

MASSACRE
AT THE
PALACE

THE DOOMED ROYAL DYNASTY
OF NEPAL

JONATHAN GREGSON

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TALK MIRAMAX BOOKS



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. . . So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

—*Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2

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PROLOGUE

SHOOTING CATS

The sound of nearby gunfire was clearly audible inside the British Embassy in Kathmandu on that Friday evening, June 1. It started around nine o'clock. Nobody paid much attention. The firing came from the direction of the royal palace, whose outer wall was just 500 yards away across a busy road intersection, and did not last long. If it had come from another direction there would have been greater cause for concern: It might have been an attack by Maoist insurgents, or a firefight between extortionists or some criminal gang and the Armed Police.

The noise of guns going off was forever coming out of the palace. Usually it was the crown prince practicing on one of the firing ranges, or blasting off at cats, bats, rats, crows, or just about anything else that moved among the dense bamboo that overhangs Narayanhiti Palace's northern and eastern walls.

An external attack on the palace would involve much heavier

exchanges. Inside the eighteen-acre Narayanhiti complex is a sizable army barracks. Two battalions of elite Royal Guard are permanently stationed there. A complex security system had been installed, using American know-how, shortly after President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, and since that time it had been repeatedly upgraded. Key security personnel were sent for specialized courses in Britain, the United States, and Israel.

The plain brick wall around most of the palace perimeter is deceptive. There are no metal spikes or shards of glass or razor wire, as can be found around most royal or presidential residences. But behind the walls, members of Nepal's royal family were guarded by a supposedly "foolproof" four-layer screen: armed police outside the perimeter and at the main gates; the regular army with fixed heavy weapons covering all possible approaches; in reserve, a rapid deployment, commando-style Fighting Force; and as a last line of defense, the ADCs, or aides-de-camp.

The ADCs represented the cream of the Royal Nepal Army's officer corps. Trained in close-quarter combat and key body protection, the ADC attached to each member of the royal family accompanied that person everywhere. Most came from "good families"; in the course of their dutiful and constant shadowing of their royal charges they built up close personal relationships. But their essential purpose was to act as bodyguards.

Any attack on Narayanhiti would have mobilized all four levels of defense. The noise would have been tremendous—not just gunfire from within the palace grounds, but the wail of sirens as reinforcements and emergency services rushed to the scene. Nothing like that happened around nine o'clock on June 1, 2001. Just a few short bursts of automatic fire. To outsiders it suggested nothing abnormal.

Even those far closer to the epicenter came to the same conclusion—initially, at least. The queen mother was talking to her sister-in-law, Princess Helen; a stout wooden door was all that sepa-

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rated them from the noise. On first hearing the shots, they too assumed "it was the youngsters playing." The queen mother no doubt thought immediately of the crown prince, and that in all probability he was shooting rats or cats again.

The crown prince's habit of discharging automatic weapons inside the palace grounds had become an accepted part of life within Narayanhiti Palace. Everyone knew that Dipendra had a private collection of guns and liked a little target practice at odd times of the day and night. The nighttime stillness was regularly punctuated with the clatter of some new weapon. So, on June 1, that was the first explanation that people within earshot arrived at to explain the three-minute session of gunfire. But on this occasion they had deceived themselves. During those three minutes a slaughter of unimaginable savagery had, in fact, occurred.

Practically the entire royal family had been massacred. The soft-spoken King Birendra was the first to be shot. His wife, Queen Aishwarya, was killed outright, as was his younger son, Prince Nirajan. Birendra's only daughter, Princess Shruti, died of internal bleeding. The king's younger brother and all three of his sisters went down in the hail of bullets, as did six other royal relations. A lucky few survived the onslaught. But by the time assistance arrived, ten members of Nepal's royal family lay dead or dying.

Among them was the man who was subsequently blamed for the killings, Crown Prince Dipendra. He had apparently attempted to blow his own brains out. The single shot to his head left him virtually brain-dead, but his vital functions did not cease for another two days. As a result, during those two days, as dictated by the rules of royal succession, the man who had committed parricide, matricide, and fratricide, and then bungled his own suicide was briefly declared King Dipendra of Nepal. Nobody, not even the most morbid of Jacobean playwrights or Greek tragedians, could have invented a plot with so much self-inflicted damage, nor such a bizarre twist at the end.

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It was the bloodiest, the most complete massacre of any royal family ever recorded. If the same crime had happened in Britain, then Prince Charles would have had to shoot dead Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, his brothers Edward and Andrew, Princess Anne, his own sons William and Harry and, to end it all, himself, leaving only (at the time) his aunt Princess Margaret, who would at that point assume the throne. And the motive? If the parallels are carried through, then it would have been because the rest of the House of Windsor was united against his plans to marry Camilla Parker Bowles.

One consequence of the Kathmandu massacre was that the senior line of the royal dynasty—the Shah family—became extinct. The crown passed to the dead king's younger brother, Gyanendra. If Nepal is to remain a kingdom, it is this cadet or junior line of the Shah family that will occupy the throne in the future. Tradition requires that a male heir inherit the plumed crown of Nepal, and apart from King Gyanendra and his son, Paras, there are no other princes of the blood left.

Nothing in Nepal's earlier history compared to the massacre in Narayanhiti, but it was certainly not the first time there had been bloodshed within the palace. Internal strife and conspiracies were an all-too-familiar part of the Shah family's heritage. Indeed, if automatic weapons had existed in the nineteenth century, there were plenty of flash points at which bloodletting on a similar scale might well have occurred.

What follows is not an attempt to explain why the massacre of June 1 happened. Whatever the motive, it was consumed in the ashes of the dead crown prince's funeral pyre. The sequence of events leading up to the massacre throws some light on the matter, but only to a certain extent.

The way in which kingship is practiced in the Himalayas, the role of monarchy and what it means to ordinary people, the very exis-

tence of the Kingdom of Nepal in the first place—all of these have a direct bearing on what was to happen on that fateful night. To appreciate the profound loss to the Nepalese people, their sense of disbelief and denial, one has to go back in time. For in this mountain refuge of age-old traditions, the king is still revered in ways long forgotten elsewhere. Here the king is held to be a god, the father and protector of all his peoples. The killing of a king is not just regicide; it amounts to deicide as well.

Yet those same traditions of reverence and unquestioning obedience shown to members of the royal family, which for more than 200 years had helped ensure that an unbroken line of Shah kings occupied the throne of Nepal, certainly contributed to their eventual undoing. Nobody dared to risk incurring royal displeasure by suggesting that some things within the palace were seriously amiss.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Nepal's royal family still lived in an unreal world behind Narayanhiti's walls—secluded from public scrutiny, deferred to on all occasions, and persuaded that by some quasi-mystical process the institution of monarchy was at one with the wishes of the Nepalese people. To go into the royal palace was to enter an Alice in Wonderland environment where the principal actors could behave like medieval despots, though in reality their power was gone; where the spirit of feudalism and noblesse oblige endured within an artificial vacuum; and where unpalatable truths could never be spoken openly, only hinted at.

The old habits of secrecy and intrigue that had served previous generations of Shah kings so well remained, but now they had turned in on themselves. Still learning to behave like members of a modern constitutional monarchy, Nepal's royal family struggled to bridge the gulf between their ancient traditions and a more meaningful, contemporary role. Even before the palace massacre,

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Nepal's monarchy had lost much of its sense of purpose, and with that went family unity. The real tragedy of the Shah dynasty was that, after surviving so many external threats, it should succumb to attack from within. But then that same tendency toward self-destruction had manifested itself many times before.

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ONE

OF COWS
AND KINGS

The Shah dynasty has ruled Nepal since 1769, some seven years before the United States of America came into being. At that time Britain was ruled by a dynasty known as the Hanoverians, albeit under the strict scrutiny and control of Parliament. In France, the Bourbon kings wielded absolute powers. A similar situation prevailed across most of Europe: Monarchy was deemed to be the only legitimate form of government. Not even the most radical of Enlightenment thinkers could foresee the overturning of this stable and time-honored pattern by the forces that were to be unleashed during the French Revolution.

The pace of change has been far slower within the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal. Since 1769 there has been an uninterrupted line of Shah kings, the son or grandson succeeding the father, up until the twenty-first century. That in itself is something of a success story. But the manner in which this first came about, through

the single-minded determination of one man, Prithvi Narayan Shah, is quite extraordinary. Rarely has the creation of a new state and its continuance over more than two centuries been so closely entwined with the fortunes of a single family.

The Shah family had for centuries been rajas of Gorkha, a tiny and impoverished hill state to the west of Kathmandu, just one of twenty-four principalities that divided up the central hill country among them. Farther west lay the twenty-two Baisi principalities, each ruled separately by its own raja. So fragmented was the region that no dominant power could emerge in the hills; as soon as one raja looked threatening, all the others joined together in a defensive alliance against him.

In this perpetual game of diplomatic cat and mouse, Gorkha was not even a major player. It was a small and not very well-endowed example of the “one-valley kingdom” previously found throughout the Himalayan foothills, from the borders of Afghanistan in the west to eastern Bhutan. The valley’s rich red soil may have been well suited for cultivating rice, and its steep encircling hills contributed to its defense. Certainly the raja of Gorkha’s decision to build the family palace astride a narrow ridge top was determined as much by its defensive advantages as by the site’s religious associations or the spectacular views it offers of Annapurna, Ganesh, and other ice-bound peaks of the main Himalayan range. But when Prithvi Narayan ascended the throne in 1742 there was no native industry in Gorkha, and most of its 12,000 households lived from subsistence farming and occasional soldiering. In terms of resources, it was scarcely a match for some of the larger hill states, let alone the prosperous kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley.

This did not prevent the Shahs of Gorkha from claiming illustrious origins. Like many other Hindu kings, they were revered by the people they ruled as living gods, in this case the partial reincarnations of Lord Vishnu. Their human lineage goes back to the Rajputs, warrior princes from the deserts of Rajasthan who

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were in the forefront of resistance against Muslim invaders. This particular Rajput clan is said to have come from the great citadel of Chittor, from which on more than one occasion the beleaguered Hindu defenders rode forth to certain death, while their womenfolk all committed *sati*, throwing themselves into the flames of funeral pyres rather than be defiled by the Muslim soldiery. Beyond that, the Shahs claim descent from the earliest of Aryan kings, and through them to the sun and the moon.

As with most Hindu royal genealogies, much of this is mythological and was inserted to add luster to what was otherwise a fairly obscure clan of hill rajas. It is, however, probable that the distant ancestors of the House of Gorkha did flee the Indian plains in the face of Muslim invasion and sought refuge in the foothills of the Himalayas. As exiled princes of Rajput stock, they were either co-opted by local rulers of less-distinguished ancestry or married into their families. By the sixteenth century there were a dozen small principalities in the central Himalayan foothills whose rajas were named Shaha or Shah. The younger son of one of these princely families, Dravya Shah, conquered the hill state of Gorkha in 1559, and both he and his successors fought endless border skirmishes to enlarge their domains.

Over the next two centuries the House of Gorkha produced some notable rulers, celebrated for dispensing justice as well as for their military successes. But when Prithvi Narayan Shah was born in 1722, their kingdom was just one of sixty independent hill states that grudgingly coexisted within the borders of modern Nepal. The hilltop palace where he grew up had a panoramic vista of the main Himalayan range and all the foothills to the south and west.

It was built on a diminutive scale, a dwarf when compared to the residences of the Malla kings who had controlled the Kathmandu Valley for more than 500 years. While some of the wood carvings at Gorkha Darbar are exquisite, they reveal the skills of Newar

craftsmen imported from around Kathmandu, not local workmanship. The Kingdom of Gorkha was not on a trade route and lacked the resources to employ such skills except on an occasional basis. It was not a rich inheritance.

Despite the weakness of this power base, Prithvi Narayan Shah had a grand vision. According to the collection of his sayings known as the *Dibya Upadesh*, he had dreamed of great conquests from the outset. While standing on a mountain ridge overlooking the Kathmandu Valley, he asked: "Which is Nepal?" His companions pointed out Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur, the capitals of three wealthy and independent kingdoms then known collectively as Nepal. Upon seeing them, the king recounts, "The thought came to my heart that if I might be king of these three cities, why, let it be so."

He was right in his assessment of the geopolitical situation. Whoever controlled the Kathmandu Valley could then dominate the rest of the Himalayan foothills. But it was a mighty gamble for Gorkha to take on the far wealthier Malla kings, whose resources could buy the services of mercenaries belonging to the warrior castes. Fortunately for Prithvi Narayan Shah, the three valley kingdoms were almost constantly at war with one another. But it still took him twenty-five years of continuous and sometimes desperate warfare to win his prize.

According to a legend that is as old as the Kingdom of Nepal, just as Prithvi Narayan Shah was preparing for the final assault on Kathmandu he came upon a holy man in the guise of a hermit. Always punctilious in his religious duties, he offered a bowl of curd to the holy man, which he duly consumed. But when the hermit vomited it all up and offered the repulsive mess back for the king to drink, Prithvi Narayan Shah refused disdainfully. He hurled the spewed curd back at the guru, coating his outstretched

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hands with the white liquid, at which the sage grew furious, shouting that if Prithvi Narayan had only swallowed his pride and drunk the curd, his every wish would have been granted. As it was, he would still go on to conquer Nepal, but the guru laid a dreadful curse on the king and his successors. Holding up his curd-splattered hands, he prophesied that there would be kings of Prithvi Narayan Shah's lineage for ten generations—one for each of his ten fingers that had been defiled. After those ten generations had passed, the Shah dynasty would be no more.

In Nepal, to be cursed by a holy man is a serious matter. But this being who appeared before Prithvi Narayan was no ordinary mortal. It was in fact Gorakhnath, the powerful and sometimes capricious deity who, according to legend, had helped out the king's ancestors on numerous earlier occasions, especially Dravya Shah, who had first captured Gorkha. The fact that their seat of power became known as Gorkha is probably due to the Shah dynasty's devotion to Gorakhnath. He became their tutelary deity, and his temple still stands beside their ancestral palace, attended by a dope-smoking priest and scores of monkeys from the surrounding forest who come to take their share of the ritual offerings.

Gorakhnath was deemed to be both a historical figure, a Hindu sage who had founded a sect of yogis known as the Kanphata, and an emanation of the all-powerful Lord Shiva, the Hindu god of creation and destruction. He always appeared in human form as a mendicant, usually with a begging bowl, and he lived only on milk, butter, and curd, the products of Hinduism's sacred cows. He was a powerful protector, but when angered he could be extremely vindictive.

An ancient chronicle tells of Gorakhnath's first visit to Nepal some 1500 years ago. The local people did not recognize him as a Hindu sage and refused to give him alms. This so enraged him that he resolved to punish the country with a severe famine. He did

this by summoning the divine serpents, or *nagas*, which are the dispensers of rain, and making a seat out of their coiled bodies. For twelve years he sat there, performing his devotions, and for twelve years no rain fell.

This caused enormous suffering throughout Nepal, so the King consulted his astrologers and priests about how to end the drought. On their advice he sent messengers to Assam, a far-distant province in eastern India, to bring back a divine sage called Matsyendranath, who was known to be the spiritual adviser or guru to the outraged Gorakhnath. Upon learning that his own guru had arrived, Gorakhnath was startled out of his meditation and went to greet him. No sooner had he gotten up than the *nagas* spread out across the land and rain fell in abundance. The grateful king built two temples dedicated to the deity Matsyendranath and started an annual procession in his honor that is still one of Nepal's largest festivals. The importance of the rain-bringing *nagas* can also be seen, not only in the many temples and water tanks built in their honor, but in the snake-covered throne on which the kings of Nepal are crowned.

King Prithvi Narayan Shah was careful to fulfill all his religious obligations, including those due to the family's tutelary deity. Why then did Gorakhnath spring a trap for the king and, when he failed the test, call down a curse on his distant descendants?

As with so many Hindu myths, the Curse of Gorakhnath works on several different levels. It is about worldly pride, and the awful consequences of failing to submit to religious authority. It is about overcoming physical disgust and recognizing the true nature of things beyond the veil of illusion. It is also about ritual purity and, strange to say, the symbiotic relationship between cows and kings.

It was the duty of Hindu kings not only to protect their subjects against intruders but to preserve the purity of the realm. Any

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defiling act—whether it was committed against temples or Brahman priests or, indeed, against sacred cows—would dilute that essential purity and, as a consequence, the king's authority.

Among the high-caste Hindus who had sought refuge in the Himalayas, the question of cow slaughter was particularly worrying. They had chosen to go into exile rather than live under the beef-eating Muslims, but they now found themselves living among all manner of indigenous peoples who did not conform to Hindu caste laws. Some were meat-eaters, and practically all consumed copious quantities of home-brewed alcohol, but the worst defilement came from the cow killers. Many of the hill Brahmans taught that Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of prosperity, was present within every cow, so to slaughter these sacred animals was tantamount to deicide. There was constant pressure from the “twice-born” priestly and warrior castes to stamp out such practices.

The Shah kings of Gorkha had been more stringent than most hill rajas in condemning cow slaughter. Another etymological explanation of the name of their royal house is that it may be derived from the ancient Sanskrit word *goraksa*, which means “cow protector.” One tradition has it that when Dravya Shah was just a young boy he had to keep watch over the family's cow herd. Gorakhnath appeared before him, and the young prince offered up a gift of milk. This pleased the deity so much that he foretold the young prince's conquest of Gorkha and much else besides. “Cow service” had its rewards.

