

## MEMORIES OF OLD NEPAL

By E. A. SMYTHIES, C.I.E., I.F.S.

Thirty-four years ago when I had to retire from service in India under the fifty-five age rule, the conditions in Britain were chaotic. The Dunkirk adventure was just over, France was collapsing, the battle of Britain loomed ahead. So I was glad to get an offer of a job as Forest Adviser to the Government of Nepal.

At that time Nepal was a land of mysteries, especially for Europeans who were rigidly debarred from it. In fact, before my arrival the total British population in all Nepal consisted of the British Minister (later ambassador), First Secretary in the Legation and an engineer, and their wives. My wife and I brought the total to eight. (Nowadays a flood of 60,000 tourists visit Nepal every year.) While there were numerous temples and mosques for Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, etc., Christianity, and especially missionaries and clergymen, were absolutely prohibited.

The reason for this was the fear of being absorbed into the Indian Empire. A hundred years earlier a remarkable character, Jung Bahadur by name and a catcher of wild elephants by profession, succeeded in seizing all power in the State. He kept the king as a figurehead, a prisoner in the Royal Palace, without any say in the rule of the country. Jung Bahadur claimed everything in Nepal (except a few temples) to be his personal property, and for the next hundred years the wealth of a nation was poured into the pocket of his family.

Succession did not go from father to son but to the next oldest legitimate male member of the family. To keep the number of legitimate heirs within bounds, the legitimacy was defined in a curious way. If the mother was of sufficiently high caste to eat rice with her lord and master, the sons were legitimate, but otherwise not. Legitimate boys were appointed generals in the army at birth; the illegitimate only colonels. This caused the Nepalese Army, about a brigade strong, to be somewhat top heavy, with a dozen generals and countless colonels.

The Maharajah's palace—called the "Singha Durbar"—was a very impressive building, about the same size and appearance of Buckingham palace, and it had an interesting origin. In 1857 Jung Bahadur offered his Nepalese troops to the Indian Government to help quell the mutiny—in fact they helped in the relief of Lucknow. Later, when peace was restored, Queen Victoria invited Jung Bahadur to visit her, and he stayed a few days in Buckingham Palace. He was so impressed with it that he gave an order to one of the big firms in the City which must surely be unique. It was—"A replica of Buckingham Palace in Kathmandu". In the 1940s it was full of mid-Victorian furniture and fittings—and probably still is.

The administration of Nepal was quite incredible. All the revenues went to the Maharajah who doled out as little as possible and pocketed the rest. Away from Kathmandu and one or two of the larger towns there were no medical services, no education beyond children, no roads in the hills except a few terrible footpaths, no sewage or waterworks or electricity or power. Officials were appointed a year at a time. If at the end of the year their names did not appear on the next list, they were out of a job. The income of the Maharajah was never disclosed, but it was quite considerable. One Maharajah who ruled for twenty years left his eight legitimate sons £5 million each.

One day I obtained permission to see the Mint, where the Nepalese coinage was made. On the way through the building we came to a large room or hall. In one corner there were two neat new-looking machines, and my guide pointed these out to me with pride. They were the latest machines from London for testing that the coins were up to standard. The rest of the room was full of twenty or thirty awful old hags squatting on the floor with the minimum of clothing. They were surrounded by quantities of shining silver rupees. I asked what they were doing.

"Oh, they are checking the coins to see whether they are up to standard."

"But I thought you said that those two machines in the corner . . ."

"Oh yes," he interrupted, "but we don't know how to use them, so we continue to check in the old way."

"And do the old women get so very hot that they have to take their clothes off?"

"Oh no. We make them undress so that it is more difficult for them to hide and steal the coins!"

Any emergency or unexpected expenditure required the Maharajah's previous sanction, which often led to absurd results. For example—a thatched treasury building three hundred miles from Kathmandu caught alight. The treasury officer sat down and wrote a report, asking for sanction of twenty rupees to put it out. He dispatched this by the leisurely Nepal post to Kathmandu, where it arrived a month later. It took another month to reach the Maharajah, and a third month for his sanction of twenty rupees to reach the treasury office.

I might mention also the Forest Guard, who, on a pay of seven rupees per month, contributed to his senior officer's private purse a sum of three thousand rupees per annum.

I will quote one more example. As the Maharajah's eldest son had four uncles between him and the highest post, the Maharajah gave him a large area of "valueless" forest land to break up for cultivation. This was in the plain (Terai) near the Indian border. I had to ask that this business be postponed a year or two, as labour and carts were scarce, and it was upsetting my arrangements for supplying railway sleepers to the Indian railways. I was told to go and examine the area carefully, as it had been mentioned to the Maharajah that the value of the timber was only Rs 60.

