

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF AN INTELLECTUAL PURSUIT

Towards a History of the Historical Journal Pūrṇimā

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There are at present two issues, namely numbers 89 and 90, of the quarterly *Pūrṇimā* in press. Neither of them will be ready for release before the first two months of 1996 are over. The journal's first number was published in the first quarter of Vikramasambat 2021, which is equivalent to the second quarter of 1964. Thus by the end of 1995 the 127th number ought to have been on the market. This means that the journal is nine years and nine months behind schedule. Why so ?

Pūrṇimā was founded by ten people, one teacher and nine of his students, whom he trained collectively as well as individually, for the kind of research published in it. Articles from outside have never been solicited and all the papers published in it are written by its founding members. By 1970, however, five members had left the journal, one by one, and another died in 1983. Now four people remain to carry on. The journal is thus seriously undermanned, and it is not surprising that its publication should have fallen so much behind schedule.

The *Pūrṇimā* group, functioning formally as the *Samśodhana-maṇḍala*, has never sought institutional support and has always performed its job with missionary zeal. Members have contributed their own money, earned by working elsewhere, not only for their research, but also for the publication of *Pūrṇimā*. The monetary support from its own members, both for research and publication, continues to be vital for the survival of *Pūrṇimā*, as the only other source of income, revenue from the journal sales, has never been sufficient. Gradually this voluntary spirit has ebbed, as reflected in the alarming diminution of the number of *Samśodhana-maṇḍala* members.

The *Maṇḍala* may be said to have germinated in 1938, when Naya Raj Pant returned to Kathmandu from Varanasi, not only with a first-class Master's degree in *jyautiṣa* (astronomy), but also with an

increasing disenchantment with the knowledge he had been able to receive in the famous college, which was probably without equal in the field of Sanskrit learning.

The British rulers in India, clearly seeing the advantage of ruling the Hindus according to their own laws and customs, encouraged a number of Englishmen to study Sanskrit, the main vehicle of Indian thinking for thousands of years. The British government in India needed a continuous flow of native Sanskritists to assist English scholars in acquiring their knowledge. In addition, it wanted to conciliate its Hindu subjects by patronising their learning and giving them an opportunity to study their own *śāstra*-s at public expense. To fulfil these goals, it established Sanskrit colleges in different parts of India. The Banaras college, where Naya Raj Pant was educated, was the first of its kind, having been established in 1791 through the efforts of Jonathan Duncan, then British resident in the court of Banaras, with the same intention of patronising and institutionalising Sanskrit learning towards furthering political aims.

Considering that Banaras College was founded for the reasons stated, it is not surprising that it made little effort to promote Sanskrit in the way with which Sanskrit-educated intellectuals were traditionally familiar. A serious departure from the traditional standards of scholarship was the introduction of regular examinations in the college, in order primarily to determine whether or not a student had attained a certain minimum level of academic achievement. Traditional scholarship required one to maintain high level of knowledge acquired as a student throughout one's active life. Following the new system, however, the student, having once been conferred a degree of permanent value, felt no need to maintain the standards of scholarship so very vital for the growth of knowledge and higher pursuits.

Naya Raj Pant's disenchantment led him to the realisation that traditional scholarship, if properly combined with a critical approach, would offer a better chance of success in Sanskrit studies. And thus he took up the task of teaching young students in his own way, which aimed at a revival of the ancient practice of thoroughly mastering texts as a basis for research along modern lines. He did not encourage his students to earn an academic degree, and engaged them year after year

in an unparalleled pursuit of knowledge. Some of them, however, abandoned their studies with him and opted for a career.

Research in any field by anyone in Nepal was ruthlessly discouraged by the Rana government. At best, a Nepalese scholar might confine his research to a safely guarded hobby or act as an assistant or informant to a foreign scholar. Strict censorship was enforced, and to publish a work with a critical approach was virtually impossible. Such being the case, Naya Raj Pant could not publish much of either his creative writings or his scientific works, both of which he produced prolifically. However, the advent of democracy in 1951 provided a favourable opportunity to publish what he wanted.

Prudent plans were made to exploit this opportunity. In 1939, he had submitted a longish paper on the dynastic history of the Mallas of the Kathmandu Valley to the only literary magazine in Nepal. The paper, based on the Malla inscriptions scattered throughout the cities of the Kathmandu Valley (most of them as yet unpublished), revealed many an error in the famous 19th-century *Vaṃśāvalī*, edited by Daniel Wright and circulated under the title *History of Nepal*, and several succeeding publications more or less based on the same *Vaṃśāvalī*. The paper criticised the work of an Englishman, and the editor of the magazine did not have enough courage to publish it.

