

REVIEW ARTICLE

Nepali Dictionaries - A New Contribution

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A Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali. Editor-in-chief Ruth Laila Schmidt, Co-editor Ballabh Mani Dahal. Delhi, Ratna Sagar, 1993. Pp. 50, 1005.

Foreign students of Nepali have traditionally been less well-served by lexicographers and grammarians than learners of 'larger' South Asian languages such as Hindi or Bengali. There are a number of Nepali-English and English-Nepali pocket dictionaries, but until the appearance in 1993 of *A Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali* (hereafter PDMN) the only thorough bi-lingual documentation of the Nepali lexicon was that published by Ralph L. Turner in 1931. This stupendous work of scholarship, described by Clark (1969: 257) as the 'supreme landmark in Nepali lexicography', was the forerunner to Turner's *magnum opus*, the *Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages*. Nonetheless, it has several disadvantages for the foreign learner of Nepali in the 1990s. First, it employs a spelling system that consistently opts for the short (*hrasva*) vowel. Turner explained this system by stating, '[o]f late years there has been a certain tendency to write the short forms in the interior of words, the long when they are final. But there is no justification for such a practice. And since there is no distinction in pronunciation I have uniformly used the short forms' (1931: xvii). Although this had the merit of being consistent, whereas modern Nepali spelling is not always a faithful representation of pronunciation (a classic example is the word *didī*, 'elder sister', in which both vowels are pronounced 'long'), it was in some regards wrongheaded. For instance, the pronunciation of the first vowel in *binā*, 'without', is definitely short, whereas in *bīṇā*, 'lute', it is long. Similarly the *u* in *unī*, 'he/she', tends to be pronounced as a short vowel, while in *ūnī*, 'woolen', it is somewhat longer, despite Turner's claims to the contrary (1931: xvii). On the basis of pronunciation, Turner dispensed with the aspirate letters *ṛha* and *rha*, spelled *vidyā bidyā, sātoṣ santok, kṛpā kirpā* and so on. Unfortunately, not all of these conventions, as Clark (1969: 257) was later to observe, 'commended themselves to native lexicographers', and the modern spelling system, now standardised, at least in theory, diverges strongly from Turner's in many respects. The second shortcoming of Turner's dictionary is the absence from it of the horde of neologisms and Sanskrit loans that have entered the language at every level over the past sixty-four years, partly as a result of *bikās* ('bloom; blooming, expanding, development' (Turner 1931: 567); 'development, progress, expansion' (PDMN: 446)). Turner seems not to have made recourse to textual sources for his vocabulary, reflecting perhaps the British perception of Nepali then as the spoken language of Gurkha

soldiers - and, to be fair, it must be remembered that in 1931 modern Nepali literature had yet to produce its first major works. As far as dictionaries were concerned, therefore (and I write from experience), one had to employ supplements to Turner when translating modern literary Nepali, and also had often to search through Turner to find words that had been spelled in what now seems a somewhat eccentric manner. The most useful supplements were Chaturvedi and Tiwari's Hindi-English Dictionary (4th edn. 1978) for 'modern' vocabulary, much of which (dare I say it?) Nepali shares with Hindi, and the mono-lingual dictionary published by the Royal Nepal Academy in B.S. 2040 (1983-4). Needless to say, it takes some years to become sufficiently well-versed in Nepali to use the latter tome, and since it does not give English synonyms for words such as the names of the huge variety of plants, trees etc. that Nepali poets in particular mention with depressing (for the translator) regularity, one must also refer to other miscellaneous works (e.g. Keshab Shrestha [ed.], 1979, 1984) on occasion. As a consequence, the foreign translator of Nepali literature has to date required a large desk.

The appearance of this new dictionary is a major event in the development of Nepali lexicography. The dictionary is the product of seven years of cooperation between American and Nepali scholars. The 15-member editorial team was headed by Ruth Laila Schmidt (editor-in-chief) and Ballabh Mani Dahal (co-editor). They are to be thanked and congratulated. First, they are to be thanked for the lengthy (37-page) introduction to the Dictionary. This presents an overview of the history of Nepali, and a skeleton grammar that is perhaps the most useful short summary currently available. Before discussing the grammar, it should perhaps be pointed out that Nepali does not 'function as a medium of television' or as a 'medium of instruction' in Bhutan (PDMN: x). Bhutan is rather famously TV-free, and Nepali was removed from its schools' curriculum some five years ago.

