Tragedy in Nepal Royal Family Massacred
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The only Hindu kingdom in the world faces an unstable future as the violent death of King Birendra and his family rock the nation

Word spread early in the morning on June 2, 2001, that something very wrong had happened a few hours earlier at Narayanhiti Royal Palace in central Kathmandu. Citizens turned quickly to BBC and CNN television and learned that at 9:15 pm the previous evening nearly the entire royal family of His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev had died in a hail of gunfire, including his wife, his youngest son and his daughter. It would be days before the Nepalese began to accept that this heinous crime had been carried out by none other than the King's oldest son,

Crown Prince Dipendra Bir Shah, who lay in a comma for two days before dying of a self-inflicted gunshot. The killings occurred at a once-a-month Friday evening dinner at the palace, and were blamed on a dispute between Dipendra and his parents over his choice of a bride.

The implausible scenario "like an American high school rampage," said one Nepalese was

compounded by the reverence held for the King, who is regarded as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. In his capacity as king, Birendra was an integral part of Hindu religion not only in Nepal, but also in India, where he held unique rights to enter the inner sanctum of the Jagannath temple in Puri, the Meenakshi temple in Madurai and the Rameshwaram temple at India's Southern tip, and personally worship the God or Goddess. These rights at three of the world's most important temples apparently date back centuries to the time when the kings of Nepal were close to kingdoms in India.

One man said it reminded him of only two incidents in history, the 1846 Kot massacre in Nepal itself an event karmically related to the current tragedy, and the 1918 murder of Russia's ruling Romanov family, including Czar Nicholas II, Czarina Alexandra, their four daughters Olga, Tatiana, Marie and Anastasia and the young hemophiliac Czareivich Alexei.

Citizens awaited the morning reports on Radio Nepal, Nepal TV and other of the country's media. But nothing was forthcoming, not even the normal news reports, only the playing of mourning music. It was through the foreign media alone that news of the

killing of royal family members arrived. Amidst confusions all around, the 125-member Raj Parishad, or State Council, which determines the succession issue, officially announced in the afternoon the death of the King, the Queen and other royal family members.

They were in a difficult constitutional position. Under the rules of succession, they had no choice but to declare Dipendra the new King, even though they knew him to be the murderer, and even though he lay in a coma with little likelihood of recovery. In light of his injuries, they appointed Prince Gyanendra, King Birendra's younger brother, as Regent of the Kingdom of Nepal.

That did not end their difficulties, as the constitution also forbade any criticism of the King, which would include charging him with the murders. This led to the bizarre explanation that the killings had been "an accidental shooting."

The Council announced that thecremation of the deceased royal family members, including the King and Queen, would take place in the

evening of June 2. Arrangement for the funeral procession was made soon after the official announcement. Foreign dignitaries were not invited. The official explanation was that Hindu religious rites and rituals do not allow the keeping of the body in state for more than 24 hours. Immediately after the official confirmation of the death of the royal family members, condolence messages started pouring in from several countries. India announced state mourning for three days at the death of His Majesty King Birendra.

The funeral procession started at 6:00 pm from Birendra Military Hospital at Chhauni. The bodies of King and Queen were wrapped with magnificent colorful clothes. The cloth which wrapped the head of the King was printed with "Sita Ram." The Nepalese people demonstrated unprecedented devotion towards their monarch. Never before in the country's history had people assembled and mourned any person's death with as much grief as this. Thousands of people lined the streets to have a last glimpse of their beloved King and royal

family members during the state funeral procession.

Pro-monarchy slogans were shouted and flowers showered from all sides on the bodies of late King and Queen. People also greeted them with incense sticks in their hands. They shouted in Nepalese, "Long Live King Birendra," and "Our country and the King are dearer than our lives."