In 1947, Naya Raj Pant simply incorporated all essential points of his research conducted thus far - without substantiating or criticising earlier writers - into a small textbook which he wrote for students appearing for the graduation examination. This text was published jointly with a brother of one of the right-hand men of the Rana prime minister. He thus did not go beyond presenting his new findings in an unassuming way. At the same time, he was diligently searching for an appropriate medium through which he could authenticate his findings by disproving earlier writings. As he was established already as a versatile scholar in several fields of Sanskrit studies and was earning his livelihood by teaching in a college, it was perhaps not imperative for him to add a new accolade through new publications as there were his students, who were assiduously mastering several branches of Sanskrit studies under his strict supervision. Naya Raj Pant thus encouraged his students to publish the new findings, reasoning that it would in the long

run bring them deserved recognition. Since there were no finances for printing, he decided to publish in instalments in the form of pamphlets, the cost of which would not be too difficult for the students to bear.

Thus the first pamphlet, put out by three students and selling for six *paisā*, was released on 5 *Āśvina* 2009, i.e. 20 September 1952. In it a refutation with proof was made of an error which confused a son with his father and vice versa within the dynasty of the Kathmandu Mallas, as contained in Nepali-language history books that blindly followed Wright.

This was followed by another pamphlet, which was released exactly twelve days later and sold for the same price. It attempted to make the abstruse contents of Kauṭalya's *Arthaśāstra* more comprehensible by applying them to examples occurring in history. It was published by a group of three advanced students.

The first issue was entitled *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana*, and the second *Kauṭaliya arthaśāstrako aītihāsika vyākhyā*. These may be translated as "Correction of [Errors in] Historical Writings" and "A Historical Gloss on the *Kauṭaliya Arthaśāstra*" respectively. As both bore a number and subtitle, it was clear that they were meant to inaugurate a series of many more such publications.

Fourteen weeks passed between the publication of the second pamphlet and a thicker pamphlet of a similar nature by the same group that published the earlier one. No other publication appeared for thirteen months. The fourth one was also by the same advanced group which had already published two issues on the *Arthaśāstra*. This time they issued a second *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana*, in which they refuted some factual errors in a textbook written by one of the two well-known teachers of history who was permitted to lecture at the college level (Nepal did not have a university at that time).

For two years and one month pamphlets, of all sizes, or even leaflets, were released, thirty-six in number, in order to correct errors in historical publications. During this period, the job of publication was not only shared by the advanced students, but also by younger ones, each of whom was a direct student not of Naya Raj Pant but of his three advanced students. Altogether there were twenty-one persons involved

in these issues of *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana*.

In addition, Naya Raj Pant's direct and indirect students issued many other pamphlets that deal with Nepalese history, Sanskrit grammar, the Nepalese calendar, Sanskrit textbooks and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Meanwhile, two of the most advanced students were appointed co-editors of a short-lived Sanskrit monthly devoted to the epigraphy, diplomacy and manuscriptology of Nepal. In its previous issues it had mainly carried papers either by Naya Raj Pant and his group or by a scholarly yogi of the Kanphatta order who initiated the journal. Moreover, two more substantial works, containing source materials for a history of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Nepal, were accepted for publication during this period by a well-endowed institution patronised by a Rana.

However, there was a profound change, at least quantitatively, during this period in the school of Naya Raj Pant. One of the three advanced students, who hailed from outside the Kathmandu Valley, left for home for good following the completion of his studies, and twelve other students of intermediate level, who had already started publishing, discontinued theirs. Now there were only eight of the original 21 *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* members left, together with a few minors uncertain of their future prospects.

All these pamphlets with criticism were based on sound documentary evidence, and were pieces of high scholarship. However, the language employed in them might often offend the person toward whose work was criticised, and at the same time the general public might misread them as sensational pieces of writing. In truth, they were intended neither to offend nor to create a sensation. On the contrary, they were inspired by the Indic mode of criticism, with which in general not even the educated class was familiar. Nevertheless, this movement attracted a lot of popular attention and became instrumental in calling into serious question the reputation of the established names in Nepalese historiography. At the same time, it indirectly exposed the ineptitude of the governmentally approved education system.

