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King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, Monarchs For 13 Million Hindus, Meet President Ronald Reagan

Leaving their Royal Palace and the peaceful Himalayan mountainscape of Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, King Birendra and his Queen, Aishwarya, embarked on an important state visit to the United States. They rule over the world's second largest Hindu population, 13 million, in a nation the size of Iowa (54,000 sq. miles). Half way around the globe, in Washington, D.C., inside the colonial halls of the White House, His Majesty sat with another powerful man - President Ronald Reagan. Like a king of old, the dignified but youthful monarch, 38, a little more than half the age of the President, spoke of matters most dear to his people. Foremost were continued and increased U.S. aid to 15 million dollars over the next five years for a subsistence economy, and U.S. endorsement to make Nepal a Zone of Peace. "Substantive talks" with President Reagan, Vice-President Bush, and a number of cabinet members were favorable for both proposals.

From the Christian or Islamic world perspective, nothing momentous had happened. But looked at from another angle, the absolute ruler from the only Hindu kingdom in the world had made his first formal visit to the West; had accomplished his mission; had come in his native Hindu garb and met with the heads of the most influential and militarily powerful nation in the world; without shyness, without giving up his Hindu-ness, without compromising the shelter that he so generously provides the Hindu religion in his land.

Though dwarfed by the veritable empires of China, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., Nepal's strategic position between India and China is meaningful: a major motive for the interest of the U.S., always wary of the unpredictable Chinese communists. This position could, King Birendra surely realizes, put an end to the relative isolation and cultural purity that his nation now enjoys largely because of its geography. His northern neighbor, Tibet, the former great Buddhist holy land, was, after all, swallowed up, many of its priests killed and an ancient way of life overrun by a ruthless Chinese army. The "King" of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, is still exiled in India, a man without a country.

King Birendra warned of the dangers of transplanting Western political institutions in illiterate developing countries, and cautioned against forsaking indigenous cultural values and beliefs "We must realize that there is an inseparable relationship between the culture of a country and the ideology it follows. The time, therefore, has come for the world to appreciate the link of the present with the past." These poignant words were spoken by His Majesty in an address given at the University of California Berkeley, following his receipt of the U.C. Berkeley Medal of Honor award. He is only the third person ever to receive the medal, joining queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and former Italian Prime Minister, Giovanni Spadolini.

For centuries, until after W.W.II, the feudal monarchy of Nepal was under a strict isolationist policy. Now King Birendra is approaching the great powers with requests for help, and with cautions to leave Nepal's internal affairs alone. Recognition of Nepal as a non-aligned Zone of Peace has been His Majesty's wish since his coronation in 1975. At U.C. Berkeley he said he hopes that by pledging non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, by peacefully resolving all conflicts between Nepal and other countries and by not entering into any military alliances nor allowing the establishment of any foreign military bases on Nepalese soil, his mountain kingdom will be better able to concentrate its resources on effecting economic and social reforms.

King Birendra's policy regarding the promotion of Hinduism follows this same internal integrity and external non-interference ideal. A Nepal foreign secretary said that the King was not actively engaged in promoting Hinduism in other countries, but Nepal is protecting Hinduism within its own borders. Any well-informed Christian missionary could tell you that, and those who have tried to proselytize in Nepal for the purpose of converting Hindus to their faith have been strongly "discouraged;" even fined and incarcerated, some sources say. Converting anyone in Nepal is against the law, confirmed Washington, D.C., Nepalese Embassy attache, Mr. Kartha. "We don't want them to change the religion of the people here. There are only two religions in Nepal, Hinduism and Buddhism and they are very close." There are no churches, no mosques, no evangelists, no talk of Christ in the schools, no fear of damnation in Nepal - nothing but the Hindu mind-flow, as in ancient days, there and in India, with a minority of Buddhists in a cooperative blend of similar thinking and culture. Yes, Hinduism is protected by law in the Kingdom of Nepal. Though a Saivite himself, the King is supportive of all denominations of Hinduism, the foreign secretary added.

An anachronism, a relic from bygone days of brave heroes who were, above all, faithful to dharma? Why not? King Birendra, educated at Harvard, unassuming,

refined, speaking clearly and with regal authority, is certainly a symbol for Hindus of the strength that they need and the faith they may take pride in. Around the world, Hindus are compromising their religion, and even giving it up, for political motives, for economic advantage, for social acceptance in the Christian or Muslim community and for other reasons. Afraid of the Christians, petrified of the Muslims, embarrassed by lack of knowledge of their own faith and gullible to negative propaganda against it, many Hindus are going down with the rise of technology. Not King Birendra. Not in Nepal.

He told the U.C. Berkeley gathering, at the end of his two-week, eight-city tour, "Until recently Nepal had been living almost in the Middle Ages. We had everything that people in medieval times had lived with - peace and contentment on the one hand, and illiteracy[70%] and epidemics on the other." His father, King Mahendra, led a revolution in 1950 which reestablished the royal family. Now King Birendra, who ascended the throne in 1972 after his father's death, hopes to bring significant improvements, but not at the cost of that peace and contentment. The key to Nepal's future, he believes, lies in tapping the power of the nation's many rivers, which, tumbling out of the mountains, have carved wide valleys and gorges in places, thousands of feet deep. Properly harnessed, the rivers would provide abundant water for irrigation to bolster agriculture (90% of the 15 million population are farmers), and hydroelectric power sufficient to provide not only for Nepal's needs, but a surplus for "exportation" to northern India.

Any sensitive visitor to Nepal would understand the treasures at state, despite all poverty: snow-capped Himalayas, lush, verdant valleys, millions of acres of forest, a simple village life and occasional small market centers, and above all a feeling of peace and social harmony which, one could safely assume, is largely due to the unity of belief among all the land's people. A full 90% of the Nepalese are Hindu and 9% are Buddhists. The themes of most artistic works are religious, depicting the lives of Gods, saints and heroes; the relationship of man to society and to universe are expounded in sculpture, architecture and drama. In Kathmandu Valley, 2,500 temples and shrines display the skill and highly developed aesthetic sense of Newar artisans, depicting the lives of Gods, saints and heroes. There is something very special about Nepal, worth preserving.

President Reagan's words in a toast to His Majesty at the December 7th White House dinner, at which representatives from 35 other nations joined him in honoring the King, bespeak a promising future for Nepal: "Through the Zone of Peace concept, you're seeking to ensure that your country's future will not be held back by using scarce resources for military purposes. Your innovative approach

towards peace and development could be a foundation for progress through the region. We wish you success." Lifting his kingdom out of the Middle Ages may be just the challenge King Birendra was born for, and with two bright sons behind him, succession to the royal throne is safely assured.