Many people cried at the passing away of their loving monarch. Ram Lal Pariyar said, "I feel like crying. We will never get a king as beloved as King Birendra." Sharad Aryal lamented, "I had never imagined that a tragedy of such magnitude could occur. I could have borne the pain of my parents' death, but cannot bear this one." The Telegraph Weekly, published from Nepal wrote, "The weeping children, the weeping women and the weeping youths who were in scores perhaps all felt that their one real guardian from amidst them has left for his

heavenly abode. Late King Birendra was indeed a Godly personality!" The sages and saints of Haridwar in India called King Birendra a patron of the Hindu religion.

As soon as the bodies of the King, Queen and other royal family members reached Arya Ghat, the holiest Hindu shrine on the bank of the Bhagmati river, preparation for the final rites began. The brahmins performed the antyesti rites in accordance with Vedic tradition. Deepak Bikram Shah lit the funeral pyre of the King at 9:50 p.m. A 56-gun salute was fired in the air signifying that the monarch was 56 years old.

There is a proverb, "Calamity never comes alone." The State Council announced that King Dipendra passed away at 3:45 a.m. on June 4. They declared Regent Gyanendra,

age 54, the new King. He was crowned amidst a simple ceremony that morning at Hanuman Dhoka, the traditional seat of the ruling Shah dynasty. The royal priest, Bada Guruju, placed a white-plumed, jewel bedecked, golden crown on his head. Gyanendra sat on a raised golden throne in traditional Nepali dressÃ□labeda, suruwal and coat.

While returning to the royal palace from Hanuman Dhoka, the King rode in a royal chariot drawn by six white horses led by a military band and red-liveried cavalry. On the three-kilometer road from Hanuman Dhoka to the royal palace, thousands of people lined up. Understandably, few of the still-stunned citizens cheered the new monarch. It was only at the gate of the royal palace that a handful cried, "Long Live the King."

King Dipendra was cremated amid heavy security and curfew at Arya Ghat, at the same place where his parents were cremated two days before. Other than the government officials and the members of constitutional bodies, to avoid any untoward incident, only a few people were allowed to participate in the funeral.

Following Hindu tradition, the ashes from the funeral pyre of late King Birendra, late King Dipendra and late Queen Aishwarya were brought from Kathmandu to the historic Shah dynasty palace and the temples of Goddess Gorakhkali and Baba Gorakhnath in Gorkha, nearly 150 kilometers west of Kathmandu. By tradition, the King and the royal family members visit the temple of Gorakhkali on certain occasions. The Dashain festival in the royal palace in Kathmandu begins only after the flowers and ritual objects come from

Gorkha.

The Nepalese people, in accordance with their religious tradition, observed aashauchi , mourning, for three days. Hindus and Buddhists started payinghomage to their beloved monarch in different parts of the kingdom, which continued for thirteen days. People belonging to other faiths also paid homage to the late kings.

Male employees of the government, including the civil servants, army and police and thousands of youths all shaved their heads, a Hindu mark of mourning altogether hundreds of thousands of people of all ages and from all over the country. Unusually, some girls shaved their heads, too.

Some people on the streets observed, "The King and the Queen were like our parents and that is why we are getting our heads shaved." In the Nepalese Hindu tradition, the first act of the sons and near relatives is to perform shaving of their heads after a person dies.

Nepal is a country of 22 million people spread over 145,391 square kilometers of rugged terrain. In the remote areas, people collect the dust from the ground where the King walks in their village, because he is regarded as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. A journalist once asked late King Birendra, "How do you feel about being looked upon as God?" He replied, "It is not a question of how I feel about it. There are local customs and traditions. This relates to

our religious background. I have responsibility under the Vedic scriptures to protect the people against injustice. The concept of God is there among the people."

Finally, amidst confusions, rumors and speculations of all kinds, the two-member investigative committee comprising Chief Justice Kesav Prasad Upadhyay and Speaker of the House of Representatives Taranath Ranabhat submitted its report of the murders to His Majesty King Gyanendra at the Royal Palace on June 14, which was soon made public at a crowded press conference at the Parliament Secretariat. In its 220-page report, the committee blamed the then Crown Prince Dipendra for the massacre.