So when some 200 years later Dravya's descendant, Prithvi Narayan Shah, also encountered Gorakhnath, he behaved properly in offering him a bowl of curd. But by then the conquering general had recruited into his army many warrior tribes—Gurungs, Magars, Bhotes from the Tibetan borderlands—who did not follow the strict prescriptions of Hindu caste rules. Some of them were even beef-eaters. The commander of such an army faced far greater problems in enforcing prohibitions against cow

slaughter than if he had remained the raja of a compact hill state. Which is why Prithvi Narayan had to be put to the test. His failure to recognize Gorakhnath and offer unconditional obedience marked him and his clan for retribution. But it would not come immediately. It would wait another ten generations.

When Prithvi Narayan Shah set out on his road to conquest, he had at his disposal only a small army and the slenderest of financial resources. He might have been considered just another clan chieftain turned military adventurer were it not for one thing: He was already a king in his own right. This alone made it possible for him to mobilize the resources of Gorkha for war and to enter into treaties with other hill rajas of equally distinguished lineage. Success in battle may have helped draw other warriors to his standard, but it was his semi-divine status as a Hindu king, the guardian and protector of all his subjects, that made him acceptable as a new ruler in the lands that he conquered.

The concept of divinely ordained kingship has been inseparable from legitimate government throughout the Himalayan foothills since the very dawn of history. In fact, the royal chronicles known as *Vamshavalis* trace an unbroken line of kings over 4,000 years, far beyond what can properly be called history to the first mythological kings of Nepal. If they ever really existed, these kings must have flourished during the second millennium B.C. Then there were two royal houses: the Gopalas, a dynasty of cow herders who claimed descent from the moon, and the buffalo-herder dynasty of the Mahisapalas, who claimed descent from the sun. Hence the symbols of the sun and moon still appear on the Nepalese flag. But the genealogies and deeds of these early dynasties, whose very names suggest that they ruled in the period when pastoralism gave way to settled agriculture, belong to myth rather than history.

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Eventually they were overthrown by the Kiratas, a warlike hill tribe mentioned in the greatest of ancient Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata*. These may well be the ancestors of the Limbus and Rais of eastern Nepal, who are collectively known as the Kirati and nowadays provide many recruits to Gurkha regiments. The Kirata dynasty is said to have ruled for more than 1,500 years and extended its dominion eastward through the Himalayas as far as what is now the Kingdom of Bhutan.

The Kiratas may well have come under the sway of powerful neighbors to the south, especially the imperial dynasty founded by Chandragupta Maurya around 320 B.C. This Mauryan empire was expanding rapidly from its capital, Pataliputra (near the modern city of Patna), right across the Gangetic plain around the same time that Alexander the Great made his brief foray into the Indian subcontinent. It is known that the greatest of Mauryan emperors, Ashoka, visited the Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini in 250 B.C., and popular legend has it he also visited the Kathmandu Valley. As with most empires based in the plains of India, the objective was more likely to have been an "informal ascendancy," to demand tribute rather than direct rule of the hill country.

In much the same way, Nepal probably fell within the "sphere" of the Kushans, who ruled over much of northern India between the first and third centuries A.D. Again, when the Gupta Empire became the dominant power in the Gangetic plain, Nepal and other hill kingdoms appear to have acknowledged their suzerainty. The Kushans had been great patrons of Buddhism, but by the fifth century the Brahmanic revival was under way, and it was a Hindu dynasty, the Licchavis, who emerged as uncontested rulers of the Kathmandu Valley.

Nepal entered a period of prosperity and cultural brilliance under its Licchavi kings just as Europe was entering the Dark Ages. The Kathmandu Valley undoubtedly benefited from the unification of Tibet at this time, which encouraged the flow of

trade and pilgrims across the Himalayas. A Chinese envoy who visited the court of King Narendradeva in the seventh century described his principal palace in Kathmandu as being of seven stories and roofed with copper, its interior embellished with semi-precious stones and, in the four corners, golden crocodile heads with water spouting from their jaws. Seated on his throne, the king was “bedecked with diamonds, pearls and other jewels, wearing earrings of gold and with an amulet of Buddha’s likeness on his breast. In the midst of his court, men sprinkle scented water and scatter flowers. On the King’s left and right, courtiers are seated on the floor. Behind the throne, countless soldiers stand at arms.” Unfortunately, no trace of the Licchavi palaces has survived, though stone sculptures of the period, including a remarkable image of Lord Vishnu, attest to a strong influence from India to which the local Newari craftsmen added their own mark.

As a small valley kingdom lying between two potentially great powers, Nepal has always had to manage a delicate balancing act. At times, the Licchavi kings may have accepted a loose form of Tibetan suzerainty. King Narendradeva is known to have assisted a joint Chinese-Tibetan punitive expedition in 1792 against an Indian prince who had imprisoned and killed visiting Chinese envoys. This campaign shows how Nepal had progressed, from being a remote mountain kingdom to becoming a regional power with trade and diplomatic links stretching across Asia.

Then, in the ninth century A.D., the Licchavis were overthrown, and Nepal entered its own Dark Age. For more than 200 years the hill country was fought over by rival princes. Few records survive from this era of uncertainty and civil strife, which continued until the Malla dynasty rose to power in the Kathmandu Valley during the early thirteenth century.

The Malla kings, who ruled over the Kathmandu Valley for more than 500 years, must have had a strong instinct for survival. From the very outset, they had to stave off rival claimants to the

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throne from the powerful Tripura and Bhonta clans, though more often than not they also fought among themselves. In 1482 the Kingdom of Nepal was divided among three different lines of Malla kings, each of which ruled from one of three royal cities—Bhaktapur, Patan, and Kathmandu. Much of the wondrous architecture of their Durbar Squares, pagoda-roofed temples and palaces entered through golden gates, was commissioned by these later Malla kings, who strove to outdo each other as much in splendor as in warfare. But their rivalry left them vulnerable to any external ruler who could take them on one at a time.

Looking down from one of the highest points surrounding the Valley, Chandragiri's Peak, onto the city kingdoms far below, the youthful King Prithvi Narayan Shah knew that his hopes of conquering Nepal depended as much on the mutual jealousies of those Malla kings as on the fortunes of war. Even if the kings remained divided, it would be a long, hard, bitterly fought struggle that would stretch the resources of his own tiny kingdom to the limit. But for such a prize, it was worth gambling his inheritance.

The Gorkha armies at first attempted a direct attack on the Kathmandu Valley but were repulsed with heavy losses after failing to take the hilltop town of Kirtipur. This was before the introduction of mountain artillery and muskets into the hills, and it was all but impossible to capture a well-defended town or hill fort by frontal assault. Indeed, the methods of waging war had hardly changed since the Middle Ages, and although Prithvi Narayan Shah purchased a few muskets during a pilgrimage he made to Benares, most of his troops were armed only with curved slashing swords, known as *kukhris*, and with bows and arrows.

Mounting an offensive campaign was therefore a long, drawn-out process of attrition, a matter of surrounding one outlying fort

after another, of cutting the garrison off from reinforcements and supplies until they either surrendered or were forced to do battle in the open. Such tactics required keeping a large army in the field for extremely long periods—a difficult feat, since many ordinary soldiers needed to return to their homesteads to bring in the harvest. To hold such an army together required exceptional leadership, and Prithvi Narayan Shah was by all accounts a charismatic leader of men. While other hill rajas left their soldiers' pay in arrears, he borrowed heavily through the state treasury in order to keep payments to his troops up to date. His concern for their welfare extended to granting pensions to the widows and families of those who had died in battle.

Where other rulers kept any lands they conquered to themselves or shared them with a few favored generals and ministers, Prithvi Narayan Shah promised his soldiers a share in the spoils of victory. They were offered the right to hold lands as feudal tenants, or *jagirdars*, for as long as they served their king. In doing so, he played upon the hillman's deep-rooted hunger for land and the social prestige that it alone can bring. The promise of holding *jagirs* made his entire army joint beneficiaries in any conquests they made, and so helped keep them in the field. It also encouraged soldiers dissatisfied in the service of other rajas to join the Gorkha standard, with the result that the more successful Prithvi Narayan Shah was in battle, the larger his armies became.

From 1744 onward the Gorkhas gradually encircled their enemies, occupying the high ridges and laying siege to forts that guarded the entrances to the Kathmandu Valley. One of the first to fall was Nuwakot, which controlled one of the trade routes to Tibet. The Gorkhas then switched their attack to the northeast rim of the Valley and captured the forts at Naldum and Madhev Pokhari. With these in his hands, Prithvi Narayan Shah was able to cut off the most important trade artery with Tibet, which runs through Kodari, and so deny the Malla kings their accustomed

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profits from trade. His forces then attacked in the south, effectively isolating the whole Kathmandu Valley from the outside world and imposing an economic blockade on its inhabitants.

In 1767 the Malla kings were finally driven to calling in outside assistance, and asked for help from the British East India Company, which dispatched an expeditionary force of 2,400 British and Indian troops. They had to march through the malaria-infested southern plains and up into the hills at the height of the monsoon rains. It was an already enfeebled column that fell into a carefully laid ambush. In this, their first-ever encounter with Gorkha warriors, the British were roundly defeated. Only a third of the soldiers who went into Nepal came out alive.

The armies of Gorkha now finally moved down into the Kathmandu Valley in force. But rather than rushing on to besiege the walled cities, they established outposts all around them and prevented the inhabitants from grazing their animals or harvesting their crops. The noose was slowly tightened until the Gorkhas' front lines came right up to the city walls. Only then did Prithvi Narayan Shah order the assault on Kathmandu. It was timed to coincide with the Hindu festival of Indraajatra, when King Jaya Prakash and his subjects were either drunk or engaged in religious celebrations. It is likely that the Malla king was betrayed, for three of the city gates were left unguarded, allowing the Gorkha soldiery to charge in. After putting up a brief fight, King Jaya Prakash and 200 of his followers fled to the nearby city of Patan.

It had taken many years of patient planning, but now Prithvi Narayan Shah had finally realized his youthful dreams of conquest. He entered the city of Kathmandu on horseback and made his way through the streets to the Durbar Square. There he ascended the same throne from which the previous king had only recently presided over the Indraajatra festivities. The living child-goddess of Kathmandu, the Kumari, gave her blessing by placing the *tika* on his forehead, smearing on a mixture of vermilion and

sandalwood in a ritual that has been repeated by successive Shah kings and royal Kumaris ever since.

Although Kathmandu was in itself a great prize, Prithvi Narayan Shah still needed to subdue the other two royal cities if he was to rule over a unified Nepal. He moved swiftly against the neighboring city of Patan, whose inhabitants were so terrified by rumors about the Gorkhas' ferocity that they put up little resistance. That left Bhaktapur, where the former king, Jaya Prakash, had fled after leaving Patan and was now organizing the city's defense. When Gorkha troops finally broke through the city's gates under cover of nightfall, some of the defenders set their wooden houses on fire to provide the light their soldiers needed to fight by. The battle raged from street to street for two long days, with the Gorkhas slowly squeezing their opponents into an ever-smaller cordon around the royal palace. Only when Jaya Prakash was wounded in the leg by a musket ball, forcing him to flee the city, did Bhaktapur's resistance finally collapse. The last of the Malla kings died in exile, allowing Prithvi Narayan Shah to become the undisputed ruler of Nepal.

King Prithvi Narayan Shah is remembered as a great leader of men and a just ruler. From the very outset, his grand design of unifying Nepal was a battle against overwhelming odds. His ability to mobilize the resources of a relatively small power against far larger neighbors is similar in many respects to his near contemporary, Frederick the Great of Prussia. His concern for the ordinary peasant-soldier won him his troops' undying loyalty, and if they had any complaint, they knew they could present their case directly to the king. This gave rise to the still-popular Nepalese expression: "If you seek justice, then go to Gorkha."

If Prithvi Narayan Shah had any weaknesses, they were his strong sense of personal honor and an occasionally vengeful

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streak. His pride had brought down the curse of Gorakhnath upon his descendants. The citizens of Kirtipur would discover his desire for vengeance to their cost.

Prithvi Narayan was normally magnanimous in victory: When his armies conquered Kathmandu and Patan, he expressly forbade a general massacre or even excessive looting. But when he came to take the hill town of Kirtipur, the site of his first humiliation in battle, which had warded off no less than three Gorkha assaults and did not finally surrender until 1769, a year after Kathmandu's submission, he showed less clemency. He commanded the mutilation of all the male inhabitants, whose noses and lips were to be hacked off. One group alone was spared—those musicians who played wind instruments. The soldiers who carried out this bloody business were Bhotes from the Tibetan borderlands.

When they had finished, all the dismembered noses and lips were then placed in baskets and found to weigh more than 120 pounds. Perhaps Prithvi Narayan Shah thought that the Bhotes had been over-enthusiastic in their nose-slicing, especially in their treatment of higher-caste victims. Whatever his reason, he ordered that the perpetrators of this atrocity themselves be killed.

The conquest of the Kathmandu Valley was in itself a major achievement, but Prithvi Narayan Shah's ambitions did not stop there. His personal prestige was at its peak; thousands of warlike hill men sought to join his armies, and with the riches of the Kathmandu Valley at his disposal, he could buy more of the muskets and small cannon that were transforming the ways in which mountain warfare was fought. Historic Nepal was only the springboard to a far broader Himalayan empire. But to achieve this vision of a "greater Nepal," he knew he had to act quickly.

By 1769 he was already forty-six years old. In terms of the average life expectancy of those times, he was an old man. Also,

there was at that moment a political vacuum to the south, where the once-mighty Mughal Empire was rapidly caving in on itself. Certainly it was in no position to intervene against an expansionist raja up in the hill country. That was the least of their priorities.

A new power in the northern Indian plains, however, threatened to prove less amenable: The British were rapidly expanding their territories and sought to establish a far broader "sphere of influence." They had attempted military intervention in Nepal once already, and despite the disaster that had proved, they might come back with far more powerful forces. Prithvi Narayan Shah saw a window of opportunity which he knew might close at any moment.

For all these reasons, the king was a man in a hurry. Most of the remaining six years of his life were spent in planning campaigns and the diplomacy needed to support them. His attempt to invade the Chaubisi principalities to the west came to nothing because for once their normally squabbling rulers formed a united front against the Gorkha menace, but when he turned his armies eastward there was little to stop them. In a series of swift campaigns he conquered the Kiratis, their poisoned arrows proving no match for modern muskets in the hands of a seasoned and well-disciplined army. All the eastern hill country as far as the Kingdom of Sikkim was overrun, besides which Nepal acquired an adjacent slice of the low-lying Terai that could be used for providing land grants to his soldiers.

By the end of Prithvi Narayan Shah's life, the House of Gorkha held all of what is now central and eastern Nepal. It could scarcely be called a unified state since local laws and customs remained intact even in conquered areas, while rajas who had voluntarily accepted Gorkha overlordship were allowed to continue ruling much as before. The strength of this new Kingdom of Nepal lay in it having the largest and best-disciplined army ever seen in the Himalayas. It was a military machine that needed to

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make further conquests, for only then could the king and his generals satisfy the hunger for land of the rank and file. Territorial expansion was not an option; it became a necessity.

This was the legacy of King Prithvi Narayan the Great. No mightier conqueror had emerged from the Himalayan foothills in more than a thousand years. But broad territories and an unbeatable army were not his only gifts to his successors. During his last years he spent much of his time dictating maxims on correct conduct and wise governance, which were collected in a book known as the *Dibya Upadesh*. He spoke of the state he had founded as a rock, something apart from himself, which should never be sundered, and he dreamed of his Kingdom of Nepal as a garden within which peoples of every tribe and caste could live together in peace and harmony.

Those ideals have informed Nepal's monarchy ever since, though most later kings have paid them only lip service, and the dream of a harmonious multi-ethnic state has yet to be realized. The "founding monarch" eventually died of a fever at the age of fifty-two, in the palace at Nuwakot, his body covered in blotches. In accordance with the customs of the time, his widow, Narendra Laxmi, performed *sati* and perished in the flames beside her husband. So too did eleven of her maidservants.

TWO

A COUNTRY CALLED NEPAL

King Prithvi Narayan Shah is, quite rightly, considered to be the founder of the nation. Before his conquests there was no such thing as a Kingdom of Nepal. When the term “Nepal” was used, it signified only the Kathmandu Valley, and even that was not a unified state. He and his immediate successors carved out a completely new kingdom, the likes of which had never been seen before in the Himalayas.

This new country encompassed all of the central Himalayan foothills. To the south lay the plains of India; to the north was the high Tibetan plateau. The hill country in between had always been a border or buffer zone between Asia’s two great valley-based civilizations, India and China. “Like a yam between two boulders,” was how Prithvi Narayan Shah described Nepal’s position, for it was constantly in danger of being crushed by the far more powerful empires that grew up on either side.

For most of the time, its natural defenses of mountains and fever-ridden forests kept potential enemies at bay. Of course, there were many ways through these barriers, secret paths known only to local rulers, as well as the main trans-Himalayan trade routes. But these were closely guarded, and for centuries it was a capital offense to reveal the “secrets of the hills” to outsiders.

Deliberate, self-imposed isolation became a cornerstone of Nepalese policy until the latter part of the twentieth century, mainly because it was deemed necessary to protect the country’s independence. Precisely because they were so isolated, the various peoples of Nepal retained habits and beliefs—about the divinity of kings and local deities who dwell in the high peaks—long after they had been discarded elsewhere. Which may be the reason why, when the first outsiders arrived in Kathmandu, they thought that they had discovered some forgotten Shangri-la. The reality, at least for most Nepalese, was very different.

