

MASSACRE  
AT THE  
PALACE

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THE DOOMED  
ROYAL DYNASTY  
OF NEPAL

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TALK MIRAMAX BOOKS



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tieth century. But his early commitment to democracy, and his decision to hold the first general election in Nepal's history, failed to bring any lasting changes. Within a year the duly elected congress government was dismissed and all its leaders clapped in jail. With the army's backing, King Mahendra quietly ushered in thirty years of royal dictatorship.

All political parties were banned, freedom of the press and speech were seriously curtailed, and the new Panchayat regime, a "partyless" system of indirectly elected representatives, became the approved method of government. True, there was now a constitution and a parliament; but the latter was never allowed to debate matters of any importance, its real purpose being simply to rubber-stamp decisions already taken in the royal palace. The same is true of the dismal train of "prime ministers" and their handpicked cabinets of yes-men. Nobody dared refuse the king, whose ancient aura of authority was now reinforced by a Kremlin-like Palace Secretariat.

The royal palace had at last become the real center of power. If nothing else, the Panchayat system provided strong rule and stability. Apologists for the system have argued that it was more "indigenous" and in keeping with the traditions of Nepal, or that its principles of "guided democracy" were more suited to an underdeveloped and largely illiterate society than full-blown multi-party democracy. There may be some truth in this, though in reality the whole apparatus of Panchayat rule was little more than a fig leaf to disguise Mahendra's very personal, very macho-style brand of autocracy.

In many respects Mahendra was a larger-than-life figure—a "real king" who ruled his country with an iron fist. He pushed for rapid modernization, opening up this previously isolated country to foreign aid and development programs. Volunteers from America's Peace Corps poured into the kingdom and were amazed at what they found: a country scarcely touched by the twentieth century, where feudalism remained intact and preventable diseases like smallpox and leprosy were commonplace.

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In opening up his country to the modern world, Mahendra still remained a fervent nationalist. He was proud of his country's independence and lobbied successfully for its entry into the United Nations. He was particularly adept at playing off the big powers, who wanted to increase their presence in his strategically positioned kingdom, balancing India against China, the Soviet Union against the United States. While he recognized Communist China and accepted its de facto suzerainty over Tibet, he also allowed CIA-backed Khampa guerrillas fighting on behalf of the Dalai Lama to operate out of Nepalese territory.

Mahendra reveled in his diplomatic games and attended many international conferences. He was the first of Nepal's kings to routinely cast aside traditional Hindu objections against crossing the "black water" so that he could travel extensively abroad. The official purpose of these visits was to boost Nepal's diplomatic status in the world, but his hosts usually indulged the king's passion for hunting and arranged for him to shoot whatever game was locally available. A visit to the United States afforded him the opportunity to bag a mountain lion. In Scotland he stalked red deer, in Germany wild boar. A tour of East Africa yielded two dozen trophies, including lion and leopard, rhinoceros, giraffe, various species of antelope, and wild dog. Back in Nepal he spent every winter season hunting tiger, leopard, rhino, and bear.

It was typical of the man that he died of a heart attack while out on a hunting expedition in Royal Chitwan National Park. As his former prime minister and closest confidant, Kirthinidi Bista, recalls: "He was so passionate about hunting that whenever he saw wild animals, he couldn't resist. It was a tremendous temptation, even after he had his first heart attack. That actually happened when I was with him in a hunting hide. I held him in my arms until help came. But even after that he didn't give up his sport."

King Mahendra was just fifty-one years old when he died. He had been warned many times by his doctors, and he was all too

aware that heart disease ran in the family. Only one Shah king in 200 years had made it past his sixtieth birthday. Yet Mahendra continued to rule in person and keep up a fast and furious lifestyle. For a reigning monarch, that might be considered irresponsible. But going out with a bang on a hunting expedition added to his personal legend.

Mahendra's solemn funeral procession marked the passing of the ninth generation of Shah kings who could trace their descent in an unbroken line from the founding monarch, Prithvi Narayan Shah. More than two centuries had passed since that ambitious Raja of Gorkha threw vomited curd back onto an old hermit's hands and as a consequence heard the dreadful prophecy of Gorakhnath. His direct descendants, he had been told, would rule Nepal for ten generations and no more. If the prophecy ran true, then the next king of Nepal would also be its last.