According to the report, Crown Prince Dipendra was close to Devyani Rana, 32, the daughter of prominent Nepali politician Pashupati Shamsher Rana and Usharaje, elder sister of Congress MP Madhavrao Scindia and BJP minister Vasundhararaje of India. The Crown Prince had even spoken to Devyani minutes before the massacre. It is believed that Queen Aishwarya did not approve of Crown Prince Dipendra's marriage with Devyani, and was bitterly critical of her son's choice. Though Devyani and QueenAishwarya come from the Rana families [see page 24], the former had a history of discord with the latter. Even though there were reliable witnesses and compelling evidence, many ordinary citizens could not believe that a marriage dispute could have led to

the massacre. But Nepal has remained calm since the report's release.

The murders are a strange twist of history, but one indicative of the entangled karma surrounding the Nepalese royal family. To grasp the situation, one must go back to Prithvi Narayan Shah, who in 1769 united Nepal into a one kingdom. According to tradition, the king was about to march into Kathmandu Valley when he encountered a sage. The king offered the sage some yogurt, which the sage tasted and gave back to the king as blessed. But unwilling to eat what the sage had already tasted, the king threw the yogurt on the

ground, covering his feet in the action. The sage then chastised the king for his pride, and said if he had taken the yogurt he would have had every wish fulfilled. But instead, the yogurt covering the king's ten toes meant his dynasty would fall after ten generations. Birendra was indeed the tenth generation after King Prithvi Narayan Shah, and Dipendra the eleventh. "This legend has a place in Nepalese history, said Milan Shakya, a renowned astrologer and a professor at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University. "Whether these terrible events are merely coincidence or a playing out of the prophecy remains to be seen." A major consideration in the continuation of the dynasty is not King Gyanendra, who is considered a

competent leader and decent man, but his son and now crown prince, Paras, who has an unsavory reputation and is widely disliked in Nepal.

In an event central to Nepal's history, Gyanendra was previously crowned king, in 1950, at the age of three. While Nepal had a royal family, power actually lay in the hands of the Ranas, who had usurped the throne in an 1846 coup. A hundred years later, King Tribhuvan, King Birendra's grandfather, had slowly won over the loyalty of Nepal's major factions. With the help of India, he and his entire family except three-year-old Gyanendra fled the

country. Anxious to retain legitimacy, Prime Minister Mohan Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana crowned the child. But India and Britain refused to recognize the infant, and on February 15, 1951, King Tribhuvan triumphantly returned to Kathmandu and wrested power from the Ranas.

As a means of insuring stability, the royal family from that time intermarried with the Ranas. Crown Prince Dipendra was, in a sense, following this tradition, for Devyani Rana was the great grand-daughter of the last Rana prime minister, Mohan Shamsher, who had crowned the infant Gyanendra. Unfortunately, the Rana clan has its own factions,

and the Queen was pleased neither with Devyani's faction, nor with the fact Devyani's mother was an Indian, and a member of the royal Scindia family.

Nepal was already in a precarious situation before the murders. A Maoist insurrection has gained control of as many as 1,000 of Nepal's 4,000 Village Development Committees. They have a significant presence even in Kathmandu. One shopkeeper, for example, told Toronto's Globe and Mail newspaper, "I don't like the Maoists. But perhaps the people believe the Maoists will finally fix our toilets and wells." It is a brutal insurrection, having cost more

than 1,600 lives so far.

Then there are the Christians, who have targeted Nepal for intense conversion programs. Consider this typical appeal from World Help Ministries, "There are still millions in Nepal under Satan's control that need to hear of the love of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. Please help me help these pastors, church planters and evangelists reach Nepal."

In a June 13 article, Nepalese scholar Devraj Dahal explained how important the monarchy is to Nepal.