The work of the group helped to highlight various aspects of Nepalese history and gave fresh impetus to the reconstruction of a correct and complete history of Nepal. The greatest contribution of this

group was that it inspired its countrymen with the idea that, given proper education, they could carry out research competently enough on their own; gone were the days of history books that were mere summaries of foreign writings of long ago.

Because this rectification campaign dented the prestige of facile scholars, the latter were from the start wary, and eventually became implacable foes of the group. Being entrenched in high positions, they exerted their utmost to thwart its advancement. The result was that most of the students felt harassed and abandoned their work, thus reducing the group to a bare minimum.

The change in situation led Naya Raj Pant to adopt a new strategy. Most of the publications which had appeared up until then were the results of his own research that had been accumulating for decades. Now it was decided that it was the job of the students themselves to collect documents. Accordingly the *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* members started a weekly tour around the Kathmandu Valley and its periphery in order to discover inscriptions which had gone unnoticed by their teacher. As stated earlier, the undergraduate-level students also took part in the rectification of factual errors in history books, but most of them left the school when harsh measures were initiated by antagonists. Thus Naya Raj Pant was forced to relieve his less mature students of their former responsibility, and instead develop a course so as to enable them to handle them to handle documents with greater ease. The *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* members busied themselves with collecting new materials and picking up the diverse skills necessary to interpret them. They passed almost one year in their endeavours, and then a new pamphlet appeared, followed by then others published during a period spanning 37 months. The newer issues of *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* concentrate more on opening up new vistas than merely correcting errors in popular books.

On the first day of Vikramasamvat 2018 (13 April 1961) the *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* members formed themselves into the *Saṃśodhana-maṇḍala* and started an epigraphical quarterly named *Abhilekhasaṃgraha* for bringing out hitherto unpublished inscriptions, most of which were discovered by them during the weekly tours they had been conducted for some years. Though they originally planned to

furnish all texts with a translation and historical commentary, they were forced to publish the bare text so as to ensure that all new findings would be in their own name, since the prospect of their findings being linked was great. Once the first issue was out, it served as a precedent for the succeeding ones. *Abhilekhasaṃgraha* continued for three consecutive years, with each issue containing the texts of twelve inscriptions and accompanied by a preface of varying length by Naya Raj Pant. During these three years, the group also produced many more pamphlets, as well as three books concerning Nepalese history and culture.

In 1964 *Abhilekhasaṃgraha* was replaced by the quarterly *Pūrṇimā*, in which eight *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* members joined with a newly trained student and their teacher to publish periodic results of their research. The starting up of *Pūrṇimā* enabled them to disseminate this research on a much more regular basis and in the case of Naya Raj Pant, his ideas and methodology as well. In addition, the period witnessed the publication of many more independent works, running to thousands of pages.

In summary, everything published during the past 43 years by the *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* and its successors amounts to a storehouse of knowledge that sheds light not only on Nepalese history, but also on the history of Indic mathematics and astronomy.

In order to be convinced of the great strides Nepalese historiography has made, one may simply choose any popular book on Nepalese history published during the 1950's and compare it with a similar book published later. Much of the credit for this progress doubtlessly goes to the *Itihāsa-saṃśodhana* group, if a fair appraisal is made.

Although many of the hard facts derived from the group's historical research have passed into the common fund of knowledge, their original writings continue to deserve careful study, as those who quote their findings, with or without acknowledgement, are more interested in mere facts, and resultantly pass over many things which they may find irrelevant. As far as the contribution towards the history of Indic mathematics and astronomy is concerned, it hardly has attracted anyone's attention.

This still ongoing research goes practically unnoticed outside Nepal, mainly owing to the language barrier, the research having been published in the Nepali language. It has been more than two years since a supplement to *Pūrṇimā* appeared in English, entitled *Ādarśa*, as a first step taken toward the dissemination of research of the *Samśodhana-maṇḍala* to a wider audience. As *Ādarśa* is a completely voluntary endeavour of one of the remaining members of the same group, its prospects are much bleaker than *Pūrṇimā*s.

Before closing, I would like to say something about the last five issues. These issues, comprising more than three hundred pages, were published over a span of two and a half years.

The earliest, number 84, contains three articles. One of them is devoted to a portion of the seventh century historical romance *Harṣacarita*, here presented in the original, but with the figures of speech dropped, which are interesting for philologists and rhetoricians but not for historians.