Two of the main problems one faces when one describes or teaches Nepali are (1) the difference between the grammar of the literary language and educated speech on the one hand and that of the everyday language of the villages and streets on the other; and (2) the difference between the spelling and pronunciation of certain words. I myself have often faced the former problem while teaching Nepali from the Matthews course (1984) to students already equipped with some knowledge of Nepali as spoken in village contexts. There is a strong tendency among such students to regard grammatical niceties such as verbal concord with regard to number or gender, or the need for inflected 'oblique' case endings before postpositions, as high-caste urban affectations. Throughout the PDMN, therefore, it is important that variant usages are noted, e.g. it is acknowledged that *biraaloko sikaar musaa*, in which *biraalo*, 'cat', is nominative, means the same as *biraalaako sikaar musaa*, in which *biraalaa* is oblique; that the noun *keTi*, 'girl' may be qualified by both *saano* and *saani*, 'small'; and that a plural subject, though it should strictly take plural verbal concord (e.g. *chan*) may often take the singular (*cha*).

The pronunciations provided in the dictionary are 'those found in the aggregate educated speech of Kathmandu and its environs' (xxx); the editors note that the 'final short -a is usually not pronounced in modern Nepali, but is

retained after clusters of two or more consonants, and in certain grammatical forms' (xxx). I am not fully convinced by the argument that retention of the final -a 'sometimes functions as a locative marker' (xxx). It is suggested that *ghar* means 'house, home', and that *ghara* means 'at home', whereas in my experience a word such as *ghar* is more commonly invested with a locative function through emphasis, i.e. *gharai*. On the other hand, the formalisation of the status of the high honorific grade is particularly welcome, especially as the extent to which *hajur* is used nowadays as an alternative to *tapāī* is not wholly evident from the Matthews course. It might have been helpful to distinguish between the heavily-used *hajur* and the forms *mausuph* and *sarkār*, however, since use of the latter is restricted entirely to royal contexts, and these pronouns therefore remain somewhat esoteric for the average foreign learner, who is usually of more lowly birth! Nonetheless, the doubt expressed (PDMN: xv) about the symmetrical application 'across the board' of honorific gradations is an important point. All schemes to date have lumped the second person *tā* and the third person *u/yo/tyo* together as 'least honorific'. 'However, *tā* is often a positive indicator of the addressee's low social rank, while *u/yo/tyo* tend to be negative indicators — neutral forms used when the speaker does not need, for one reason or another, to refer to someone deferentially' (PDMN: xv). The system of honorific grades can be explained in terms of politeness or deference, but explanations also need to take account of the physical proximity, absence or presence of the person referred to (in the third person), and of levels of intimacy or formality (in the second). In second person contexts, low grade pronouns can be used to express trust as well as contempt.

Occasionally, the general clarity of the PDMN's grammatical analysis is blurred by surprising slips: *uniharū khaanchan* means 'they eat', not 's/he eats' (xvi), and *biraalo* is nominative, not oblique (xxvii). The analysis of verb structure departs a little from the scheme established by T.W. Clark (1977) and adopted by Matthews (1984). Clark identified verb 'bases' (the 'primary base' being the first infinitive minus the -*nu* suffix) and a range of suffixes, e.g. *cha*, *chan*, *chin* etc. in the simple indefinite tense. Here, however, -*an* and -*in* are defined as suffixes, and the Clark/Matthews scheme is dispensed with. I am not sure that the new scheme would be helpful to foreign learners if it were adopted in a primer. Similarly, I have difficulty with the definition of -*ro* (in *mero*, 'my', *tero*, 'your', etc.) and -*no* (in *aaphno*, 'one's own') as suffixes, since *me* and *te* and, arguably, *aaph* (which does appear as *aaphu* or, emphasised, as *aaphai*) do not occur independently.

The 7,000 entries in the Nepali-English section are detailed and very helpful indeed. Each Devanāgarī headword is followed by a transliteration, a representation of the pronunciation in cases where this differs from the spelling, and a definition. In addition, the dictionary often provides copious illustrations of usage, compounds in sequences (e.g. under *kaama* [pr. kaam] we find *kaama aaunu*, *kaama garnu*, *kaama parnu* etc.), notes, references to synonyms (e.g. under *kaama* we are given *kartabya*, *jaagira*, *jībikaa*, *pesaa*, *rojagaara*), etc. The transliteration system is similar to that employed by Karki and Shrestha (1988): retroflex characters are represented by upper case

letters, and long vowels by double vowels (e.g. 'ii' instead of 'i'). While this provides welcome relief from the upside-down 'e's of the Matthews course, and is as reliable and clear a guide to pronunciation as any other, it seems to be a purely Nepali innovation that will probably not be welcomed by Indological purists. (Turner in his introduction [1931: xvii] goes to great lengths to justify spelling conventions 'that the Sanskrit-educated reader will find repugnant', and the tastes and preferences of Sanskritists have not changed much since).