On a clear day you can see the Himalayan snow peaks from Kathmandu. The views from the royal palace, which stands to the north of the Old City, may not be so good as from farther afield, but the proximity of those eternal snows is still felt whenever the winds blow down from the mountains. True giants rising more than 20,000 feet above sea level, they are the Kingdom of Nepal’s single most defining feature, and not only topographically, for to Hindus and Buddhists alike, those icebound peaks are the abode of the gods, a sacred space hanging between heaven and earth, a place of seclusion into which countless sages and hermits have withdrawn to achieve mystical union with the godhead.

Even Nepalis of a less religious bent are proud that six of the world’s eight tallest mountains either rise entirely within their country or straddle its borders. It is natural that the mighty Himalayas are celebrated so often in verse and song. So too are the

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forested foothills, the mountain torrents, and the steeply terraced rice fields, such simple pleasures of village life as sitting in the shade of a peepul tree, the heroism of Nepal's great warriors, and, of course, the pangs of love.

Some of these gentler aspects of village life are equally praised among other rural communities across the border in India. But the mountains, and the rigors of mountain life, set most Nepalis apart from their fellow Hindus. They are *paharis*—true hill men accustomed to carrying loads hung from straps across their foreheads up the steepest of tracks—as opposed to the soft-living people of the plains. Even though many Nepalis now live in subtropical valleys or down in the low-lying Terai, and so rarely have a chance to glimpse the Great Himalaya, those snow-covered mountains are always there in the imagination, an essential part of their being.

There is another characteristic that sets these proudly independent hill men apart from their neighbors in India or Chinese-occupied Tibet. They live within a kingdom that has never been conquered or occupied by a foreign power. Few countries in the world can make such a claim—not even Afghanistan, whose inhospitable terrain, warlike traditions, and geopolitical importance as a buffer zone between the Indian subcontinent and the rest of Asia are not that dissimilar from Nepal's. Impoverished they might be, and constrained by ancient and discriminatory customs, but the Nepalese people have at least never been subjected to colonial rule.

That this is so is largely due to Nepal's uncompromising terrain. The entire country is a natural fortress, defended to the north by the ice curtain of the Himalayas and the empty wastes of the Tibetan Plateau beyond. As for any potential invader from the south, they would first have to cross the jungles of the Terai, which, because they harbor a particularly virulent strain of malaria, have often proved an even better defense than the ice-bound Himalayan passes. An already enfeebled army would then

have to struggle over two ranges of steep and densely forested foothills before they could stare down on their prize, the fertile uplands known as the Pahad, with the Kathmandu Valley at their center.

Despite these difficulties, some foreign armies have succeeded in penetrating as far as the Kathmandu Valley and looted its rich palaces and temples, though none of them stayed for long. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Valley was subjected to repeated attacks by the powerful Khasa Kingdom to the west, and in 1349 the mainly Muslim armies of Shamsud-din Ilyas carried out a devastating raid that left most Hindu and Buddhist temples stripped of their treasures and religious images.

The next foreign invaders were the British, whose forces finally broke through the Gorkhas' stiff defenses in 1815. They halted at the edge of the Kathmandu Valley rather than attempt to occupy the land, since the British East India Company wanted to impose a treaty whereby Nepal fell within their "sphere of influence" rather than having to commit endless troops and resources to trying to hold down such ferocious hill men in so hostile a terrain.

In this, the British followed much the same line as previous imperial powers all the way back to the seventh-century Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo, and beyond that to the Indian Emperor Ashoka, who erected one of his stone pillars at Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace near what is now Nepal's border with India, in the third century B.C. The consistent aim of all these powerful neighbors was to hold some sway over the hill country, not to rule it directly. The difficulties of communication, the fragmented and warlike clans, the poverty of so much of the country, all served as a powerful disincentive to empire-building.

The British remained down in the plains and, as a result, Nepal was again spared direct colonial rule. The Nepalese people may have suffered long from misgovernment and tyranny, but always at the hands of their own rulers and not some foreign power. They

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have known neither the sense of subjugation nor the burning resentment that this can engender. At the same time they have missed out on whatever benefits colonialism brought in terms of education and medicine, of road-building and communications and a general broadening of horizons. Instead, Nepal remained shielded behind its mountain battlements until well into the second half of the twentieth century, a world apart where ancient customs survived intact long after they had been eroded elsewhere.

The same physical barriers that dissuaded foreign adventurers also worked against the emergence of a single unified state in the hills. The whole country is so broken up by mountain spurs projecting south from the main Himalayan range and by precipitous river gorges that run between them that, until quite recently, it was easier to travel from east to west by going down into the Indian plains and then climbing back into the hills. A more direct path almost always existed, but it usually involved scrabbling over high passes, trying one's luck with rickety bamboo suspension bridges, or fording swollen streams. Hence for much of its history Nepal has experienced not a single dominant power in the hills but clan chieftains or petty hill rajas whose authority rarely extended beyond their home valleys.

Before Prithvi Narayan Shah imposed a sense of unity, more than sixty squabbling principalities carved up the hill country, each with its own army and laws and customs. Because the mountains kept the people in different areas of the country apart, it was not unusual for the inhabitants of one valley to speak a completely separate and indecipherable language from those living just a few miles away as the crow flies, but on the far side of a 12,000-foot ridge. Very often this was because they belonged not just to a different tribe, but to a quite distinct ethnic and linguistic group, since the

gradual settlement of the Himalayan foothills over more than two millennia had drawn in many diverse peoples.

Among the earliest settlers in the middle hills were tribes of Mongoloid origin who speak a variety of languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. They probably migrated westward through the Himalayan foothills, though that was long before any written records were kept. With their broad features, stocky build, and fiercely martial traditions, these native hill men are very different from the predominantly Indo-Aryan peoples of the plains. It is from among these “martial tribes” that the world-famous Gurkha regiments are mainly recruited.

Perhaps the most famous of these martial tribes, the Gurungs, are known both for their military valor and because their home villages spread around the southern flanks of the Annapurna Massif—an area that in recent years has become the most popular trekking destination in Nepal. Their hilltop hamlets may command wondrous vistas of the Great Himalaya, but this is tough country to farm. Narrow terraces have to be carved out of hill-sides so steep that, whenever the monsoon rains are too heavy, entire strips of farmland disappear in landslides. Land hunger has been endemic here for centuries, which is why so many young men have left to become mercenaries. Gurungs who live in the high country observe a form of Tibetan Buddhism combined with far older animist beliefs; those who live at lower altitudes and have more regular contact with their Hindu neighbors have adopted some of the religious customs and practices of Hinduism, including a version of the caste system.

Their immediate neighbors to the south and west, the Magars, are equally renowned for their martial prowess. Of the thirteen members of the Brigade of Gurkhas to be decorated with Britain’s highest award for gallantry, the Victoria Cross, six were Magars, and long before they were recruited by the British, Magars had formed the backbone of local rulers’ armies. Living mostly from

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farming at lower altitudes, they had greater contact with Hindus who had come up from the plains, and adopted many of their practices.

The other fighting tribes recruited into the Gurkhas are the Limbus and the Rais, who inhabit the extreme east of modern-day Nepal. Known collectively as the Kirati, they probably migrated in prehistoric times from the borderlands of China and are generally of slight build and have dark, almond-shaped eyes. They too have long been respected for their fighting skills, and according to legend their distant ancestors established one of the first Himalayan empires around 1000 B.C. They retained their own distinctive customs, including the communal ownership of land.

Tribal peoples of equally early origin occupied the low-lying forest and foothills in the south. The Tharus, Danwars, Darais, and other indigenous tribes were able to survive in this malarial climate because they developed at least partial immunity to the disease. Although local myth traces their ancestry back to the "noble" lineage of the Rajputs, whose womenfolk fled into the jungles and preferred to marry their own servants rather than fall into Muslim hands, they tend to have strongly Mongoloid features, and their languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. The cutting down of forests and intensive cultivation of the Terai has left only a few isolated pockets of these indigenous peoples, and they are vastly outnumbered by more recent immigrants from the northern Indian plains. Other lowland tribes such as the Rajbansis, Dhimals, and Bodos from the eastern Terai and or the shy, forest-dwelling Chepangs and Kusundas of the central hills are all remnants of very early settlement.

Of all these tribal groups, the Tharus have proved most successful in adapting to modern life while still maintaining their distinctive identity. For others, the process of assimilation into the mainstream probably implies their cultural extinction sooner rather than later.

* * *

What is considered “mainstream” in Nepal—basically Hinduism and the Nepali language—was introduced by successive waves of Indo-Aryan settlers from the south and west. The first to arrive were a people known as the Khas, who are mentioned by such classical scholars as Ptolemy and Pliny as being a mountain-dwelling and warlike tribe. They entered what is now far-western Nepal around the sixth century A.D., and subsequently intermarried with the indigenous tribes. Due to their lax interpretation of caste rules, they were looked down upon by the stricter Hindus of the plains.

When these same members of the orthodox Hindu elite, the Rajput princes and their Brahman priests, found themselves under pressure from Muslim invaders, some of them fled their ancestral lands in Rajputana, northwestern India, and sought sanctuary in the hills. Among them were the distant ancestors of the present kings of Nepal. Their princely and semi-divine status, together with the Brahmans’ superior learning, usually assured them of a warm welcome. The Rajputs often married into the native elite or were otherwise coopted by their rulers, with the result that by the fifteenth century there were dozens of small principalities governed by Hindu princes. On the whole, infiltration rather than outright conquest was the rule.

These relative newcomers brought with them their own hierarchical caste system, which in its primitive form divided society into four castes—priests, warriors, merchants or artisans, and cultivators. Over time these subdivided into a multitude of occupational subcastes such as goldsmiths, tailors, barbers, domestic servants, blacksmiths, and at the bottom of the pile, the untouchables, so called because any physical contact with them is deemed to be polluting. Strictly speaking, intermarriage between castes is prohibited, but the incoming settlers got around this by conferring on local clan chieftains who converted to Hinduism the equivalent of

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the Kshatriya or warrior caste. The same distinction was granted to the offspring of a Brahman priest and a hill woman, and in time the descendants of these mixed marriages became the dominant group in western and central Nepal.

In time the ancient Sanskrit term for the warrior caste was corrupted into "Chhetri" in Nepali to describe this peculiarly Nepali caste. As this diluted form of Hinduism spread among peoples who had previously had nothing to do with caste rules, further accommodations were made. For instance, those who continued to drink alcohol, forbidden to Hindu warriors and priests, were still allowed to call themselves Chhetris, but only as Matwali, or "liquor-consuming" Chhetris. Nepalis who accepted a relatively high caste status were both honored and entitled to participate in the service of princes. In such ways were many of the originally non-caste peoples of the hills, the Khas of the western hills and the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, gradually brought within the caste system.

So, although the original teachings of Buddha reject the divisions of caste laws, the predominantly Buddhist peoples of central Nepal, such as the Newars and Tamangs, have developed their own parallel caste hierarchies. The influence of such ideas is felt least in the high borderlands between Nepal and Tibet. Most of the peoples who settled in this inhospitable region are of Tibetan stock, and they all practice a form of lamaist Buddhism. Best known for their mountaineering expertise, the Sherpas from the slopes around Mount Everest retain a rich oral tradition in which history and myth often mingle, though without a written language of their own the Sherpa tradition is now being eroded.

Even more isolated are the Lobas of Mustang, who inhabit a high-altitude desert on the far side of the main Himalayan range that can be reached only by climbing up the world's deepest gorge. The Kingdom of Mustang is an anomaly, a semi-independent principality within the greater Kingdom of Nepal whose relation-

ship with Kathmandu is based on a treaty of 1789 whereby the local kings accepted the Shah dynasty as their feudal overlords. There is still a king of Mustang, and he and his people still speak a unique Tibetan dialect and follow the Sakya school of Buddhism. Here too, however, a distinct culture is being gradually undermined. In government-run schools, all the teaching is in Nepali.

The same process of cultural erosion is going on among the other border peoples, such as the Lhomis and the yak herders of Dolpo. They are all lumped together in popular parlance as "Bhotes," the generic term used by southerners for those who speak a Tibetan language. Their ancestors may have migrated from the high plateau to the north, and their culture may be very close to that of Tibet, yet for more than 200 years all these Bhotes have been subjects of the kings of Nepal. Only recently, however, have they been taught to think of themselves first and foremost as Nepalese citizens.

It has been estimated that there are as many different languages and dialects spoken within Nepal as in the whole of western Europe. Certainly there is as great a difference in terms of climate, topography, and culture between the moonlike mountains of Mustang in the north and the steaming jungles down by the Indian border as exists between, say, Norway and Sicily. That a country so broken up by razor-backed ridges and precipitous gorges could ever be unified seemed impossible—until, that is, Prithvi Narayan Shah seized control of the three kingdoms in the Kathmandu Valley.

The Valley has always played a pivotal role in the central Himalayan region. Whereas most other valleys have been gouged out by swift-flowing rivers and are therefore narrow and steep-sided, Kathmandu's resembles a huge rice bowl encircled by mountains.

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According to both Buddhist and Hindu myths, this bowl once contained a lake that was drained by either Lord Vishnu or his Buddhist counterpart Manjushri carving out the gorge through which the sacred Bagmati River flows down toward the plains. Part of that legend has been confirmed by geologists, who have found that the valley did once form the bottom of a lake, though they point to seismic activity rather than divine intervention as the reason it drained away. Apart from the Vale of Kashmir, centered around Dal Lake, there is no broader upland valley in the Himalayas.

The Valley enjoys many natural advantages. Sitting above 4,000 feet, it does not suffer the terrible summer heat of the northern Indian plains. Its lake-bottom soil is rich and the arrival of the monsoon and winter rains more certain than elsewhere, allowing for the cultivation of two crops a year. The valley floor is crisscrossed with streams that carve deep ravines in places, but that also feed an intricate system of irrigation. Just to the north are two relatively easy passes through the High Himalaya. These have been used for centuries by merchants and pilgrims traveling between India and Tibet or the lands of Central Asia and China that lie beyond.

Sitting astride this trade route, surrounded by easily defended mountain ridges, the Kathmandu Valley was well placed for the early development of urban civilization. The rich soil was good for making the bright red bricks that are still the hallmark of its buildings, while the abundant supply of hardwoods provided the raw material for skilled Newari craftsmen to fashion into the most exquisite carvings. Above all, its wealth and large population compared to other hill states distinguished this area.

The original inhabitants of this thrice-blessed valley, the Newars, have always proved themselves adept as traders and craftsmen. Traditionally, the staples of trade were salt and raw wool, brought down from Tibet, which were exchanged for rice

and other foodstuffs that could not be grown at higher altitudes. Higher-value goods, such as Chinese silks, were traded for spices, ivory, and coral. Newari metalwork was also much in demand. The trans-Himalayan caravans could number thousands of yaks and pack-ponies, and so long as Kathmandu stood at the cross-roads of the principal trade routes its merchant community prospered.

Much of this surplus wealth was lavished on building temples and palaces whose richly carved doorways and windows display the skills of Newar craftsmen. The erotic woodcarvings of deities and adepts in tantric embrace that adorn the great Durbar Squares—not just in Kathmandu, but equally in the other royal capitals of Patan and Bhaktapur—are almost entirely the work of Newars. So too are the gilt-bronze statues of ancient kings on their stone pedestals, the fine wall paintings and scroll pictures within their palaces, and the wheeled chariots and ceremonial masks brought out at religious festivals.

Most of the older temples are built in the distinctive pagoda style, which may have developed from the simple thatch awnings that can still be found protecting village shrines along the southern slopes of the Himalayas or, up in the Tibetan borderlands, Buddhist stupas or chortens made of beaten earth. The movement of Newari craftsmen along the trade routes to Tibet and China, where their skills were much sought after, may have introduced this rudimentary style to East Asia. Later on it was further elaborated into the multi-tiered pagoda—the finest examples being the five-tiered Nyatapola Temple in Bhaktapur and the Taleju Mandir next to the Old Royal Palace in Kathmandu.

The Newars' skills as metalworkers extended to minting coins not only for their own kings, but for Tibet and other neighboring states. The Tibetans had plentiful reserves of gold dust and silver bullion but no mint of their own, so they exchanged precious metal for finished coinage. Since the authorities in Kathmandu

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repeatedly lowered the gold and silver content of the minted coins they returned, this became a highly lucrative business and one of the mainstays of government finances. But whereas the Newars excel in the peaceful pursuits of trading, farming, and a whole range of artisanal activities, they do not have a tradition of soldiering. This may be in part because so many of them have been city dwellers for so long, but the main reason is that until the latter part of the twentieth century the great majority of Newars have followed Buddhism, that most pacifist of religions.

It is likely that Buddhism entered the Kathmandu Valley very early on. The historical Buddha was himself a prince of the Sakya line, and even if these Sakyas were little more than clan chieftains, they ruled over an area of what is now the Nepalese Terai as early as the sixth century B.C. Not long after that, the new religion spread from its heartland in Bihar up through the neighboring hills and into the Kathmandu Valley. In a land where family lineage remains all-important, there are still Newars belonging to the priestly Sakya clan who trace their ancestry back to the family of the historical Buddha.

