a registration of associations act which is completely different. There is one law in the Muluki Ain which provides for *duniyā guṭhi*, but no provision for registration officially. So this is another example of what could be done by building on traditional institutions. Now here Putali Sadak has become Ram Shah Path in the name of progress, whereas in London you can still visit Threadneedle Street. Nobody has changed the name. Nobody changed it to Queen Victoria Street or... Now poor Ram Shah has nothing to do with this Putali Sadak. So you don't (have to) kick out everything in the name of modernity. Change and reform are all right, but I don't think you can bring it in chunks of more than a bit at a time, ten percent for example. Major changes have always been disastrous. So in the same way a lack of knowledge of history and tradition.... You have studied in Eastern

Nepal, this *kīpaṭ*, now why do you kick out this *kīpaṭ* system of controlling forest resources? Can you substitute anything more effective for that? Why should you abolish *kīpaṭ* tenure? You write off the land tax for small holdings, you bring *kīpaṭ* land under tax system, then abolish the tax on certain categories of holdings, so what does it come to? An entire administrative effort gone waste.

Q: It is all in the process of changing now, up to the present day in the area where I was doing research, taxes are still collected by the old *jimmāwāl*. But now this will all be completely abolished, they will have to start from the scratch. They still have to rely somehow on the old documents.

A: Nobody is going to collect them. ... And then the cost of collection. Maybe it is cheaper to collect it through traditional channels.

Q: Yes, that's why they have so far still done it. But the idea now is to send someone from the district headquarters, who has no idea about the local situation.

A: This is what I mean by saying you have to study history and you have to have a sense of history in order to develop. Now, everybody wants to modernize and develop, but there is no magic formula which is applicable. (...) So that's why I don't want to change things. My only objective is to widen the frontiers of human knowledge in the field I am writing. And from that point of view I think I have been more or less successful. Nobody has studied these things before. I don't want to change the world. I can't.

Q: So all this brings me to a more personal question. How did you get interested in economic history?

A: I started in 1956-57, I was out of work, I had been dismissed by the government, I was in the Industry Department and one day I was dismissed. Then I met a Ford Foundation scholar who was doing some research on the agricultural system of Nepal and he gave me some documents to translate. These were mainly reports of the land reforms commission of 1952-53. I tried to translate

them and then I got interested in this thing, one thing led to another and in 1957 I started this thing. In 1960 I got some help from the University of California through Leo Rose, and in eight or nine years I wrote *Land Tenure and Taxation*. It's more than thirty years old now, but I am glad that the basic definitions I devised at that time are still valid. I don't have any reason to change them. (...) What you do sometimes doesn't have any logical reasons. It's only what you want to do. I have to explain maybe at some point why I want to do it, but that's not important, is it? You want to do it.

Q: What about this Himalayan Border Country Research Project?

A: That was Dr. Leo Rose in 1964 or 65. There was a controversy there; they had got a research grant from the Defense Department of the United States. There was a clamour that it was CIA funded. I said: look, I don't know, I get payed for doing research on Nepal, I don't care where the money comes from. But I didn't have to explain. And all of a sudden the project was discontinued in 1969.

Q: So you were involved as translator?

A: They gave me a grant, they never told me what to do. They said: You (can) do what you want to do. And I said I want to do land tenure and taxation in Nepal. It started with a one volume project, one became two, two became three, three became four. So they financed all that.

Q: Let me come to my last question: Which historic period do you find most fascinating? You have been writing on the early Shaha period of Prthvi Narayan Shah and on the

Rana period...

A: From my point of view the most interesting period is from 1768 to 1815. The Gorkhali Empire period. Because things happened. Things happened, achievements were made, despite lapses and failures, but something was created. And when you create it is not all the way a linear one-way process, you get setbacks also. Isn't it a surprising thing that the state of Gorkha became Nepal? Just think of it like a Nepali, as I do. They created it. You see, before that, I told you just a short time ago, there was no idea of a state. It was just the King's personal possessions, tribal organization. Look at the Limbus, they never went beyond the confines of their tribal organization. Now, ... a state formation is much more progressive than a tribal formation. It has a secular base. They never developed beyond tribes. But here Prthivi Narayan Shah comes and says: Look, we are *dhuṅgo*. [lit. 'stone', but here as a metaphor for the state.]

Q: That's the concept which made the difference...

A: It made a difference, this is *dhuṅgo* where everybody has equal rights. Now this concept is completely unknown in this part of the world. (...) I think I am the first person to have brought this out. I haven't seen it anywhere. Others just described what it did. But here it comes out: *dhuṅgo* is different from and beyond the king's personality. You are not loyal to the King but to the *dhuṅgo*, which is a very progressive idea and ideal. (...) And they did it. Now you have a state from the Mechi to the Mahakali, 54,000 square miles.