King Mahendra's eldest son, Crown Prince Birendra, was not of the same devil-may-care type as his father. He was a more thoughtful, articulate, and compassionate monarch. Even his greatest admirers admit, however, that he was not a commanding personality. Cautious and analytical in his decision making, in his personal manners he approached that very English ideal of a "true gentleman." Birendra was the first Nepalese prince to be educated abroad: first at England's prestigious Eton College, before going to Tokyo University and then to Harvard. In later life he was more comfortable speaking in English than Nepali, though he regretted this and made sure his own sons were fluent in the national language.

For the crown prince to shoot his first tiger was considered a rite of passage, and Birendra duly did so in Royal Chitwan National Park. But he never relished *shikar* as his father had. By one of those chances of timing, these gentler tastes reflected

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changing attitudes to wildlife. The tiger was finally recognized as an endangered species in 1973, a year after Birendra ascended the throne, and all over India old *shikars*, or tiger hunters, had begun to put aside their guns and turn to conservation. In Nepal, the new king supported the creation of protected zones under the auspices of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation.

But old traditions died hard. When visiting royals or foreign dignitaries came to Nepal, time-honored rules of hospitality meant that a tiger shoot had to be had. This could lead to embarrassment when a royal guest, such as the Duke of Edinburgh, was closely linked to international conservation groups. For him to refuse a royal invitation to a tiger shoot would be worse than impolite, but to be photographed pulling the trigger or, worse still, posing beside the “kill” would have been a public relations disaster. Calls for his resignation from various wildlife organizations would have inevitably ensued. It was a tricky situation, but eventually a diplomatic solution was found. Prince Philip accepted the royal invitation. However, on the morning of the shoot, he emerged with his trigger finger encased in plaster. Obviously, he was unable to shoot any tigers that day.

Enormous expectations of change and progress accompanied King Birendra's accession to the throne in January 1972. The new monarch was twenty-six years old, Western-educated, and known to be more liberal-minded than his father. He made a point of traveling around the country and meeting his subjects so that he could listen to their problems and grievances in person. But for all the hopes of an early shift toward a more democratic regime, Birendra retained the Panchayat system erected by his father.

He may well have been influenced by those same senior palace officials who were effectively running the country for him, and who therefore had their own reasons to oppose any liberalization.

Then there was his wife, Queen Aishwarya, who was a Rana by birth and instinctively supported the royal prerogative and the privileges of the elite. A strong-minded though not very well educated woman, Aishwarya exercised a powerful influence over her husband throughout the thirty-one years of their married life.

The Panchayat system was to remain in place for nearly two more decades. During that time it was constantly tweaked so that, in theory at least, it reflected the “will of the people.” A “Back to the Village” campaign was extended to ensure that government stayed in touch with the concerns of Nepal’s overwhelmingly rural population. “Commissions of Enquiry” were dispatched to root out corruption at the local level. The all-powerful Investigation and Enquiry Centre was set up, so that complaints could go straight to the top rather than getting bogged down in officialdom. King Birendra wanted very much to be informed of the state of his nation, and whenever possible, he sought to provide a remedy. It was a very personal and benevolent approach to kingship, but it was not very democratic.

Whether King Birendra ever took much notice of the Gorakhnath prophecy is unknown. Early on in his reign he did visit the main center of the deity’s cult just across the border with India, just as his forefathers had done before him, and paid for special prayers, or *pujas*, to be made on his behalf. He must have known about a legend so intimately linked with his family and been aware that the prophecy implied he would be the last Shah king of Nepal. But to function on a day-to-day basis with the belief that this was the *fin de ligne* would be intolerable.

Besides, there were many other prophecies and predictions in Nepal, few of which came to anything. And while Birendra was a deeply religious man, his preference turned toward the teachings of a living guru, Sathya Sai Baba, and other “modern” strains of



4. Three hundred tigers might be shot when kings or Rana prime ministers went hunting in Terai. Only an estimated one hundred now survive in Nepal.