That Buddhism had a profound impact on the Newar population can be seen today in the thousands of temples, the domed stupas within which religious relics and treasures are secreted, and the smaller wayside shrines that dot the Valley. Oldest and most important for the Newars is the hilltop stupa of Swayambhunath, its whitewashed dome surmounted with a golden spire and surrounded by lesser temples, monasteries, and shrines. Legend has it that the mound on which it stands was formed when a previous manifestation of the Buddha threw a lotus seed into the lake that then filled the Kathmandu Valley, though inscriptions suggest the first stupa was probably built here in the early centuries of the Christian era. The even larger Bodhnath Stupa, with its fluttering

prayer flags and emblematic eyes looking out in the four cardinal directions, is of more recent construction and has become the focus of Tibetan as opposed to Newar Buddhism. There is a tradition among the Newars, however, that Bodhnath was originally founded by a local king during the fifth century to atone for his having killed his own father.

The Buddhism of the Newars is very different from that found anywhere else. It may have been the religion of the majority in the Valley for nearly two millennia, but throughout that time it has coexisted with Hinduism. The king, the high priests, and the warrior castes were usually Hindus, and their concepts of social hierarchy and ritual purity had a profound impact on their Buddhist subjects.

The Newars developed a distinct system of caste, with its own prohibitions of inter-caste marriages and untouchability. The Buddhist monkhood came to resemble the Hindu Brahmans in that their status and priestly duties were defined by their family and caste rather than monastic observance or other forms of merit. Newar monks are allowed to marry and lead normal family lives, and their religious duties are mainly to act as family priests for their hereditary parishioners. As Buddhists they are permitted to eat meat, including buffalo and pig, and their pantheon of deities, family rituals, and religious festivals are quite distinct. But so far has the exchange of customs gone that nominally Buddhist Newars may have a Brahman as their family priest, while Hindus often turn to Buddhist or tantric healers. They attend each other's shrines and festivals, each worshiping in their own manner. Even at the holiest of Hindu shrines—the temple to Shiva at Pashupatinath, where there is a blanket prohibition against non-Hindus entering the inner sanctum—the presence of Newar Buddhists is accepted because they are seen as co-religionists.

This intermingling of Hindu and Buddhist traditions is most striking in the role of the Kumari during the yearly Hindu festivals

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of Indrajatra and Dasain. The Kumari is a living goddess, an incarnation of the primordial mother goddess who is at once wrathful and the city's protector. She is revered as such from the day she is chosen, usually at between two and four years of age, until her first menstruation, when she has to make way for a new Kumari. During Indrajatra she is pulled in a chariot through the different quarters of Old Kathmandu before giving the *tika* or ritual blessing to the king, who is himself a partial incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. After the mass sacrifices of buffaloes and black male goats at Dasain, she must walk fearlessly into the Taleju temple past long lines of their severed heads. Although the Kumari features so prominently in Hindu religious festivals, she is always chosen from the Buddhist priestly clan of Sakyas. The crossover between different religious traditions is encapsulated in the Kumari's closeted and ritualized existence in the house assigned to her just opposite the Hanuman Dhoka Palace.

The worship of mother goddesses who must be propitiated by blood sacrifice goes back to before the arrival of either Buddhism or Brahmanical Hinduism in the hills. It was part of the old religion, and stone circles at crossroads or on hilltops testify to the antiquity of these cults. There are thousands of these "power places" around the Kathmandu Valley, and many of them still have ritual offerings of food placed before them. Sometimes the offerings are made to propitiate demons or evil spirits whose thirst for human blood is well known, and who are deemed to cause all manner of ailments. It is possible for both evil and benign spirits to come of their own accord, and one of the reasons that the windows of Newar houses have such densely carved wooden screens is to prevent their entry.

More often these spirits are believed to be sent by witches. Throughout the hill country, among both Hindus and Buddhists, popular beliefs about the powers of witches to do harm through casting the "evil eye" on their enemies or through the reciting of

spells or black mantras are so widely held that there are still occasional witch-hunts. These usually culminate in the unfortunate suspect being held down and force-fed human feces through a jute bag, which is believed to deprive the witch of power.

However, most people who suspect they have been bewitched seek out a tantric healer or shaman to take countermeasures. The preference, particularly among Newars, for tantric healers can be traced back to the importance of esoteric tantric cults in the Kathmandu Valley from the early medieval period onward. Tantrism became embedded in both Buddhist and Hindu rituals, and if its practice gradually moved away from its original search for self-liberation toward an admixture of high magic and formalized initiation ceremonies, it was and still is deemed to be power-enhancing. So it is to tantric adepts that many Nepalese still turn when faced with an illness that the hospital cannot cure.

Many of the former kings of Nepal are believed to have undergone tantric initiations. Both the esoteric nature of tantrism and its power-enhancing possibilities must have appealed to those whose very purpose was to be the embodiment of power. These Hindu kings may have been the incarnation of a deity, but they also sought out other means to increase their prowess. So besides their Brahman priests and orthodox ayurvedic physicians, they turned to Newar astrologers for knowledge of their future and to tantric initiates for enhancing their sexual and physical powers. Most of these experts were also Newars, and there is a tradition stretching back generations among certain Newar families of loyal service within the royal household.

THREE

THE REGENCY SYNDROME

When he knew that his death was approaching, Prithvi Narayan Shah summoned his family before him and specifically forbade them from carving up the lands he had so painfully united. He was all too familiar with the ways in which rival heirs could fight over their inheritance, particularly the families of hill rajas. It had been one of his favorite stratagems to play upon such internal jealousies among neighboring states in order to weaken them before he launched an attack. To prevent this from happening to his own family, he ordained that the Kingdom of Nepal in its entirety was to go to the eldest son, and that in future the principle of primogeniture should always be observed.

The succession went smoothly enough. Prithvi Narayan Shah's eldest son, the twenty-three-year-old Pratap Singh, was proclaimed King of Nepal in 1775. To be on the safe side, he had one of his uncles and his younger brother, Bahadur Shah, arrested and

thrown into prison—just in case they planned to create little kingdoms for themselves. Their sentences were later commuted to being exiled in India.

Over time the strict rules of succession laid down by Prithvi Narayan Shah became embedded in the Royal Constitution. Although there were frequent disputes over who should wield power, the kingdom itself remained intact, and with one notable exception, the crown of Nepal passed from father to eldest son or grandson through ten generations.

Some of these Shah kings were wantonly cruel. Others gave themselves over to alcohol, drugs, and concubines. But none of that mattered so long as the dynasty survived. Provided that they were not actually deposed by rivals or the very institution of monarchy thrown onto the scrap heap of history, there could be good kings and bad kings. The whole country might suffer if the king was vicious or ineffectual, as was often the case. But for the dynasty to survive, the only thing that really mattered was that the king produce an heir—male, legitimate, and of pure lineage.

The man who inherited the Kingdom of Nepal in January 1775 was all of these things. King Pratap Singh may have been more inclined to poetry than fighting campaigns, but his lawfully married wife, Queen Rajendra Laxmi, was already pregnant and within four months bore him a healthy son. The royal succession was secure.

Unfortunately, Pratap Singh did not stop there. He soon took a second, unlawful wife, Maiju Rani, who was the daughter of a Newar family and therefore of the wrong caste. Abandoning the affairs of state to his ministers, he spent most of his time with her, participating in secret tantric rituals that usually involved harnessing sexual energy and the use of powerful narcotics. This naturally displeased Queen Rajendra Laxmi, especially once she learned that her rival was pregnant by the king.

The very possibility of an alternative succession stirred jeal-

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ousies within the royal court. While the practice of taking multiple wives and concubines might ensure there would be numerous royal offspring, it provoked bitter rivalries between their mothers—each of them pushing her own child to be the next king. Such conflicts were endemic in a court culture where the role of the future king's mother was all-important. Factions began coalescing around the senior and junior queens. On this occasion, however, the matter was not put to the test, because King Pratap Singh died of smallpox at the age of twenty-five, just before any rival heir was born.

Queen Rajendra Laxmi's nearly two-year-old son, Rana Bahadur Shah, was declared the third King of Nepal unopposed. She was immediately appointed regent, with extensive powers to govern on his behalf and she quickly took her revenge on her former rival. Maiju Rani's pregnancy was allowed to come to term, for this was the late king's child she was carrying. But once she had been delivered of a son, who was immediately named Sher Bahadur, she was taken away from the royal palace and forced to perform *sati*. This, despite the fact that more than a month had passed since the late king's cremation. But the new queen regent was taking no chances.

Nepal had its third king in less than three years. The rules of primogeniture had been strictly observed, but the situation in which Nepal now found itself, with an infant on the throne, was not conducive to strong government. The young King Rana Bahadur would not be able to rule by himself for nearly seventeen years, during which time that almost unconditional loyalty offered by most Nepalese to their monarch had no natural focus. Over such a long minority there is a natural tendency for the very personal powers of kingship to be gradually eroded. It is one of the built-in weaknesses of any hereditary monarchy.

It did not help that there was a power struggle over who should rule in the boy-king's name. Queen Mother Rajendra Laxmi had

been appointed as regent, but her authority was disputed by the late king's younger brother, Bahadur Shah. Both were still in their early twenties, both headstrong personalities who refused to compromise. So when Bahadur Shah argued for a new military campaign, the queen mother refused her consent. Infuriated by this, he staged a coup with the support of the Council of Nobles, who had been scandalized by some of Rajendra Laxmi's habits, which involved affecting masculine ways and dressing her maidservants up as armed men and having them parade around on horses and elephants. Bahadur Shah had her confined to her apartments, where she was forced to wear handcuffs made of silver. But once he had left the capital to join his armies at the front, Rajendra Laxmi adroitly turned the tables on him. She reclaimed the regency and had Bahadur Shah sent into exile.

All of this required a great deal of political machinating. Mutually hostile factions formed around each of the rival claimants, and the Royal Palace became a whispering gallery as courtiers and generals tried to choose which side to back. It had a corrosive effect on relations between the Crown and the Gorkha nobility. Where Prithvi Narayan Shah had always been able to count on his commanders' loyalty and rewarded them on their merits, those who now ruled in the king's name had to win over supporters to their cause by offering them military commands, land grants, and other favors. Ability was no longer required for holding high office, and Rajendra Laxmi sent some exceptional commanders into exile because she was unsure whether they were completely trustworthy. What she looked for was personal loyalty, especially in men whose extended families and clan connections would help bolster her own power base. Factionalism and intrigue replaced the deep-seated trust that had previously existed between king and nobility, and once factionalism has set in it is very hard to extirpate.

The queen mother's party remained in control until she died

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of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-four, whereupon Bahadur Shah was recalled from exile and became regent. One of his first acts was to purge the court of those factions that had previously been hostile to him. Had it gone on for much longer, such bitter infighting at court might have spelled doom for the Shah dynasty, but against all expectations the new regent did not try to carve out a personal fiefdom for himself. The Kingdom of Nepal remained intact, and with the resumption of the military campaign against the western hill rajas, rival factions at court put their differences on hold. Nepal's monarchy had survived its first crisis. But the mutual trust that had existed between the king and the leading families of Gorkha was gone for ever.

If Prithvi Narayan Shah's victory against overwhelming odds may be compared to the exploits of Frederick the Great, the endless conquests of his younger son Bahadur Shah would make him the Napoleon of the Himalayas. Under Bahadur Shah's leadership the armies of Gorkha carried all before them, extending the kingdom's frontier some 400 miles to the west. True, he had at his command a formidable military machine, the likes of which had never been seen before in the Himalayas, and he was careful not to get entangled in quarrels with any of the powers down in the plains of India, where the Gorkhas' superiority in hill fighting counted for nothing against massed cavalry and cannons. But in the specialized art of hill warfare he was, initially at least, unbeatable. So terrifying was his reputation that many hill rajas fled simply on hearing of his approach.

Like his father, Bahadur Shah was a great tactician and leader of men. Yet his successes were not only military. Nearly half of the hill states were won over by diplomacy rather than force of arms. Before the start of his western campaign, for instance, he gained the powerful Raja of Palpa's support by marrying his

daughter. Other hill rajas were offered generous terms if they would voluntarily accede to the Kingdom of Nepal. They and their successors could rule over their lands as before, provided they paid a token annual tribute to Kathmandu and allowed Gorkha armies to pass through their territories unhindered.

Bahadur Shah began with a lightning campaign against the Chaubisi kingdoms, to the immediate west of Gorkha, moving his companies so swiftly that he was able to subdue each raja in turn before any allies could come to their assistance. He then moved his campaigning to the western hills, conquering the Kingdom of Jumla and all the other principalities as far as the present-day boundary of Nepal at the Mahakali River. His armies then advanced farther west and occupied Kumaon, now part of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. He was planning to invade Garhwal and continue the advance all the way to Kashmir, thereby creating a single empire throughout the foothills of the Himalayas.

Whether such an extended "Greater Nepal" could have been held together is doubtful, for in the west this Hindu kingdom would have included a sizable Kashmiri Muslim population. Another weakness, already being felt by Gorkha generals as they moved farther west, was the problem of bringing up supplies and reinforcements over extended lines of communication in such rugged country. Very often their troops had to "live off the land," requisitioning foodstuffs and transport from the local inhabitants, which might work as a short-term expedient but did little to encourage loyalty among their newly conquered subjects. Bahadur Shah's dreams of yet further conquests had to be abandoned, however, when events closer to home necessitated his return to Kathmandu.

In 1792 a large and well-equipped Chinese-Tibetan army made an incursion into Nepal and advanced toward the capital. This punitive expedition was in response to several Gorkha incursions into Tibet, culminating in an attack on Shigatse during

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which the fabulous riches of the Tashilunpo Monastery were plundered and carried back to Kathmandu. Bahadur Shah had to sue for peace, the terms of which included returning all the looted treasures and sending a tribute mission to Peking every five years—a clause that later Chinese rulers have claimed establishes their suzerainty over Nepal. Even Communist China, which fully recognizes Nepal's sovereign status, has occasionally used language reminiscent of the Manchu and Ming emperors by referring to Nepal along with Sikkim and Bhutan as the “gates” that guard its southern borders.

After the peace treaty Bahadur Shah no longer looked unbeatable, and for this failure he was to pay a heavy price. So long as reports of more victories arrived in Kathmandu—and with them the promise of more land grants and military commands for the noble families—his position as regent had been secure. But despite the enormous expansion of Nepalese territory, there were still not enough spoils to go around. The army had to be satisfied first, and the numbers of men under arms had grown threefold since Prithvi Narayan Shah's time. Most of the newly conquered lands were assigned as temporary *jagirs* to soldiers, though there was a growing tendency for especially valued officers to be granted *birta* lands, which remained with their families in perpetuity. So although in theory the king held all lands within Nepal, the Crown was actually worse off than before.

The same was true of tax revenues. Keeping the army well armed, paid, and fed through these long wars was an extremely expensive business. In fact, it consumed practically all the royal government's tax revenues. The kingdom may have doubled in size, but that did not mean more money flowed into the royal coffers. There were dozens of hill states that had voluntarily joined Nepal, and these sent only token contributions. Instead, the main burden fell on the same Nepali hill farmers who already had to hand over half of their crops to the government, not to mention

providing porters for carrying army supplies free of charge. This burden became even heavier when, to maximize his short-term receipts, Bahadur Shah contracted out revenue collection to private tax-farmers, who were given virtual control of an area in return for sending an agreed lump sum to Kathmandu. The tax-farmers leaned heavily on the peasantry, and since they had greater powers within their area than royal officials, there was no longer any means of redress for those who felt they had been dealt with unjustly.

An ad hoc system grew up to satisfy the needs of the military elite. Although it was imposed in the king's name, there was no real advantage to the royal treasury, which tottered from one financial shortfall to the next. New demands for cash arose continually, not least from the increasingly restive King Rana Bahadur. For years he had been kept on a tight leash by his regent uncle, but as a teenager his tastes grew ever more extravagant. He demanded that new additions be made to the Royal Palace at Hanuman Dhoka and that religious festivals be celebrated with more pomp and ceremony. He thought the temples and priests should receive truly royal munificence. All of this may have been a further drain on the treasury, but as the young king approached the day when he would rule in person it became impossible to refuse his requests.

King Rana Bahadur clearly had no affection for his uncle. By one of his first edicts when he assumed full powers, the former regent was placed under house arrest. It did not matter that he had served his country well and won countless battles in the west. People at court chose to remember the more recent humiliation of the Tibet War. So Nepal's greatest commander was left to languish in obscurity for a couple of years before being incarcerated for life. His imprisonment lasted only six months, for he died in jail under

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mysterious circumstances, probably from poisoning. For a warrior prince, it was an ignominious end.

The prospects for the House of Gorkha, on the other hand, looked extremely promising. It had survived a long minority and all the perils that went with it. Now there was an adult king on the throne again, and to begin with, he showed a vigorous interest in governing the country himself. As for the royal succession, that too looked secure. Rana Bahadur had been married at fourteen, first to his senior queen, who bore him a daughter, and then to his junior queen, who in due course produced two sons. There was every hope that the king would live long enough for his heirs to grow up and attain their majority.

After what looked like a promising start, it soon emerged that Rana Bahadur did not relish the high duties he was born to. During his youth he had been deliberately encouraged by his uncle to lead a life of debauchery—mostly to prevent him from exercising his rightful authority. Unfortunately, these habits persisted. As king, he showed no interest in military campaigning and increasingly ignored the business of government. Although he already had two wives through arranged marriages, he now fell hopelessly in love with Kantavati Devi, a young widow of a Brahman family who had come to worship at the Pashupatinath temple.