The Nepali-English section fills 674 pages and is followed by a 331-page English-Nepali index which provides summary definitions. Obviously, users requiring more detail on a particular Nepali word can readily cross-refer between the two sections. To assess the usefulness and usability of the Dictionary, I tested it against two very short passages from well known Nepali prose texts. These were the opening sentences of (1) Biśweśwar Prasād Koirālā's short story *Sipāhī* and (2) Devkotā's essay *Āṣāṅko Panda*:

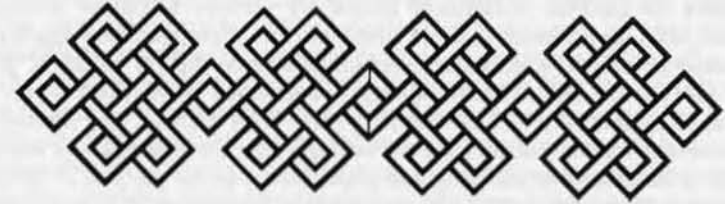
(1) pahaaDko baaTo eklai hiDn gaahaaro parcha. maile dui-tiin dinko yastai baaToma euTaa sipaahiilaaii phelaa paarē, jasle mero yaatraa dherai sugam paaryo. (It is hard to walk a mountain path alone. On a two- or three-day journey of this kind I met a soldier who made my journey very easy).

(2) nepaalmaa khuṣiyaalii cha. hṛdayale navaagata paahunaako premapuurbaka svaagata garirahecha. (In Nepal there is happiness. The heart is affording the newly-arrived guest a welcome full of love).

The two texts are written in different registers. The first is overtly colloquial, the second more flowery and Sanskritised. As expected, all of the vocabulary of the first extract, with the exception of the word *sugam* (defined as 'easy of access, easily traversed ...' in Turner 1931: 612), was present in the dictionary, with many useful notes on usage. Admittedly, *gaahaaro* is a non-standard spelling of *gaahro* that does not appear, while the emphatic form *eklai* appears as a subheading under *eklo*, 'alone'. Also, the compound *sajilo parnu* is explained under *sajilo*, 'easy', but unfortunately *gaahro parnu* does not appear under *gaahro*, 'difficult'. Under *euTaa* there is a very useful note, explaining that *euTaa* 'very occasionally modifies a noun denoting a human being'. Thus, it appears that the dictionary would serve as a more than adequate tool for a student who wished to decipher the meaning of a standard modern prose text. It performed slightly less well in relation to the second extract. *khuṣii*, 'happy' appears, but not *khuṣiyaalii*, 'happiness', while the words *navaagata* and *premapuurbaka*, being Sanskrit-derived compounds, do not appear (although there is of course an entry for *prema*, 'love'). Nonetheless, it would still be possible for an intelligent foreign learner to reconstruct at least the gist of these two sentences with the aid of this dictionary. The Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali deserves to become a standard text for foreign learners of the language, and will take up a prominent position on the desks of translators too, though those who obstinately persist in tackling texts written in poetic or highly technical language will now need even larger tables.

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BOOK REVIEW

Lebensraum Nepal. Eine Entwicklungsgeographie. Wolf Donner, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde*, 226. Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde 1994, 728 p., 142 Fig., 62 Tab..

For over a generation, German-speaking scholars working on Nepal have been referring to Wolf Donner's book, *Nepal - Raum, Mensch und Wirtschaft*, which appeared in 1972. This year, the author published a new version of his earlier study under the title "Lebensraum Nepal. Eine Entwicklungsgeographie" (Life-Space Nepal. A Development Geography). It is still the most exhaustive development geography of Nepal published in the German language. The new version has of course the advantage of being written by an author who has known Nepal thoroughly since the early 60s, and who consequently has the ability to overview and grasp the country's complex development process over the last three decades. Like his first work, Donner bases this study on a great variety of sources, Nepalese and foreign, and on publications easily accessible to a wider audience, as well as on numerous documents opened in the first place to concerned administrators and