The eldest son was away in Delhi arranging for the Nepalese troops to help India in the war effort. However, he sent his senior ADC to interview me, who told me that I must report the value of the timber at Rs 60, and threatened with dire action if I upset the arrangement. A week later I sent my report that the proposed grant of land included valuable sal forest, and one of my contractors had offered not Rs 60 but Rs 250,000 for the timber! My boss—the director of forests (General Sir Kaisir Shumshore Jung Bahadur Rana) told me later that the grant of land had been cancelled, and the Maharajah had mournfully asked whom could he trust when even his own son lied to him. Sir Kaisir added, "I told him evidently he could trust you".

Living in a country where Europeans were prohibited had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. Amongst its advantages I will mention the complete freedom from all forms of taxation; no income tax, no customs, no excise, whisky ten shillings a bottle. Another advantage was that in Kathmandu only the European families and the Ranas were allowed to have motor cars. As there were no roads to Kathmandu at that time our car—a Chevrolet—had to be carried over two passes of seven thousand feet, by two gangs of seventy coolies each. They took four days over the job, and received a wage of one rupee (1/6d) each. (Nowadays I hear that Kathmandu is connected both with the Indian frontier to the south, and with Lhasa to the north, by excellent roads, provided and serviced by the Indian and Chinese governments.)

Amongst the drawbacks, there were no shops at all for Europeans; no butcher, no baker, no hotels or restaurants. We baked our own bread and bought our meat alive (sheep and chicken only, beef being prohibited of course in a Hindu state). The medical service was practically non-existent. There was, however, a dentist, whose chair was behind a large plate-glass window that faced the main street in Kathmandu. When my wife required treatment, the sight of the white memsahib was so unusual that a large crowd immediately collected and nearly blocked the street outside.

During the 1940s flights by aeroplanes over Nepalese territory were strictly prohibited. This was due to a disastrous earthquake that wrecked a lot of Nepal in 1934 soon after the Houston expedition had flown an aeroplane over Everest, thereby annoying the Gods who lived up there. During the war, the Americans were busy sending war material to the Chinese with Flying Fortresses. These habitually flew over Nepal at over 30,000 ft. to avoid bumping into Everest. One day as I was passing the

parade ground near the Singha Durbar, I saw a row of the local troops, loaded with their antique weapons, which have a range of about two hundred yards, firing volleys at the almost invisible aircraft, thousands of feet up in the sky.

During each of the years 1940–46 my wife and I spent some of the cold weather touring the wilder and flatter forest areas, mostly below the foothills, where carts were available. During those years we travelled the whole five hundred miles from SE to NW—most of it twice, and much of it never visited before by Europeans. We were thrilled at exploring virgin country, and found these tours the most interesting and enjoyable periods of our life in Nepal.

We travelled in state and comfort, with four elephants to ride on, a number of bullock carts as required for tents and belongings, about fifteen or sixteen government servants, clerks and six or seven private servants. Our camps were frequently near the villages of primitive aborigines, who, of course, had never seen white faces before, and we soon became accustomed to being stared at.

After the swarming deer populations of the UP forests, we found the Nepal forests very dull, as deer were almost extinct. On many occasions and in many places in the UP I have seen more deer in an afternoon, than I saw in all the 6½ years I spent in Nepal—due, of course, to lack of protection. However, there was one interesting exception: the Rhino sanctuary in the Rapti Valley. Here the Maharajah employed a special service of seventy or eighty game wardens, to prevent rhino being poached and other game killed.

In Nepal the rhino was valued for two reasons. First, the horn on the nose was valuable, if not its weight in gold; at any rate much higher than its weight in silver, as a never-failing aphrodisiac.

Secondly, it was valuable for doing a powerful puja. As soon as a rhino was killed, the stomach and intestines were cleaned out, leaving a large empty cavity, quite big enough to take a human body. Whoever was going to do the puja then got inside, drank a cup of the rhino's blood, and said a few prayers. This puja guaranteed that at his death all his sins in this life would immediately be forgiven, and he would go without further delay to the highest heaven.

In this sanctuary of some two hundred square miles, on few occasions the Maharajah had a shoot for some VIPs. King George V shot there in 1911 and the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow much later—when the tiger and rhino were thinned out to some extent. But in our two trips through this area we saw rhino, tiger and elephant, sometimes at uncomfortably close quarters! One night, when I had a bout of malaria and a temperature of 106° all hell broke loose in the camp, with all the staff yelling, beating tins and lighting fires to drive off a small herd of wild elephants that were invading the camp.