So captivated was he by Kantavati that he had her brought to him at the royal palace and demanded she marry him immediately. She put him off for six months, arguing that it was too soon after her late husband's death, for whose soul she had come to pray at Pashupatinath. She also insisted that if they married and had a son together, then this child and not one of his half-brothers should become the next king of Nepal.

The king agreed to her terms, even though to promise so much threw aside the established rules of succession. Additionally, the marriage itself was contrary to Hindu custom on two counts.

Widows were deemed unsuitable to marry, and a wife from the Brahman caste was inappropriate for a king of undiluted Rajput blood. But none of this mattered to Rana Bahadur Shah. They were married, and to the intense displeasure of his two other wives, he made Kantavati Devi his queen, with the full title of *rani*. Within the year she gave birth to a healthy boy, who was named Girvan Yuddha. By then Kantavati had already contracted smallpox, and the king was driven half-mad with the thought of losing her.

Since she herself thought she was dying, Kantavati reminded the king of his promise to her about their son succeeding to the throne. She also pointed out that Rana Bahadur's own horoscope foretold he would die young. This would leave their infant son, Girvan Yuddha, an orphan. She anticipated that since her son was neither the firstborn nor of unmixed Rajput blood, there would be opposition to his succeeding to the throne and argued that it would be far better to have the boy crowned while they were both alive and able to influence the outcome. In other words, she asked the king to abdicate in favor of his son.

To agree to this would not only be a dereliction of the king's duty, it would place the entire Kingdom of Nepal in jeopardy. The inevitable consequence of such a decision would be another long minority, precisely what Nepal did not need at the time. But Rana Bahadur, whose mental state was almost certainly unstable, was won over to the scheme. He was in the habit of putting his personal wishes—or rather those of his beloved—before any reasons of state. So he first declared his eldest and rightful heir illegitimate, and then renounced the crown in favor of Girvan Yuddha, retiring completely from public life so that he could devote himself to caring for his ailing queen.

Lavish offerings were made to the most revered Brahmans and temples in Kathmandu, and these seemed to have worked, because eventually Kantavati Devi did make a partial recovery. But upon seeing her smallpox-ravaged face in the mirror, she committed

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suicide rather than let anyone look at her. Her death drove the former king so mad with grief that he ordered his troops to desecrate the temples where offerings had been made. He had the Brahman priests killed or forced them to commit defiling acts by which they would lose their caste. If any of his soldiers refused to carry out such sacrilegious acts, they themselves had boiling oil poured over their bodies.

As the former king raged in his grief, a group of leading courtiers withdrew to Nuwakot, where the infant king was being kept safe. From there the Council of Nobles ordered Rana Bahadur into exile and, with most of the army behind them, they began to march on the capital. Rana Bahadur fled to Benares, where he occupied his time at first with religious devotions. Only later did he begin plotting to regain power in Kathmandu.

King Rana Bahadur's abdication left Nepal in turmoil with an infant on the throne again, not out of necessity, but through a deliberate act of will.

In the absence of anyone else, the country was now nominally ruled by the former king's second wife, Queen Suvarnaprabha, who had remained in Kathmandu and now assumed the regency. In fact, it was governed by a group of *kazis*, or strongmen, who in their struggle for supremacy used every means at their disposal, including assassination. The failings of an individual monarch encouraged the leading families of Gorkha—the Pandes, the Thapas, the Basnyats—to look to their own interests. And where once these had been bound up with loyal service to the king, now the noble clans concentrated on building up their own networks of patronage. In effect, they began to behave like alternative royal dynasties. A political culture based on fear and self-interest developed that was to have grave consequences for future kings of Nepal.

Rana Bahadur's role in these events was not over yet. His ill-treated senior wife, Rajareshwari Devi, escaped Benares and returned alone to Nepal, where she took charge of the boy-king and, after striking a deal with the influential leader of the Council of Nobles, Damodar Pande, took upon herself the powers of regent. Her husband had to remain in the "honorable custody" of the British while they tried to complete a trade treaty with Kathmandu. But when these negotiations failed, the British decided to free him, and he immediately set out for Nepal with his loyal followers, including his chief bodyguard and adviser, Bhim Sen Thapa, intending to seize back his throne.

Queen Rajareshwari was rightly alarmed by this and despatched Damodar Pande south to intercept her husband's party. But the former king won over the Nepali troops to his side and reentered Kathmandu in triumph, where he banished Queen Rajareshwari from court and assumed the regency. Damodar Pande and four others were executed. Otherwise, Rana Bahadur acted with the restraint needed to gain the support of the nobility.

It helped that his return coincided with a renewal of military campaigning. Gorkha armies stormed westward, taking the Kingdom of Garhwal and the constellation of minor hill principalities known as the Barha and Athara Thakuri. There was no power in the hills that could withstand them. They were poised to continue their advance onward to Kashmir, with the renewed prospect of a Nepalese empire stretching almost the entire length of the Himalayas. Only the great fort of Kangra stood in their way. But as the Nepali army was besieging Kangra Fort it ran into the armies of another great martial race, the Sikhs, whose wily, one-eyed ruler Ranjit Singh sent his own troops into Kangra. The Nepalese were wary of taking on the dominant power in northern India and so for a second time their advance toward Kashmir was held in check.

For two years Rana Bahadur held power in Kathmandu, to the accompaniment of constant news of victories and fresh land

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grants to be distributed. The spoils of war kept his commanders and the noble families happy, at least for the time being. But when in the spring of 1806 the regent also assumed the powers of *mukhtiyar*, or chief minister, there were many at court who feared a renewal of the earlier rule of terror. The corridors of Hanuman Dhoka Palace buzzed with rumors of conspiracies, both real and imagined, while in the great houses of Kathmandu the nobility and military commanders weighed their next moves.

It was in this atmosphere of mutual suspicion that the regent summoned his half-brother, Sher Bahadur Shah, to answer charges of purloining state funds and abusing his authority. The session was held late at night, in *darbar*, or open court, with the regent and members of the Council of Nobles attending. Faced with this most grievous accusation, Sher Bahadur asked to be allowed to drink some tea because his throat was dry. Permission was given, though Rana Bahadur taunted him for this display of weakness. The two half-brothers had started quarreling violently when the attention of all present was distracted by the howl of a jackal just outside. Sher Bahadur seized the moment, drew his sword, and struck the former king dead before anyone else could react. One of the *kazis* in attendance then leaped on Sher Bahadur and strangled him with his bare hands.

That kazi's name was Bal Narsingh Konwar, and his direct descendants were to assume the princely name of Rana and would rule Nepal for more than a century. Nobody present when their former king was cut down could have foretold such an unlikely outcome, for the Konwars were only a minor noble clan at the time. The double deaths within the Shah family did not, however, lead to the collapse of the monarchy or the rules of succession. Throughout all the turmoil, young Girvan Yuddha remained on the throne of Nepal.

* * *

During the ensuing chaos, Rana Bahadur's counselor and bodyguard Bhim Sen Thapa alerted the Royal Guard of Rana Bahadur's death and told them there were more conspirators within the palace. He ordered the guards to surround the hall where the Council of Nobles and courtiers had assembled. They were to kill anyone who resisted. The result was a general massacre in which three royal relatives and more than seventy members of the nobility were executed. But that was not the end of the bloodletting. The purge of any possible opponents continued apace, with the banished Queen Rajaeshwari forced to perform *sati* one week after her murdered husband had been cremated. Fifteen royal mistresses and female servants joined her in the flames.

Already, within two generations of Prithvi Narayan Shah's death, the institution of monarchy had imploded. A royal fratricide had been allowed to take place, and there were enough corpses littering the corridors of Hanuman Dhoka Palace to keep the funeral pyres down by the Bagmati River burning for days on end. The scale of the slaughter was terrible, the damage largely self-inflicted. Not in the goriest of Jacobean tragedies does one encounter so many futile deaths.

Even before the untimely departure of two royal brothers, the very system of government set up by the founding monarch had fallen into ruin. It required a strong king at its head to impose a sense of unity and purpose on the Gorkha clans. Rana Bahadur had signally failed to provide such leadership, preferring to follow his personal preferences by marrying outside his caste, offering up his abdication, and then refusing to leave the political stage. The end result was bloody turmoil and the further undermining of royal authority. But all was not lost. If the Shah family was incapable of providing a strong man, there were others ready and able to step into the gap.

In theory, the regency automatically passed to Rana Bahadur's

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fifth wife, Queen Tripura Sundari. She was just twelve years old, a member of the Thapa clan and had been married to Rana Bahadur only the previous year. Partly because of her age, but also because of her kinship to Bhim Sen Thapa, this young girl was excused from performing *sati*. Instead, she was supposed to rule on behalf of the nine-year-old King Girvan Yuddha. Since she was not much older herself, real authority was concentrated in the hands of her kinsman Bhim Sen Thapa, who now took up the combined roles of chief minister and commander in chief.

Anyone who had opposed him in the past was arrested and killed on charges of conspiracy against the Crown. No trials were held and no evidence of any real conspiracy produced, but still hundreds of the leading families of Gorkha were purged. Their lands and titles were confiscated, and the principal beneficiary was Bhim Sen Thapa and his supporters.

It was a bloody start to a regime that would last more than thirty years. Yet it was during the early part of Bhim Sen Thapa's rule that Nepali military expansion reached its fullest extent. By 1806 "Greater Nepal" stretched from the River Sutlej in the west to the Teesta and the borders of Bhutan in the east. The Gorkhas controlled all of Garhwal and Kumaon as well as broad tracts of fertile land down in the Terai. At its peak, "Greater Nepal" was at least a third larger than the present Kingdom of Nepal. Even this was a relatively compact realm compared to the endless plateaux of neighboring Tibet, but the lands to the south of the Himalayas were much more fertile and densely settled. No greater Himalayan empire had existed before.

Further western expansion remained barred by the powerful kingdom of the Sikhs. Any plans to invade the rich valleys of Kashmir had to be abandoned indefinitely. The Tibet War had shown that any attempt to expand northward would eventually bring down the wrath of Imperial China. And to the south and east, Nepal was hemmed in by the rising power of the British East

India Company, whose agents were trying to impose the principle that Nepali control ceased where the hills met the northern Indian plains.

This was unacceptable to the Nepalis. Many of the hill rajas they had conquered held lands in the Terai, and these had been transferred to the House of Gorkha and their supporters. Although they rarely visited the Terai except for hunting trips, the royal family and nobility drew much of their revenue from landed estates down in the plains. Gorkhali soldiers since the days of Prithvi Narayan Shah had often been rewarded for their service with *jagirs* in the Terai. The Nepali sphere of influence was encroaching inexorably on villages whose ownership they disputed with the Nawab of Oudh and other client princes of the British East India Company. When villagers were carried off by the Nepalis as slaves into the hills, the Company's agents protested that they were British subjects. The southern expansion had set the Kingdom of Nepal on an inevitable collision course with the mightiest empire on earth.

FOUR

A HOUSE DIVIDED

The Anglo-Nepalese War lasted from 1814 until 1816, but the outcome was never really in doubt. The British, whose armies on the other side of the world were defeating those of the greatest general Europe had seen in 500 years, had mustered a huge force, vastly superior in both numbers and armaments, and they advanced in five separate columns along a 700-mile front. To begin with, the Gorkhas' raw courage and experience in mountain warfare brought some astonishing victories. Three British columns had to withdraw in disarray. But more troops were thrown into the attack, and sheer weight of numbers combined with the use of mountain artillery eventually wore down the Gorkha defenses. With British forces poised to march on Kathmandu, Bhim Sen Thapa's government was forced to sue for peace.

The peace treaty signed at Sugauli in 1816 imposed tough terms on the Nepalese. The recently acquired provinces of Kumaon,

Garhwal, and parts of what is now Himachal Pradesh were annexed by the British, thereby blocking any westward expansion. In the east, a strategic strip of hill country between the Teesta and Mechi Rivers was restored to the Kingdom of Sikkim under British guarantee, to prevent any further Gorkha forays in that direction. Down in the plains, broad tracts of the Terai were transferred to the British or one of their client states. The Kingdom of Nepal lost roughly a third of its lands and was now surrounded on three sides by British-held territories or protectorates.

In exchange, the British allowed the Nepalese a free hand in their own internal affairs. They did insist, however, that a British Resident be stationed in Kathmandu, and that the *darbar* permit no representative of any other foreign power into the country. Having been deeply impressed by the fighting qualities of their recent opponents, the British also demanded that in the future their Indian Army be able to recruit Gorkhas as mercenaries. Otherwise, the Kingdom of Nepal, admittedly much reduced in size, was left to go its own way.

Although defeated in battle, the Nepalese once again escaped direct colonial rule. The British had realized that, in addition to the difficulties in imposing order on a hostile population in such difficult terrain, it suited Britain's interests that Nepal remain as an independent buffer state between her own dominions in India and the Chinese and Russian empires in Central Asia. The security of India's northern border would be guarded just as well, and at a far lower cost. What went on inside Nepal was, therefore, left largely up to the Nepalis.

The Kingdom of Nepal had survived another crisis. Even its intemperate chief minister, Bhim Sen Thapa, who had led his country into war with the British, managed to come through more or less unscathed. He made sure that his own relatives held all the

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key offices of state and kept the boy-king Girvan Yuddha in strict seclusion. Apart from the occasional ceremony where his presence was required, the king was allowed to see only the chief minister and other trusted members of the Thapa clan.

As was the custom, the young King Girvan Yuddha was married in his early teens to two even younger girls. The junior queen gave birth to a son when she was probably only fifteen years old. Although the royal family lived as virtual prisoners within Hanuman Dhoka Palace, at least there was an heir to the throne. As Girvan Yuddha approached the age of majority it was expected that he would shake off his constraints and rule on his own. All might still be well for the Shah dynasty.

Such hopes were dashed when Girvan Yuddha died of smallpox at the age of nineteen, shortly after he had reached his majority. The strict rules of succession were observed and another infant, his three-year-old son Rajendra Bikram Shah, was placed on the golden throne of Nepal. Once again there would be a long minority, but the chief minister exercised governing power. Bhim Sen Thapa showed his true colors by forcing the dead king's childless wife to commit *sati*. The question of what to do with the new seventeen-year-old queen mother resolved itself, for just two weeks after her husband's death she too succumbed to smallpox. Having lost both his parents, the infant King Rajendra was put in the care of his step-grandmother, Queen Lalit Tripura Sundari. She continued to act as regent on behalf of the new king, though her kinsman Bhim Sen Thapa remained very much in control.

Bhim Sen Thapa's thirty-one-year rule over the much reduced Kingdom of Nepal at least provided a period of stability. New buildings and public works were started. A stone bridge connecting Kathmandu and Patan was thrown over the Bagmati, and a fountain with an immense golden waterspout known as the Sundhara was installed near where the post office stands today. New courtyards and pavilions were added to the Hanuman

Dhoka Palace, where the queen regent, who was herself a lover of poetry and had even translated a portion of the *Mahabharata* into Nepali, presided over a court of some refinement.

Some habits, such as the use of Persian for titles and diplomatic correspondence, were borrowed from the court of the Mughal emperors in Delhi. Others were specifically Nepalese and Hindu. The queen regent commissioned several new temples in the Kathmandu Valley, including the remarkable temple dedicated to Shiva at Tripureshwar, all of them built in the traditional pagoda style and embellished with intricate Newari woodcarvings. Her patronage extended to Benares, the most sacred of Hindu cities, where she had constructed a temple and bathing steps beside the Ganges for the use of Nepalese pilgrims. Throughout the twenty-six years she was regent she left the governance of the country to Bhim Sen Thapa, which probably explains why she died a natural death at the relatively advanced age for those times of thirty-eight.

For most of this period Nepal, confined by British India, was at peace with its neighbors. There was little scope for military expansion. But this caused serious frictions within a society where honors and rewards, mainly in the form of land grants, had traditionally been provided by new conquests. Forced to turn inward, the Nepalese might have found a way forward through trade or by adopting land reforms to improve agricultural productivity, but this did not fit at all with the militaristic and caste-driven values of the Gorkha nobility. Instead, they fought among themselves over the diminishing pool of patronage available. So long as Bhim Sen Thapa remained in control, nobody dared to make a move. But when the young King Rajendra attempted to assert his authority, all the conspirators came out of the woodwork.

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Bhim Sen Thapa applied the same approach to Rajendra's upbringing as he had to the two previous kings in his charge. The young monarch was kept completely isolated within Hanuman Dhoka Palace. At the same time, he was steered toward a life of indulgence and sensual gratification. As the British Resident in Kathmandu noted, King Rajendra was "hemmed into his palace, beyond which he cannot stir unaccompanied by the Minister, and then only to the extent of a short ride or drive. Even within the walls of his palace the Minister and his brother both reside, the latter in the especial capacity of 'dry nurse' to His Highness." The report concludes, "the Raja has been purposely trained so as to possess little energy of body and mind." This was all done to ensure that, when Rajendra did take up his role as king, he would be incapable of exercising real authority without the assistance of Bhim Sen Thapa.