"The monarch is perceived as a Lord having spiritual and temporal authority to protect the sacredness of Nepal Mandala the universe of Nepal. The practice of worshiping monarchy springs from the notion that the King performs Raj Dharma (statecraft) to regulate society, observes the Sanatana Dharma (eternal religion), is of virtuous conduct, dispenses justice and safeguards the motherland from external intrusion. The monarchy's ability to transcend partisan politics not only set itself above many institutions of governance, but also helped achieved a single national community as opposed to the ideology of identity politics. It often played the role of a safety valve of

society against the threat of imperialism and native radicalism. It is an element of continuity of Nepali history, society, institution and the statehood."

The Kings' Farewell

The ancient, magical rite of "katto"

There is a unique system in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal whereby a katto-eating ceremony is organized to liberate the dead king's soul amidst a function attended by royal officials, the prime minister, constitutional heads, state council members, army and police officers. The last such ceremony was performed in Nepal three decades ago at the death of King Mahendra. It is called

katto, impure, because meat is added to the dishes fed to a vegetarian brahmin priest, and because people in mourning would normally fast upon this day. Two different katto-eating ceremonies were performed on the eleventh days, respectively, of the passing away of King Birendra and King Dipendra. They were held with Sanskrit chants at the Kaalmochan Ghat on the

bank of Bagmati River in Kathmandu.

The priests were picked by government officials. Each was offered a meal comprised of 84 dishes, some laced with the meat of a goat sacrificed for this purpose. After this meal, the priest is considered katto, impure, and exiled from the Kathmandu Valley

for life.

On the death of King Birendra, Durga Prasad Sapkota, age 75, from Kavre district, volunteered for the katto eating ceremony. In consideration of the impurity and exile to be endured, he was given a suitcases of clothes, a bed, TV, radio and cash reportedly in the amount of us

$17,000 a fortune in Nepal. He was also given various belongings of the late King, including the King's sofa and study table. As he prepared to leave, he dressed in a shining gold-colored silk suit, placed a replica of the King's crown on his head and wore the King's shoes and sunglasses. He then

departed peacefully on an elephant, Nirajan Prasad, across the Bagmati River. "It was a good sign," said one participant. "If the elephant refuses to go, it could mean bad omens."

The purpose of such a

ceremony, explained Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, is for the priest to take on any negative karma of the king and, through this personal sacrifice, protect the kingdom. Local tradition says that the ceremony helps the king to return to

Vaikuntha, the heavenly realm of Lord Vishnu.

Ill omens appeared before the next ceremony. Moti Prasad, the elephant brought to transport the priest for King Dipendra killed a women as it was being

brought to the capital. In hopes of her next child being a boy, she had crawled between the elephant's front legs. The startled elephant tossed her aside with his trunk. The katto ceremony for Dipendra was performed by Devi Prasad Acharya, 65, from Sindhupalchok.

After he mounted the elephant, it refused to cross the Bagmati River on its way into exile. It trumpeted wildly, turned tail and chased the group of dignitaries back up the narrow path. People first scattered in panic, then pelted the elephant with stones and drove it across the river.

HISTORY

The Rana Rulers

By J. Michael Luhan

How Nepal's prime minister usurped royal powers and ruled for a century

The Shah dynasty of nepal began in 1743 when King Prithvi Narayan Shah united Nepal and ascended

the throne of Gorkha. But in 1846, in a bloody midnight massacre in a courtyard of Kathmandu's Durbai Square that eliminated the hundred most powerful men in Kathmandu, its

power was usurped by the king's prime minister. Thus began the Rana dynasty, a curious new century in the history of the Kathmandu Valley. The Shah kings were stripped of power, but were still worshiped as

incarnations of Vishnu. The mastermind of the bloodbath, Jung Bahadur Kunwar Rana, declared himself prime minister and "maharaja," the first of the new dynasty. Perhaps Bahadur

hadn't read it, but his method of gaining power by wholesale slaughter was precisely and approvingly described in The Prince by Italian Niccolo Machiavelli in 1513.