On another occasion, and in a different place, an inquisitive rhino on two consecutive nights came up to our tent with grunts and ponderous footsteps, while we were wondering what to do if he blundered into our tent. The next day, when shooting jungle fowl for the pot, I disturbed two rhino and had to climb up a convenient tree out of their way. An hour later a big bull rhino charged my elephant quite unprovoked, which fortunately stood firm, and the rhino shied off at the last instant.

We also had the pleasure of watching tigers on several occasions—we had no permission to shoot tigers in Nepal, and anyway had long given up shooting them when my wife had shot a dozen, and myself three or four. Also this was twenty years after the terrible episode described in my wife's book *Tiger Lady*, after which I never fired at a tiger again.\* We ended our second trip in the rhino sanctuary in spectacular and thrilling fashion. The western boundary is roughly the Gandak river, one of the big rivers of the Himalayas, with a flow of water much greater than any in Britain, and very swift

\* The only case known of a tiger, lightly wounded and infuriated, climbing sixteen feet up a tree like a great cat, and knocking my wife out of her machan (small platform). Even as she was falling, my despairing shot was on its way and by the grace of God put a stop to the tiger's further activities, thus saving my beloved wife from an appalling death. Even now, fifty years later, the memory of that awful moment sometimes gives me a sleepless night.

in the foothills. There was a very primitive aboriginal tribe, which had no settled village or land, who knew nothing of agriculture, but depended on the river for their existence. They were expert fishermen and had large dug-outs twenty to twenty-five feet long made from the light wood *Bombax malabaricum*. They used the dug-outs to move up and down the river and for fishing. As a side-line they did a little washing of gold from the river bed.

Where the rhino lived the ground was flat, the river sluggish and plenty of swamps with tall grass. Lower down, however, the river had cut a gorge through the Sewalik rocks. Here the channel was narrower, and the current was faster with occasional rapids. We decided to go out by dug-out to the Indian frontier twenty miles away. A little fleet of four or five dug-outs collected, and when loaded had a freeboard of four or five inches only. We set off placidly, but when we got to the gorge, the trip became more exciting. Occasional sunken rocks foamed in the current, and there were a few small flat islands about the size of half a tennis court. As we approached they seemed to slide into the water. The islands were in fact completely covered in crocodiles, mostly the long-nosed fish-eating alligator type, but also a few snub-nosed crocodile. I have never seen such hundreds of saurians as we saw on that trip.

Presently some birds flew overhead which I took for duck (they were, I think, merganzers), and I shot down two, winged, but quite capable of swimming and diving. Then the excitement really began. Our boatmen went mad with excitement and for the next mile or two they disregarded their precious cargoes and the swarms of crocodiles below, and dashed madly around, trying to catch the agile birds from their limbering dug-outs. If we had realised how expert they were in handling their own dug-outs, we should not have been so alarmed. They got the birds in the end, and we arrived safely at our destination without a ducking, and so everyone was happy.

In about 1950 the old Nepal that I knew passed away for ever. The king (the grandfather of the present king) escaped from his palace prison and took shelter in the Indian Embassy. Here he came under the protection of Pundit Nehru, and was flown out to Delhi. He shortly afterwards returned and the century-old rule of the Ranas was over.

Thirty years ago my wife and I attended the royal wedding of the present king's parents. In London a royal wedding has a long chain of horse carriages. In Kathmandu it has a long chain of elephants dressed in cloth-of-gold and elaborate paint designs. The young king, with the advantage of an education at Eton, has very different views on how to run his country. Thirty years ago the Europeans totalled eight, nowadays the tourist invasion exceeds 60,000 every year, in which hippies are prominent, attracted no doubt by the fact that hemp (bhang) and other drugs are easily available. I am told that there is a ten-year waiting list for climbing Everest, which has a Japanese three-star hotel on its flanks. Lines of bed-and-breakfast places radiate from Kathmandu, which now has a big air service. Let us hope that new Nepal is more efficient than the old Nepal was.

Potentially the inhabitants of Kathmandu are terrific gamblers, but gambling was only allowed four days in the year—connected with Hindu festivals. On the morning of a gambling day all traffic in the town is rendered impossible, as the entire male population from grey-beards to children take possession of the streets. Parties of four mark their gambling board of four squares, one for each gambler. Each square has certain numbers, and dice are used to decide the winner. The gambling goes on non-stop for twenty-four hours. A decade or two earlier, when slavery was still in force in Nepal, and there were no banks, lines of slaves carrying heavy baskets of silver rupees could be seen settling the gambling debts between the palaces. Amongst the less wealthy strata of society, when a man had lost all his possessions, he would stake his wife, and if again unlucky, would stake himself into slavery.

I do not know whether gambling is still carried on in modern Nepal.

This article has become very long; I hope it may prove of interest to its readers.