The gradual transfer of power away from the king was made acceptable simply because there had been no real king in Nepal for so long. Nearly half a century had elapsed between Prithvi Narayan Shah's death in 1775 and his great-great-grandson Rajendra Bikram Shah's commencing personal rule in 1837. During all this time there had been only seven years when a Nepalese monarch could be said to have truly ruled. The rest of the time the country had been governed by a regent, the Council of Nobles, or an all-powerful chief minister. The half-century had seen the king become deeply revered, but weakened by the long disuse of his powers. The king was still needed, but only to provide legitimacy for those who acted in his name. Indeed, it had become so unusual for the monarch to take a hand in government that whenever an attempt was made to rule in person it aroused strong opposition from the leading families of Gorkha, who had begun to behave more like rival dynasties than loyal subjects. They formed shifting alliances with one another and with various members of the royal family—half-brothers, cousins, and royal bastards—whose position at court was assured but who

had nothing to do apart from conspire against one another. Each junior queen or royal mistress faced the stark choice either of ensuring that her own son became crown prince or of eventually being forced to perform *sati* when her husband died. There were no half measures. So it is hardly surprising that accusations of poisoning or deliberately infecting young princes flew about the court. At such times, all that held the royal household together was its thin veneer of ceremony and exquisite manners.

The queen regent's death in 1832 undermined the absolute rule of Bhim Sen Thapa. His ancient enemies, the Pandes, knew that the young king was resentful of the constraints imposed on him. Now that Rajendra was approaching the age of majority he might be expected to dismiss his chief minister and rule on his own. But before then, there were other deadly rivalries within the royal family to be exploited. Both of Rajendra's wives had borne him sons, and each was equally determined that her own offspring be declared crown prince. So the senior queen, Samarajya Laxmi, allied herself with the Pandes and other Brahmans, while the junior queen sought the support of the chief minister and the rest of the Thapa clan.

What finally sparked an open confrontation was the unexpected death of the senior queen's youngest son. The royal physician who had been treating him was interrogated, and he eventually admitted that the medicine administered was not normal. The chief minister and his nephew were immediately arrested on suspicion of poisoning. Their real target, it was alleged, was the senior queen herself, but the plot had misfired. After a travesty of a trial, Bhim Sen Thapa was stripped of his office and imprisoned. The senior queen's ally, Rung Jan Pande, was appointed chief minister. He dared not have Bhim Sen Thapa killed immediately, and instead attempted to confiscate all the lands and properties of the Thapas and their allies. The nobility protested to the king, who was forced to dismiss Rung Jan Pande and release the former chief minister from his prison.

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King Rajendra wanted to restore the monarchy's authority and rule on his own terms, but his cloistered upbringing had left him lacking both the necessary judgment and self-restraint. He ran through a string of ineffective chief ministers, none of whom enjoyed his full confidence, until having to accept Rung Jan Pande once again.

This time the Pandes were determined to destroy their old enemy, Bhim Sen Thapa. After a second show trial he was locked into an underground dungeon, where his guards informed him that his wife had been stripped naked and paraded around Kathmandu. Unable to bear the dishonor, he used a dagger smuggled into prison to slit his own throat. Denied any medical attention, he lingered on for another nine days. It was a slow and agonizing death. In this way was Rung Jan Pande avenged of his father's murder and all the indignities borne by his clan.

The crisis of King Rajendra's reign was far from over. When his senior queen died of malaria on a pilgrimage to Benares, the factions that had supported her rallied around her eldest son, the feeble-minded and uncontrollable Crown Prince Surendra. From an early age he had demonstrated a streak of capricious cruelty that made him deeply unpopular. On a casual whim he would order his subjects to jump down a well or ride a horse off a cliff, just to see whether they would die.

Partly to distance himself from such outrages, King Rajendra granted this wayward prince an equal part in governing the Kingdom. As the king appeared incapable of restraining Surendra, the Council of Nobles demanded that the junior queen also have a share of power. She immediately recalled the Thapas from exile, and there now ensued a purge of the Pandes, during which a dozen "conspirators" were executed. The tables had been turned again.

The role of chief minister was handed to Mathbar Singh Thapa, although with only the junior queen's support he was unable to restore order at court. King Rajendra continued to intervene sporadically in the affairs of state, while the crown prince remained uncontrollable. With power divided among three royal personages, nobody was left in control. As the British Resident in Kathmandu put it, the country was governed by "Mr. Nepal, Mrs. Nepal and Master Nepal."

An embattled Mathbar Singh Thapa decided that the only way to consolidate his power base was to switch allegiance to Crown Prince Surendra, thereby winning over the great majority at court who still stood by the principle of primogeniture, no matter how unsuitable the present heir to the throne. With their support he would persuade the king to abdicate and place the grateful Surendra on the throne, reserving all real authority to the office of chief minister.

Before this plan could be put into effect the junior queen, Rajya Laxmi Devi, heard about it. Like so many junior queens before her, she desperately wanted her son to secure the throne and with it her own future. That meant thwarting Surendra. So she persuaded her husband that all this talk of abdication was just a cover for an attempt by Mathbar Singh Thapa to usurp the throne for himself. Faced with this imaginary threat, the king and queen decided that their chief minister must be assassinated. The man chosen for the job was an ambitious young officer named Jung Bahadur Konwar. Not only was he the son of Bal Narsingh Konwar, who had strangled Sher Bahadur thirty years earlier; he was also the favorite nephew of the man he was now ordered to kill.

Once he had received the royal command he had no choice but to obey. Nobody dared resist the junior queen's wishes. Mathbar Singh Thapa knew this only too well and had once explained to Jung Bahadur: "If the queen orders it, I will kill you

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and you will kill me.” Those are the rules when there is absolute authority without any sense of responsibility.

On the appointed day, the chief minister was called into the queen’s chamber on the pretext that she had suffered an injury. Jung Bahadur shot him in the head, and he fell forward, toward where the king and queen were seated. Guards rushed in to slash at the fallen body with their swords. Just to make sure, King Rajendra himself kicked the corpse around before more retainers arrived to carry it away for cremation.

The murder of another chief minister only plunged the court into deeper crisis. Factions became the rule, entire noble families were purged, and effective government was sacrificed to maintain some degree of balance between the king’s men and the queen’s men. Among the latter was the minister in charge of civil affairs, Gagan Singh Bhandari, who was secretly the queen’s lover. She also thought she could count on Jung Bahadur Konwar, whose assassination of his uncle was rewarded with command of the army.

But nothing remains a secret for long in Kathmandu, and King Rajendra soon heard about his wife’s relationship with the low-born Gagan Singh. He promptly summoned the two sons of his senior queen and commanded them to avenge the family’s honor. They in turn sought the advice of the new chief minister and others loyal to their cause. Their suggestion was that one of Jung Bahadur’s brothers do the deed, since he was having an affair with one of Gagan Singh’s maidservants, who could be persuaded to let him in. The true identity of the assassin has never been made clear, but what is certain is that Gagan Singh was shot dead while at prayer on the roof of his home.

Queen Rajya Laxmi was known to have a fiery temper. When she learned that her chief ally and lover had been assassinated, she

became intent on only one thing—revenge. She sent out orders summoning all senior officers to the arsenal and assembly ground known as the Kot, just to the north of Hanuman Dhoka Palace.

It was a dark night, and the enclosed courtyard where troops normally mustered was only partly lit by flickering torches. Many officers and courtiers who answered the royal summons had no idea what had happened, though they sensed more trouble was in store for them.

Among the first to arrive was Jung Bahadur Konwar. He was accompanied by his six brothers, with three loyal regiments in support. The queen should have been worried by such a show of force; but she counted Jung Bahadur among her supporters, and her immediate concern was to destroy those who had killed Gagan Singh.

She ascended to the upper floor above the Kot's main hall by means of a wooden ladder and a trapdoor that could be sealed off in an emergency. From the safety of a balcony she demanded that the assembled officers of state name who had ordered the killing. When nobody spoke up, she accused the wrong man and ordered that he be executed on the spot. At this point King Rajendra, fearing his own part in the conspiracy might be revealed, slipped away unnoticed, leaving his chief minister to argue that no one should be executed without a trial. That did not satisfy the queen, who descended and rushed toward the man she had accused with a sword in her hand, its curved blade flickering in the torchlight. She was forcibly restrained and escorted back upstairs by Jung Bahadur and other ministers. And only just in time, for all around the courtyard rival officers and retainers were drawing their weapons.

At that moment shots rang out from all around the Kot. Jung Bahadur's brothers and loyal followers had already taken up position inside the Kot's main hall, around all the entrances, and on top of nearby roofs. Their gunfire scythed its way through the

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bodies packed inside the courtyard. No mercy was shown, regardless of rank. Within minutes the flagstones were drenched in blood. Among the dead were more than thirty members of Nepal's aristocracy, including three ministers of state. Nobody bothered to record the number of ordinary soldiers and retainers killed that night.

The Kot Massacre of September 15, 1846, used to be remembered as the most infamous in Nepal's history, not only because of the numbers slain, but on account of the base passions revealed and the dreadful consequences of that night. Before she had even left the scene of the massacre, Queen Rajya Laxmi had conferred the dual offices of chief minister and commander in chief on her apparent savior, Jung Bahadur Konwar.

Her precipitate action placed immense powers in the hands of a twenty-nine-year-old officer of undistinguished family. But Jung Bahadur had already proven he could be ruthless, and now he moved swiftly to consolidate his position. He appointed his own relations to all the key military and political offices in the kingdom and then carried out a bloody purge of any possible opponents. Those of the old nobility who had not been killed in the Kot Massacre were hunted down, their lands and titles forfeited. Thousands of their followers were forced into exile.

If the queen thought she had elevated a faithful supporter, she was soon disabused. When Jung Bahadur refused her wish to see her own son become crown prince, she decided to have this new minister assassinated as well. But the envoy sent to summon him to the Bhandarkhal Palace, where the queen and her fellow conspirators awaited him, was so frightened that he revealed the plot.

Jung Bahadur's men rode to the palace and caught the conspirators by surprise. Twenty-three of the queen's men, including most of the noble Basnyat clan, were put to death, and the queen herself was kept under house arrest until she could be put on trial before the Council of Nobles. The charges, of attempting to murder the

prime minister as a prelude to assassinating the crown prince and placing her own son on the throne, were said to “clearly tend towards the destruction of the royal family.” Moreover, the queen’s actions had already “caused the death of hundreds and brought ruin and misery upon [her] subjects, whose misfortunes will not end as long as [she] remain[s] in the country.” She was exiled to Benares, where she was joined by the king and other members of the royal family, leaving the emotionally unstable Crown Prince Surendra as nominal regent in Kathmandu and chief minister Jung Bahadur fully in charge.

The royal exiles meanwhile plotted and planned beside the banks of the Ganges. But the assassins they sent to rid them of the overbearing prime minister were arrested in Kathmandu. Worse still, they were found to be carrying an incriminating letter from the king. Jung Bahadur used this evidence to convince the army that the king should be deposed. On May 12, 1847, a letter was sent to Rajendra in Benares declaring, “[You are] unfit to rule the country over whose destinies Providence has placed you to preside. And hence by the unanimous will of the nobles and people we have set up Prince Surendra Bikram Shah on the throne of Nepal. And be it known unto you that from this day you have ceased to reign.”

Rajendra’s response was to attempt an invasion of Nepal, but his pitiful forces were dispersed and the former King found himself being escorted back to Kathmandu under armed guard. For the remaining thirty-four years of his life he was kept a prisoner in the old palace of the Malla kings at Bhaktapur.

Rarely has a house been so divided against itself as the Shah dynasty during the ten years between 1837 and 1847, when King Rajendra, his wives, and his demented son and heir, all attempted to rule the country. When Nepal most needed a secure, depend-

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able, viable monarchy, it found itself with a family driven by arbitrary and shortsighted urges that led inevitably to endless conspiracies and bloodshed.

Only four generations had passed since Prithvi Narayan Shah had seized the throne of Nepal by force of arms, but already it seemed that the curse of Gorakhnath was taking effect. Whether it was through sheer willfulness or their lack of responsibility, each succeeding king who wielded anything like real power seemed bent on self-destruction. The serpentine logic of palace politics, the life-and-death competition between rival queens, the rivalries of the old Gorkha families, all contributed to this this sad state of affairs. But the royal family were themselves largely to blame, and in the end they paid a heavy price.

While the Shah dynasty nominally continued to reign without interruption, henceforth they were prisoners in their own palaces, the succession of kings mere figureheads whose presence at state functions bestowed legitimacy on the men who really ran Nepal. The long years of royal captivity had just begun.

FIVE

THE CENTURY OF CAPTIVITY

Even before Jung Bahadur seized absolute power, the Kingdom of Nepal was already moving toward a dual system of government in which the king officially reigned but an all-powerful chief minister actually ruled the country. Bhim Sen Thapa had been the first to make this arrangement work over three long decades. But Jung Bahadur took this process a stage further, by declaring that in the future the office of Prime Minister (the title was a new one, reflecting British influence in the subcontinent, and was initially spelled *Praim Ministar*) should become hereditary. Only members of his own family would be permitted to wield absolute power in Nepal.

In doing this, Jung Bahadur Konwar deliberately raised up a parallel dynasty to the royal family. Appointment to the primeministership and all other offices of any importance, both civil and military, were now subject to strict rules of hereditary succession.

It was this regime that was to govern the country for the next 104 years, during which time the reigning Shah family were prevented from exercising any real power in the land. Their day-to-day activities were kept under the closest scrutiny by the hereditary prime minister and his agents. Only rarely were they allowed to go outside their own palaces.

Although in theory they were still absolute rulers, in practice the Shah kings were restricted to a purely ceremonial role. The monarch's presence was required at certain public functions—to receive foreign emissaries, for instance, or to preside over religious ceremonies or musters of the army—because the king still symbolized the unity of the country, its independence from foreign rule, and, above all, the continuity and legitimacy of its government.

The Konwars needed that veneer of legitimacy. For even though Jung Bahadur and his successors arrogated to themselves all powers of decision making and patronage, their authority was based on the premise that they were acting in the king's name. In theory, the king remained the source of all authority, the fountain of justice, the dispenser of all honors and lands within his realm. The oath of loyalty taken by every officer and soldier in the army was—and to this day still is—directly to the person of the king, and not to his ministers. This helps to explain how, despite incessant power struggles among its ruling elite, the Kingdom of Nepal managed to avoid any full-scale civil wars over a period of nearly 250 years.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Shah dynasty had forfeited any meaningful political role, but they at least succeeded in remaining on the throne throughout a time when many other royal houses were consigned to oblivion. In Nepal, the royal succession passed uncontested from father to eldest son. The throne could not be left vacant, so the principle “The King is dead; long live the King” was adhered to. While the death of a king was an

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occasion for elaborate mourning, the birth of a son and heir was greeted with widespread public celebration. The safe delivery of a future king was announced by a nineteen-gun salute from the palace guard rifles, which *feu-de-joie* was then taken up by the massed regiments on the parade ground at Tundikhel until the whole of Kathmandu seemed filled with celebratory gunfire. Prisoners were released from jail, three days of holiday declared, and thankful offerings made at the appropriate temples.

As avatars of Lord Vishnu, the god-kings of Nepal were openly worshiped by their subjects. They were the living embodiment of all traditional values associated with Hindu kingship, and their physical presence alone was believed to guarantee the safety of the land and its people. No matter what scandalous behavior went on within the royal palace, nor how capriciously cruel their monarch's commands might sometimes seem, to the ordinary, illiterate, and thoroughly superstitious Nepali subject the king was a divine being whose presence should be worshiped and whose peremptory command was to be unhesitatingly obeyed.

Such religious beliefs surrounding Nepal's kings were deliberately encouraged by Jung Bahadur and his successors, precisely because this served to further distance the divine monarch from his subjects. Learned Brahmans supported this policy by declaring that the god-king should not leave the palace precincts for more than twelve hours at a time and on no account venture beyond the limits of Kathmandu. In many ways the mystery surrounding the king in his forbidden palace was similar to that of latter-day emperors of China or Japan. It enhanced the mystique of divine kingship, and hence the reverence with which even the most vicious and ineffectual of monarchs was held by his subjects.

Finally, since the king himself was no longer responsible for government, he could not be blamed when things went wrong. By a strange paradox, the absence of responsibility contributed to the popularity of Nepal's monarchy throughout its century of captivity.

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Jung Bahadur's rapid rise to power was in many ways a joint enterprise in which his own extended family members were partners. His six brothers had come to his assistance during the Kot Massacre. They had ridden with him to Bhandarkhal Palace and killed the conspirators there. They had stood by him, with their regiments in support, as he declared King Rajendra and his queen deposed. So Jung Bahadur was aware that they needed to be rewarded, and not just for services rendered, but in order to ensure their future loyalty.

What he proposed was a variant of the oriental system by which the office of grand vizier and other high positions in government remained within the same family. In this case, however, the king had no say in how the all-important office of prime minister was automatically transferred on the death or resignation of the holder to the next most senior of his brothers. This brother would already hold the position of commander in chief of the army, though he also had wide responsibilities for civil government. Next in line was the western commanding general, the man who really ran the army, with younger brothers holding progressively less important military and civil commands. This meant that before they reached the pinnacle of power they would already have broad experience of governing, while the military nature of the hierarchy would help ensure that the army remained loyal to the prime minister at each and every level. When each of the surviving brothers had held office and either died or resigned, the roll of succession would pass to the next generation, beginning with Jung Bahadur's eldest son and then working through his nephews in strict order of seniority. By then they too would have worked their way up through the hierarchy and gained much useful experience.