He installed his brothers to all the key posts of the country, and later institutionalized the prime ministership in the Rana family. He began his reign with an unprecedented voyage to Europe, taking along his

seven brothers and his personal cooks. For the first time in the history of Nepal, its royalty trod on Western soil, in London, Edinburgh and ParisÃ with interesting results. The handsome maharaja cut a

memorably exotic figure at the court of Queen Victoria, dressed in velvet robes trimmed in lace and studded with rubies, emeralds, diamonds and pearls, topped by a plumed white silk cap glittering

with diamonds and dangling with emeralds. The traveling Rana royalty found the palaces of Europe so impressive they chose to replicate them, not an easy feat in an isolated mountain country

still unconnected to the outside world by anything more than a walking trail.

In the rural fields of the Kathmandu Valley, the Ranas walled off vast

estates, and built colossal caricatures of the neoclassical palaces of Europe. They built the Red Palace, the White Palace, the Lion Palace, and many others. Armies of porters heaved furnishings up the

mountain trails: crystal chandeliers, mirrors, window glass, marble tables and tiles, brocade chairs, iron lamp posts, wrought-iron ornaments and more. The most magnificent palace was Singha Durbar,

the Lion Palace, built in 1904 for Maharaja Chandra Shurnsher Rana, sited on grounds half the size of the old walled city of Kathmandu and sumptuously fitted with imported European exotica.

Nor did the imitation of Europe stop with architecture. Inside the palaces, the Rana nobility and their many wives posed for formal photographs, dressed like parodies of Queen Victoria's court, as if

they were revelers at some marathon costume ball. The trappings of male finery included plumed helmets, heavy epaulettes, long swords, tassels, braid, knee-high boots, gleaming escutcheons, white

gloves, white trousers. The women became blimps in massive gathered skirts, bustles and crinolines. Their hair was arranged in ringlets, framing heavily made-up faces topped with

round, flat hats.

Into the twentieth century, the Ranas imported the latest inventions into the high walls of their palace compounds. They studied

English, watched motion pictures, lit their palaces with electric bulbs and even brought dismantled motor cars up the mountain trails on the backs of porters.

But extravagance was confined to the palace compounds. The Rana oligarchy administered Nepal like a private estate, leaving most of the people of the Kathmandu Valley more impoverished than ever, isolated

from both the outer world and their own rulers.

The beginning of the end of the Rana regime came on January 15, 1934, a day significant to

twentieth-century Nepal. An idealistic political movement formed around an alliance of three dissatisfied groups inspired by the independence movement of India. The Ranas ruled with the permission

of the British, and with England's departure, their position became precarious. The ousted Shah monarchs were still endowed with the power of the Gods, but not the power of men. They were

restless. Also, Nepalese men had fought alongside the British in famed Gurkha regiments during both world wars; they returned home with new ideas from the outer world. Finally, the prolific reproduction

rates among the polygamous Ranas created too many offspring to share the benefits of privilege peacefully. Juddha Shurnsher Rana, maharaja at the time, had 130 wives. An "ABC" system was

developed to rank Rana children according to the status of their mothers primary wife, secondary wife, or concubine. Most were left disinherited and dissatisfied. In November, 1950,

the Shah King Tribhuvan launched a revolution based on the coalition of these three groups.

On November 6, Tribhuvan and his family set off on a

"hunting expedition," but actually went to the Indian Embassy, where they were granted asylum. Rana Prime Minister Mohun Shumshere Jung Bahadur was incensed with this "interference" from

India, but upon "advice" from India's Ambassador C.P.N. Singh, did not interfere with the royal family's calm drive to Kathmandu's airport and departure by plane a few days later. Shumshere

then crowned the infant Prince Gyanendra, but India and England refused to recognize the three-year-old, and the Rana power began to crumble. On February 15, 1951, Tribhuvan returned to Nepal

and took power three days later. Shumshere was relegated back to a minister's post, and the country began a slow transition to democracy, fulfilled finally under the late King Birendra.