The second, occupying a greater part of this number, is the last instalment of a hitherto unpublished history of Nepal by the pioneer historian Baburam Acharya (1888-1972), which he wrote over two years from 1949 to 1951, its serialisation having started in *Pūrṇimā*, n^o.31, published in 1974.

A new serial was started in the same issue, namely the publication of a mass of Newar deeds, hitherto unnoticed, in which reference is made to Brahmins. In the second issue of *Pūrṇimā*, which was published in the third quarter of 1964, Naya Raj Pant wrote a paper in which he convincingly demonstrated that the caste system was not introduced by the fourteenth century king Sthitirāja Malla, as the nineteenth century *Vamśāvali*-s have credited him with, but had existed long before, to which fact even the earliest documents bear witness. In the succeeding years, one of the *Itihāsa-samśodhana*. members became more involved in the history of the caste system in Nepal and started scribbling notes whenever he came across references to it. With the passage of time, those notes grew into two independent papers, one about the Nepali-speaking community in the Newar kingdoms, and the other about the Newari-speaking Brahmins known formally as Rājopādhyāya and, in common parlance, as Dyaubhājū. Later on he became associated with

the German Research council, and this opportunity enabled him to go through thousands of Newar-period deeds executed on narrow strips of palm leaves. This untapped source has necessitated a revision of both papers, and this he is currently doing. Thinking that it would be prudent to publish these hitherto unpublished documents independently rather than including them in his footnotes, he started serialising, in *Pūrṇimā*, all unpublished deeds concerning Brahmins, exactly 240 in number and covering a period of nearly four and a quarter centuries. He has presented them in chronological order, and also referred to those deeds which have already been published. Those documents when studied revealed that in the Newar kingdoms there were, besides the local Dyaubhājū, not only the Brahmins from Tirhut and South India, but also the Gayāwār and Bengalese from the plains and the Nepali-speaking Purbiyā, Kumāi and Jaisī as well.

The serialisation of documents concerning Brahmins in the Newar kingdoms coincides with a movement away from the received view in Nepal that largely blames the Brahmins for being instrumental in the suppression of ethnic communities. These days two words, *bāhundbād* and *janajāti*-s, are frequently used to denote the traditional structure and the ethnic communities respectively, and those Newars who view themselves as one of the ethnic communities are no less vocal than others in opposing *bāhundbād*.

Here I do not wish to enter into the question whether the Brahmins were significantly engaged in suppressing *janajāti*-s or not, but I cannot help pointing out that Newars have, since the beginning of their recorded history, been a community divided into many castes and identifiable as a linguistic community to the same degree as Nepali-speaking Parbates, whom Newars call Khay, which means Khas.

Number 85 of *Pūrṇimā* contains ten articles. One is the continuation of the deeds concerning Brahmins and occupies the larger part of the issue. Two others present the colophons of two hitherto unnoticed Sanskrit manuscripts, copied in Nepālasamvat 175 and 536, which are useful for the reconstruction of dynastic history, and the manuscript themselves for the history of the transmission of the texts involved. Another two are directed toward the identification of two Buddhist temples in Kathmandu and rectify errors by John K. Locke

and Mary Slusser. In another paper are presented the texts of two previously unpublished lāl mohar-s of Prithvinarayan Shah.

There are five articles in number 86, a considerable portion of which is devoted to the deeds concerning Brahmins. One of the papers contains the text together with a translation of and comments on a deed, dated Nepālasamvat 485, that is the first document discovered executed by a king following the ones issued by the Licchavi Jayadeva II more than six centuries earlier.

Number 87 has twelve articles. One of them analyses the strategy of loyalty adopted by Jung Bahadur, the de facto ruler, towards his overlord, the de jure Shah king. Another demonstrates that the Newar festivals Pāśā Cahre and Goḍe jātrā were in earlier times pan-Indian ones, even as Indra Jātrā is recognised to have been.

These two articles occupy the major part of the issue. There is an interesting extract in the same issue from the manuscript of a text attributed to the Shah king Surendra. This text deals with the traditional Hindu polity called *rājanīti* but, unlike its numerous predecessors, is written in very bad Sanskrit.

Number 88 opens with the deeds concerning Brahmins and, as usual, these constitute the major part of the issue. In addition, several documents are presented which shed light in one way or another on the Rana period in Nepal.