Such a system of hereditary prime ministers had numerous advantages for the incumbent. It encouraged loyalty among those who might expect through the normal progression of events to

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inherit immense power and riches. By the same token, it made assassination or other forms of treachery as a rapid path to the top seem much less appealing, for the brother next in line for prime ministerial office had a vested interest in maintaining the order of succession. The very system imposed a strong sense of mafia-style family unity among different branches of so extensive a clan. It also avoided the chief weakness of the Shah dynasty's laws of succession, namely the situation when an infant-king inherited the throne. This had required others to govern on the king's behalf, resulting in endless power struggles. Now there would always be an undisputed hereditary prime minister to rule for him.

The overwhelming ascendancy of a single family needed some further justification, especially since Jung Bahadur's clan of Konwars had its origins among only middle-ranking nobles. A more illustrious lineage was required, and the Brahman priests and genealogists worked overtime to produce one. It was found that their ancestry could be traced back to one of the premier Rajput families, the Ranas of Chittor in Rajasthan. Henceforth the Konwars were to be known by the princely title *Rana*. Their caste status was upgraded to a position above the rest of the nobility but still beneath the royal family. In this way the regime commonly known as the Rana oligarchy was born.

The royal edict approving this new title in 1848 expressly forbade the Ranas from marrying into the royal family or their collaterals, but Jung Bahadur simply ignored such stipulations. He himself took as one of his wives a royal cousin, while for his eldest son, Jagat Jang, he arranged a marriage with King Surendra's six-year-old daughter. The wedding was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony. Six dozen richly caparisoned elephants, hundreds of dancing girls waving peacock fans, and an entire regiment of soldiers accompanied the wedding procession from Hanuman Dhoka Palace to the prime minister's magnificent residence in Thapathali. The dowry was immense, and naturally entered the

new Rana household. But what really mattered to Jung Bahadur and his family was the immense boost in their prestige. Besides, it could be politically useful to have the royal family as in-laws.

This was the first time that the Shah dynasty had entered matrimonial relations with their own subjects, but it was only the first of many such family alliances. Two of Jung Bahadur's daughters were married to Crown Prince Trailokya, and the practice continued in the next generation when King Prithvi Bir married two daughters of the ruling Rana prime minister. The tradition continues to this day, with Nepal's last three reigning monarchs all marrying into the Juddha branch of the Rana family.

In terms of their genetic background, the modern royal family owes far more to the Ranas than to the House of Gorkha. Their original Rajput bloodline has been diluted in a manner similar to that of Russia's Romanov dynasty, who were sometimes criticized for always marrying German princesses. The poet Pushkin once vividly expressed this by mixing together two bottles of wine, the red representing the proportion of Russian Romanov ancestry, and the white wine that of foreigners. By the time he had reached his own generation of czars there was only the faintest blush left in the mixture. Much the same could be said of the Shah dynasty, except in their case practically all of the white has come from one single family estate—the Ranas.

So confident was Jung Bahadur of the family-run autocracy he had established that, in 1850, only four years after the Kot Massacre, he felt able to delegate his prime ministerial powers to his brother Bam Bahadur and leave Nepal for an extended visit to Europe. It was an unprecedented step. No Hindu governor of such elevated caste had ever ventured outside the Indian subcontinent. To the orthodox Hindu this was unthinkable: To cross the *kala pani*, the "black water" of the ocean, resulted in permanently losing one's caste.

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Jung Bahadur had good reasons for undertaking the journey, however. He hoped that his reception in London by Prime Minister Lord Wellington and Queen Victoria, who was soon to include among her titles Empress of India, would lead to fuller recognition of Nepal as an independent kingdom. He also anticipated that in visiting the distant capital of British India, by far the most powerful of his immediate neighbors, he would win enormous prestige back in Nepal. As for the problem of losing his caste, he was assured by the Brahmans that ritual purification ceremonies carried out after his return would prove effective. To ensure purity, his entourage was equipped with clay jars of sacred water and live goats and flat-tailed sheep, as prescribed for sacrifice, and included cooks and servants of the correct caste to prepare his meals.

The Nepalese party's arrival caused a great stir in London society. Their bejeweled helmets and exotic appearance, not to mention their reputation as both fearsome fighters and oriental despots, ensured their lionization by society hostesses. The Nepalis were puzzled by many English customs. Being used to keeping women in purdah, they found it extraordinary that so many beautiful ladies approached them directly and took their hand. They were invited to balls and the opera, to the pleasure gardens at Vauxhall, and to watch the horse-racing at Epsom. They marveled at how clean and orderly Victorian London seemed, with none of the open sewers or the insecurity of life that was all that they knew in Kathmandu. While Jung Bahadur was not so impressed by the democratic nature of Parliament, he did understand the rule of law's importance to Britain's peace and stability. Even the highest persons had to submit to the law of the land, it was noted, and when he returned to Nepal Jung Bahadur tried to incorporate this principle into his codification of the country's laws.

Jung Bahadur was also shown Britain's industrial might, its shipyards and factories turning out the weapons of war on an

unimaginable scale. Like Peter the Great before him, he was duly impressed. But whereas the Russian czar sought to emulate Western technology and culture, Jung Bahadur took home a different lesson. It was that a country like Nepal could never challenge such an empire as this, so the best policy was to maintain Britain's friendship through whatever means possible.

Jung Bahadur had an early opportunity to win favor when, in 1857, Indian garrisons rebelled against their British rulers. This conflict is known to Indians as the First War of Independence and to the British as the Indian Mutiny, and some of the worst of the fighting occurred in areas immediately adjacent to Nepal. The Hindu kingdom had three choices: coming to the aid of its co-religionists, remaining neutral, or assisting the British. Jung Bahadur did not hesitate to take the last course. He immediately offered Nepalese troops to help put down the rebellion, and personally led a column 9,000 strong down into the plains. For this he won the undying gratitude of the British, who were content to allow him to run the internal affairs of Nepal as he thought best. A belt of land in the western Terai that had been annexed in 1816 by the East India Company was returned to Nepal.

Friendship between the two countries was deepened by Jung Bahadur's facilitating the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers for British-officered regiments. This was to become the cornerstone of Anglo-Nepalese relations, with the Gurkhas fighting alongside Britain with great distinction through two world wars. The reward was British recognition of Nepal as a sovereign and independent nation, thereby placing it on a completely different footing from that of other Indian princely states. Besides, the generally supportive stance of the British raj served to prop up the conservative Rana regime until the British left India in 1947. From then on, the Ranas had to deal with a very different neighbor to the south.

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The strategy of currying favor with the imperial power was not the only thing that Jung Bahadur brought back from his journey to Europe. He realized that the only way to understand the British was to learn their language. Although he made little headway himself, he introduced English-speaking Hindus into his household to teach his sons the rudiments.

He was also won over by the European style of architecture and had the new palace he was building on a hill above the Bagmati River finished with neoclassical flourishes. The internal organization of Thapathali Darbar, with its separate courtyards for his extended family and an enclosed harem for his many wives and concubines, may have been typically oriental. But from now on, the Nepalese court looked increasingly to European fashion, as opposed to the more traditional influences of the Mughal emperors in Delhi.

These changing tastes expressed themselves in external display—the cut of a general's uniform, for instance, or the use of European-style horse-drawn carriages—rather than on any deeper cultural plane. Even when the Ranas built themselves mock-Palladian mansions, the cooking and eating arrangements within their households remained governed by Hindu caste rules. Their wives and concubines might have adopted the full skirts and crinolines of Victorian fashion, but they still lived according to the local rules of purdah. Beneath their new veneer of sophistication, members of the Rana elite were entrenched in their conservatism.

The men felt far freer to adopt European styles in everything from their drinking habits to their taste in furnishings. A tolerance of alcohol is deeply embedded in Nepalese culture, even among orthodox Hindus, but from the 1850s onward their tastes switched to imported wines and brandies from the distilled rice liquor known as *rakshi* and other local brews. Jung Bahadur's sons led the way, and most evenings there were marathon drinking bouts going

on in some part of Thapathali Darbar. The young inebriates even took to swallowing bottles of French perfume to cleanse their breath before they had to greet their fathers. More than one young Rana died from alcohol poisoning, and many more lost their inheritances in the wild gambling sessions that accompanied these parties. Some would stake everything they possessed—lands, villages, concubines, and slaves—on a single throw of the dice or, in another popular form of gambling, by casting forth sixteen kaudi shells.

The nobility's style of dress also shifted from the fashions of the Mughal court toward European models. This can be seen in their preference for Napoleonic-style military uniforms that they had specially designed, the more gold braid the better. Their bejeweled and plumed helmets required not only copious quantities of diamonds, emeralds, and pearls; for the plume to hang correctly, it had to be made from the tail feathers of a rare variety of bird of paradise found only in New Guinea.

Such fashions represented conspicuous consumption in the extreme, especially set against the background of the mind-numbing poverty in which 95 percent of the population lived. But that was considered to be the "natural state" of the peasantry. Instead of trying to improve the lot of the peasants, the rulers of Nepal competed with their princely neighbors in India to possess the latest and most luxurious imports: Belgian chandeliers, French porcelain, Chinese vases, Italian glassware, and British-made musical instruments for their household bands, which always accompanied them on formal outings. When they did not eat off European crockery they had exact copies made in solid gold or silver. One of Jung Bahadur's brothers had a silver dinner service for 170 guests.

As for their domestic arrangements, the Ranas took the Nepalese practice of polygamy to its logical extreme. Jung Bahadur had more than three dozen wives of varying status, not to mention the 200 or so concubines and maidservants who were watched over

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by his palace eunuchs. His eldest son, Jagat Jang, had been married to a royal princess but nonetheless aspired to rival the parental harem, maintaining 100 dancing girls, a large troupe of musicians, and a theatrical group at his separate Manohara Darbar residence. To complete the opulence, he had a private zoo built in his grounds and filled it with African ostriches and other exotic creatures.

The number of wives and concubines maintained—not to mention the dozens of offspring that needed to be supported—became a measure of just how important an individual was in the Rana hierarchy. Jung Bahadur may have been a compulsive womanizer, but the size of his entourage was not exceptional compared to some of his brothers and successors. One reason he switched bedchambers and sleeping partners so often was for security, so no one intent on assassinating him could be sure where he would be that night. Hidden beneath his half-Westernized exterior was the quintessential Nepali strongman, constantly on his guard and trusting no one who could possibly harm him. At times he seemed to show more affection for his favorite elephants—the always reliable Jang Prasad and the bolder Bijuli Prasad, who was so adept at fighting wild tuskers—than for any member of his family.

The orderliness of the Western countries impressed Jung Bahadur. He became convinced that Nepal should adopt a similar legal system, and on returning to Kathmandu he immediately began codifying and revising the ancient laws of Nepal, which were still largely based on the Hindu *shastras* as interpreted by the royal priest and other Brahmans.

The result was the *Muluki Ain* of 1854, the first comprehensive legal code in Nepal's history. Trial by ordeal was abolished completely. Death sentences or mutilation were restricted to only the gravest of crimes—treason, desertion in the face of the enemy, murder, and cow slaughter. The new legal system asserted that for

any crime there should be only one punishment, rather than the previous practice of sentencing people according to the caste they belonged to. Similarly, the discretion of individual judges in sentencing was severely limited, this having been a source of favoritism and unequal justice.

While it was progressive in many ways, the *Muluki Ain* still had to reflect traditional Hindu values. Nearly a third of its content deals with caste rules and offenses. It did not abolish *sati*, the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyre, although it did ban child brides and women who were pregnant or who had young children from taking part. The minimum age that a girl could be married was left unchanged at five. Slavery and bonded labor remained enforceable by law. Punishments such as branding, castration, and other forms of mutilation were restricted but not done away with completely. Since most of these laws were left unchanged until well into the twentieth century, Nepal appeared to many outsiders to be stuck in a more primitive, feudal age where savage punishment made up for the absence of any effective police force.

Jung Bahadur was able to set an example of leniency shortly after his return from Europe. His brother Bam Bahadur warned him of an assassination plot being hatched. The plan was to kill both King Surendra and the prime minister and set the king's brother Prince Upendra on the throne.

The conspirators, including two of Jung Bahadur's brothers, were arrested and brought before the Council of State to be sentenced. Since a member of the royal family was involved, both King Surendra and his deposed father, Rajendra, were present, though neither took an active part in the proceedings. All those accused were found guilty of treason, and the mandatory death sentence was imposed by the Council. To everyone's surprise, Jung Bahadur refused to endorse this. Nor would he accept the alternative punishments suggested, that those convicted be blinded with

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hot irons or transported in cages down to the Terai, where they would be left to die of malaria. His final decision was that they be locked up in the fortress at Allahabad under British supervision for thirty years.

By the standards of those times, this treatment was exceptionally lenient. Moreover, as soon as the conspirators were safely out of the country Jung Bahadur commuted their sentences from thirty to five years. It was suggested at the time that this was because the entire plot was a fabrication invented by him in order to remove potential opponents from Nepal until he felt more secure. If so, this would not be the first time—nor the last—that trumped-up charges were used by a Nepalese ruler to consolidate his position.

In finding his brothers guilty and then showing leniency, Jung Bahadur provided a forceful reminder to other members of the royal family of who was really in charge of Nepal. If those who may have been innocent could be so easily condemned, what fate was in store for those who really did plot against the prime minister?

For most of King Surendra's thirty-four-year reign he was a virtual prisoner in Hanuman Dhoka Palace. His father, the former King Rajendra, outlived him by a few months, but the old man was placed under even closer guard in the old palace at Bhaktapur. Throughout, King Surendra meekly agreed to all his prime minister's demands: the transfer of all royal authority, marriage alliances between their families, and the creation of a new princely title for Jung Bahadur and his successors.

In 1856 the king conferred upon Jung Bahadur the title of Maharaja of Kaski and Lamjung, two small hill states inhabited mainly by the warlike Gurung peoples, which he and his male heirs would rule over in perpetuity. The royal warrant, or *lal mohar*, lists among the reasons why the king was "pleased" with Jung Bahadur the fact that he had previously saved Surendra from conspiracies against his life, secured for him the throne of Nepal,

treated his father and younger brother leniently despite their deadly machinations, and promoted friendship with the queen of England. For these reasons, the king not only granted the new title but gave Jung Bahadur absolute power over life and death throughout Nepal. The king himself accepted that he could be overruled on all matters of importance. It amounted to a complete abdication of royal authority and any responsibility toward his subjects.

Some members of the royal family could not bring themselves to agree with Surendra's capitulation. His elder son, Crown Prince Trailokya, was determined to reassert the legitimate authority of the Shah dynasty, to the point of vowing never to accept the Crown unless the Ranas were first overthrown—this despite being married to two of Jung Bahadur's daughters, one of whom gave birth to his own son and heir, Prince Prithvi Bir, in 1875. His views were well known to his father-in-law, who kept the crown prince under constant surveillance and restricted his movements. He could do little while the all-powerful prime minister was alive. But when Jung Bahadur died suddenly in February 1877, of cholera contracted during a hunting trip in the Terai, the situation changed completely.

The next-oldest Rana brother, Ranaudip Singh, succeeded to the prime-ministership as planned. He also decided to appropriate the title of Maharaja of Kaski and Lamjung, arguing that this was attached to the prime ministerial office. In doing so he disinherited Jung Bahadur's sons. The eldest son, Jagat Jang, sought out other malcontents in the hope of reversing this injustice. At the top of the list was Crown Prince Trailokya, who had his own reasons for wanting to be rid of the new and not very effective prime minister.

How far their conspiracy progressed will never be known, for on March 30, 1878, it was announced that the crown prince had died. He was only thirty years old at the time, and his death was

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most unexpected. The official communiqué from the palace was that the heir to the throne had succumbed to an unfortunate combination of colic and rheumatic fever.

The whispers in the bazaar were very different. Prince Trailokya, it was said, had been poisoned because of his opposition to Rana rule. The chief suspect was Dhir Shamsher Rana, the prime minister's younger brother and right-hand man. If, as is quite likely, these rumors were true, then Crown Prince Trailokya became yet another member of the Shah dynasty who was born to be king but suffered an untimely and unnatural death.

Six generations had passed since the reign of Prithvi Narayan Shah. The day of reckoning for the ruling dynasty was still far away, if the Gorakhnath prophecy were to prove correct. Although he never ascended the throne, Trailokya was the eldest son and is therefore included as a direct heir of the founding monarch. His early death meant that the crown passed directly to his son, Prithvi Bir, missing a generation.

All the signs are that, if Trailokya had survived, he would have been a far more forceful king than either his father or his grandfather before him. That might well have placed him in direct conflict with the Rana establishment, whose interests were best served by having a feebleminded or weak-willed monarch on the throne of Nepal. His very presence at court was seen as a potential threat to the regime. If he had become king, then a showdown between the Shahs and the Ranas would have come sooner rather than later—for which reason it was plain to every officer and court functionary that it was the Prime Minister Ranaudip Singh and his allies who benefited most from Prince Trailokya's sudden departure.

Just how important it was to the Rana elite that they keep a malleable personality on the throne became obvious when the sixty-one-year-old King Surendra fell seriously ill in the spring of 1881.

The prime minister and his brother, Dhir Shamsher, were so worried that they tried to keep the royal indisposition secret as long as possible. They also ordered up twenty additional regiments to bolster security around their own palaces.

What they most feared was an anti-Rana coup in which dissatisfied elements of the old Gorkha nobility would combine with Jung Bahadur's dispossessed sons, especially as some of these had an intensely loyal following in the army. They were also worried about a smooth succession to the throne. Already there was discontent about the royal infant Prithvi Bir being declared crown prince. For while the prospect of a long minority might suit the Ranas, it spelled doom for anything approaching an effective monarchy. Opponents of this line of succession argued that, because the little prince's mother was a Rana, his lineage was impure. Far better to install on the throne Prince Trailokya's younger brother, Prince Narendra Bikram Shah, who was of pure Rajput blood. Traditionalism and political expediency were mixed in equal measure, but the conspirators' plans to blow up the entire Rana leadership as they assembled in the pagoda-shadowed expanse of Nasal Chowk, the principal courtyard in Hanuman Dhoka Palace where coronations and all important gatherings were held, failed to materialize in time.

King Surendra's death was announced on May 17, 1881. His five-year-old grandson, Prithvi Bir, was immediately installed on the throne of Nepal. As an additional security measure, Prime Minister Ranaudip Singh removed the young king from the Old Royal Palace, where his uncle and other royal family members had easy access to him. Breaking with tradition, Prithvi Bir was brought up in a wing of the prime minister's own palace, Narayanhiti Mathillo Darbar, which from then on became the principal residence of the Shah kings of Nepal.

The grandiose new palace that Ranaudip Singh had built in the European style lay well outside the crowded center of Kathmandu,

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so the king could be kept at a safe distance from his subjects. Its lofty ceilings, marbled floors, and pillared galleries were deemed a more fitting environment for the boy-king to grow up in. There were extensive grounds in which he could ride his ponies. More important, it was easier to keep an eye on him than in Hanuman Dhoka's jumble of courtyards and corridors. Access to the king's person was severely restricted, with even close family members barred from entering Narayanhiti Palace. A gilded cage was created to keep Nepal's monarchs completely isolated from their subjects. The young Prithvi Bir had little choice but to accept these changed circumstances. He knew no other kind of life.

Such precautions seemed to be justified when, within the year, a plot to assassinate the Rana leadership was "discovered." More than 100 conspirators, including many members of the old Gorkha nobility, were arrested and forced to make confessions. These implicated both the king's uncle, Prince Narendra, and Jagat Jang, who was then on pilgrimage in India. Whether they were actually involved in any plot is doubtful, but it suited the prime minister and his brother General Dhir Shamsher to have all possible rivals removed. The leniency of their sentences—five years' incarceration under British supervision at a faraway hill station in southern India—suggests they were completely innocent. By contrast, twenty-three less exalted conspirators were beheaded with *kukhris* on the banks of the Bagmati. They too pleaded their innocence at the end, but the Rana leadership thought that a stern example should be set.

The prime minister was still worried about his personal security, however, and built up an extensive network of spies and informers. He also surrounded his residence at Narayanhiti Palace with handpicked soldiers of the Guards Regiment who were to prevent anyone entering unless they knew that day's secret password. But the most comprehensive security arrangements can fail if the person they are supposed to protect is too trusting. In the

case of Ranaudip Singh, his over-reliance on General Dhir Shamsher and his sons was to lead to his own downfall.

The root cause of the problem was the absence of male heirs. Although Ranaudip Singh had three wives and kept numerous concubines and dancing girls, he had no sons; and as he grew older he became increasingly religious and addicted to hashish. He might have been prime minister, but he was unable to make decisions.

This was not a matter of urgency so long as his strong-willed brother Dhir Shamsher was alive, because according to the roll of succession he would eventually become prime minister. But when Dhir Shamsher died in late 1884 there was a political vacuum at the top, and various Ranas of the next generation started jostling for position. This alarmed Ranaudip Singh so much that he insisted that every senior Rana accompany him on his winter hunting trip to the Terai so as to prevent any conspiracies being hatched back in Kathmandu. That did not solve the question of who was to succeed him.

The main protagonists were the seven sons of Jung Bahadur, who should have taken precedence, and the seventeen sons of the late Dhir Shamsher, whose hopes of promotion had been so suddenly dashed. If either camp managed to seize power, their opponents knew exactly what to expect. Banishment would be the most merciful outcome. So both these rival branches of the Rana family solicited the support of persons of influence. The Queen Mother Lalit Kumari and other members of the royal family became deeply involved. Even the prime minister's own household was divided, with his senior and junior wives backing opposite sides. Once again, faction ruled in Kathmandu. Sooner or later a showdown was inevitable.

THE SHAMSHER SUPREMACY

All the advantages seemed to lie with the sons of Jung Bahadur. They were far wealthier than their Shamsheer cousins. Their allies held more important offices in the government, and they had better contacts in the royal family. Perhaps this gave them a false sense of security. While they played a waiting game, the Shamsheer Ranas were secretly organizing a daring coup d'état.

Their planning was meticulous. They secured the loyalty of four regiments stationed in the Kathmandu Valley, and in advance, they bribed key advisers to the prime minister, his personal secretary, and the commandant of his bodyguard. They also saw fit to consult their family astrologer on what would be an auspicious date for so dangerous an undertaking.

On the evening of November 22, 1885, six of the Shamsheer brothers rode over to the prime minister's residence at Narayanhiti Palace. They had been informed of the password and were allowed

through the main gate. The eldest brother, Bir Shamsheer, waited on the ground floor, where he was joined by the king's great uncle, Prince Upendra, who had been summoned to convey royal approval of what was to follow.

Four of the younger brothers, all of them dressed in greatcoats, went upstairs toward the prime minister's private apartments. They were met by a senior foreign affairs official who had already been bribed. When challenged by two bodyguards, they claimed to be bringing an urgent communication from the British Resident and pointed to the foreign office minister who was with them. One of the guards rushed to seek orders from the ADC general; the other was browbeaten into allowing them to pass. When the brothers found the door to Ranaudip Singh's room bolted, they simply repeated their story about an urgent message. The prime minister told a houseboy to open up, and all four brothers marched in.

They found Ranaudip Singh relaxing on a couch, two maid-servants massaging his feet, while his private secretary read out the newspapers to him. His overbearing senior wife, who had championed the rival claims of Jung Bahadur's sons, was resting on a velvet-covered bed. The assassins pulled their carbines out from their greatcoats and took aim. One of them shouted: "This is the fate of those who rule from beneath a petticoat!" Then each of them fired in turn, with the family drunk, Rana Shamsheer, apparently missing his target. After checking that their uncle was well and truly dead, the brothers wrapped his blood-stained corpse inside a carpet and threw it down the staircase.

Some of the palace guards finally tried to intervene, but they were soon overpowered by Bir Shamsheer's men. Two of the brothers then went to the royal apartments in Narayanhiti and took custody of the boy-king, carrying him out through his bedroom window. Down in the courtyard, the queen mother was ready to affix the royal seal of approval on prepared documents

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appointing Bir Shamsher Rana prime minister and maharaja. The next step was to win the army's approval, so the ten-year-old king and his mother were made to ride with Bir Shamsher in a state carriage to Tundikhel parade ground. Those regiments loyal to the Shamsfers had been placed on alert, and all the other, mainly unarmed troops offered no resistance. The queen mother announced that the old prime minister had died of natural causes and that Bir Shamsfer was appointed in his place. The assembled soldiery presented arms and fired off a nineteen-gun salute in his honor.

There followed the inevitable purge of all potential opponents. A detachment of troops loyal to the Shamsfer brothers was dispatched to Jagat Jang's residence before dawn, and he was shot on sight. Others gained news of the coup before they could be apprehended, and most of these—including the king's uncle Prince Narendra and the senior queen mother—sought sanctuary with the British Resident. One of Jagat Jang's sons foolishly went back to the family palace at Thapathali to gather up whatever jewels and valuables he could find. Although disguised, he ran into an army patrol and was shot dead in the street.

The whole of Kathmandu was placed under martial law. Its normally bustling streets and bazaars were deserted except for army patrols guarding the crossroads or raiding private houses to arrest supporters of the previous regime. After lengthy negotiations, the eminent refugees inside the British Residency were granted safe conduct to go into India and, since they were not allowed to take any property with them, a life of impoverished exile. The immense fortunes amassed by Jung Bahadur and his brothers were confiscated, the roll of succession altered so as to exclude all who were not of the Shamsfer branch of the family, and the top civil and military commands distributed among the seventeen brothers in strict order of seniority.

Similarly, the palaces and jewelry and private estates of the departed were divided among the brothers. Bir Shamsfer took the

lion's share, including the jeweled headdress, the great hoard of coins and precious stones, and 100 state elephants and their equipage, as well as the extensive lands that had belonged to his uncle. But he made sure that the distribution went far enough to retain the loyalty of the entire Shamsheer clan. He knew that he needed their support if he was not to suffer the same fate as the last prime minister.

The Shamsheers' coup d'état had been meticulously planned and boldly executed. Given that they had no legitimate claim to rule Nepal, there was surprisingly little resistance. The mere presence of the boy-king Prithvi Bir at the Tundikhel parade ground was enough to convince the army that the new man proclaimed as prime minister acted in his name. Their oath of loyalty was to the king alone, and the habit of unquestioning obedience to whoever was in authority was so deeply ingrained that they were unable to react in a crisis situation. Besides which, it did not really matter to ordinary soldiers or, for that matter, the great majority of the Nepalese people which group of Ranas held power. Life went on much the same as before.

From exile, attempts were made by the sons of Jung Bahadur to send assassins into Nepal and mount a countercoup, but these conspiracies were all discovered and ruthlessly suppressed. At first, the British authorities in India hesitated to recognize a regime that had so blatantly usurped power. However, the view of the British Resident in Kathmandu was that there was not much difference between Jung Bahadur's family, who were "equally steeped in blood," and "the present Minister and his family, who are as bad as they can be. Unless we mean to change our whole policy towards Nepal, and to abandon strict neutrality for active interference," he assessed, "it seems to me that it does not matter to us which set of cut-throats has the upper hand."

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Such pragmatism paid immense dividends, for the Shamsher Ranas were to rule Nepal for the next sixty-five years. From the British perspective, they provided stability in a sensitive border area. They also assisted in the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers when they were most needed. Around 100,000 Nepalese served during the First World War, including in the Mesopotamian campaign and on the western front, while more than twice that number fought alongside Britain during the Second World War. Their sacrifice was enormous, with Nepal losing more combat troops compared to its total population than any of the Allied powers. The Rana government even sent its own regiments for active service and raised loans to help the war effort. Understandably, the British were not going to undermine so helpful an ally, and no matter what went on inside Nepal they continued to give their tacit support to whoever was its de facto ruler.

Britain's recognition of Bir Shamsher's government gave some legitimacy to the new Rana regime. But the entire authority of these hereditary prime ministers rested on the fiction that they served the legitimate ruler of Nepal, the king. This fiction was easy to maintain while King Prithvi Bir remained a minor, but as he approached adulthood his prime minister grew increasingly worried that he might become the figurehead for anti-Rana conspiracies. While the king and his immediate family were kept isolated in Narayanhiti Palace, too many of his half-brothers and cousins were allowed to visit him there.

In particular, there were five male relatives who bore the title *Sahebjue*, or Count, who lived in various wings of the old Hanuman Dhoka Palace and were at liberty to mix with people in the streets of Kathmandu's Old City. Most afternoons they came to see King Prithvi Bir at Narayanhiti, providing him with much-needed companionship, and very often stayed on for dinner. Bir Shamsher worried that they might be bringing adverse reports about his government and decided to have them removed. The

pretext was a rather sumptuous dinner they had with the king at which a dozen partridges and copious amounts of alcohol were consumed. The next day they were summoned by the prime minister and accused of inciting the king to drunkenness and debauchery. For this largely imagined "crime," they were exiled to remote hill districts and had their state pensions greatly reduced.

The loss of his closest companions threw Prithvi Bir into such a rage that he declared he would leave Narayanhiti Palace, complaining that everything he did had to be supervised. He had even started having his belongings packed up when, at the prime minister's urgent request, the Queen Mother Lalit Rajya Laxmi persuaded him to calm down and stay on in his palace. This tantrum was about as close to independent action as this king of Nepal ever came.

By the age of twelve Prithvi Bir was already married to two Indian princesses of Rajput stock. This did not prevent the prime minister from cementing his family relationship with the Shah dynasty by arranging for the king to marry two of his daughters—even though they were only eight and nine years old when the wedding was celebrated. Bir Shamsheer was following the same matrimonial policy as his uncle, Jung Bahadur, a generation earlier. But for the queen mother, who had been complaisant to most of his previous requests, it was a step too far. She was, after all, Jung Bahadur's daughter, and the thought of a girl from this junior branch of the Ranas becoming the potential mother of a king was abhorrent to her.

She could not prevent the marriage alliance, but once the junior queens arrived in Narayanhiti Palace, they fell within her sphere of influence. To begin with, she was not very worried, since they were still too young for the marriage to be consummated. But once they reached puberty, the queen mother took

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matters into her own hands. She arranged things so that pretty and compliant maidservants were constantly brought into the presence of the king on those days when it was the turn of his two junior wives to sleep with him. Her son was so exhausted by his sexual exploits that no heir apparent could be conceived by these particular daughters-in-law.

Queen Mother Lalit had very practical reasons for promoting such devious stratagems. If a daughter of these Shamsheer Ranas became pregnant and her child was declared crown prince, the balance of power within the palace would shift decisively against the queen mother. The second reason for her taking against these junior queens was that their parents had never been formally married: They were little better than the daughters of concubines. In her view, neither girl was suitable material to be the mother of a king, even if their father happened to be prime minister and enormously wealthy. Their dowries might, however, be far larger than those of Prithvi Bir's two senior queens. The youngest, who was reportedly becoming the king's favorite, had been given an enormous 82-carat diamond.

In the end the queen mother had her way. On June 30, 1906, Queen Laxmi Dibyeshwari gave birth to a boy-child who was to become King Tribhuvan. His mother was a senior queen of Indian descent and not one of the upstart Shamsheer Rana girls.

The Kingdom of Nepal continued to be administered like one large family business, whose only purpose was to further enrich the ruling elite. Such changes as were introduced were mainly in revenue collection and administration. The more efficient these were, the greater the income enjoyed by the hereditary prime minister and the senior generals.

A disproportionate share of the nation's wealth was set aside for the army. This was partly to ensure its loyalty, and partly

because all the senior positions in the Rana hierarchy below prime minister were military commands. To keep such powerful allies required enormous salaries. But apart from a couple of brief and unprofitable border clashes with Tibet, there was not much for the army to do. They marched around the Tundikhel parade ground to make their presence felt in the capital, but their only real purpose was to provide a threat of force. This was the mainstay of the Rana autocracy.

The old quasi-feudal system of rewarding the rank and file with temporary land grants, or *jagirs*, was abandoned in favor of cash payments. As a result, a huge area of what were technically crown lands was freed up, but the crown did not benefit from this. Neither did the ordinary hill farmers, who continued to scratch a subsistence living from their meager plots. The main beneficiaries of land transfers were the Rana nobles, who regularly rewarded themselves “for services rendered” with grants of *birta* land, holdings that stayed in the family forever. The cumulative effect was that about a third of all cultivable land in Nepal was reclassified as *birta*, and most of this was owned by a handful of Rana families. They also awarded themselves state-sponsored monopolies and most of the new arable lands being reclaimed from the Terai’s forests. As a result, the Ranas grew exceedingly rich—far richer than the royal family, whose income was strictly controlled by the prime minister.

Some Ranas invested their surplus income in trade, though mostly it went to building palaces and to ostentatious living. They soon abandoned the indigenous Newari style of palace architecture, preferring to live in grandiose and uncomfortable pseudo-European piles outside Old Kathmandu. Although three dozen of these mock-Palladian palaces survive from the Rana period, few are admired these days. This may be because they are florid and overblown, the chaste principles of classical design constantly subverted by excessive ornamentation. Most Rana buildings,

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including the original Narayanthiti Palace, owed less to the generally austere colonial architecture of the British themselves than to extremely fanciful variants of the style adopted by maharajas and nawabs under British rule. Their high ceilings made them impossible to heat in winter, but practicality was never an important consideration. They were built to impress the visitor. Their sweeping driveways and marble-lined entrance halls were there to declare the importance of their owner in the Rana hierarchy, and not much else.

The appearance of Kathmandu was completely transformed by this spate of building activity. Previously rice fields had come right up to the walls of the Old City; now the surrounding countryside was dotted with stucco palaces surrounded by walled gardens or open parkland. A broad avenue was created linking Narayanhiti Palace and the Tundikhel parade ground so that the king, accompanied by his prime minister and generals, could form a grand procession without having to enter the Old City's narrow streets. This Durbar Marg, or Royal Way, became the main axis of the new and far more spacious city growing up beyond Kathmandu's historic limits. As each successive prime minister sought to outdo his predecessors, larger and more splendid Rana palaces went up to the north and east of the capital, culminating in the immense Singha Durbar. With its own theater, a grandiose assembly hall, and more than 1,000 rooms set around seven grand courtyards, it was reputed to be the largest palace in Asia. Nobody dared to surpass Singha Durbar, and it subsequently became the prime minister's official residence and the seat of his government.

The other symbol of highest rank was the right to engage in big-game hunting, or *shikar*, down in the forests and marshlands of the Terai. Every winter season, the prime minister would set off from Kathmandu with an entourage that sometimes numbered several thousand. The king, the crown prince, the top generals, and other leading Ranas would usually take part in these hunting

expeditions. Several hundred trained elephants and thousands of local guides and beaters were employed to corral all the wild animals within a cordoned-off area and funnel them into the designated killing grounds. There the honored guests would be waiting, either in a hide raised on poles or mounted on elephants, their high-powered hunting rifles at the ready. On one occasion more than 300 tigers were killed in a single hunt.

The prodigious scale of hunting expeditions in the Nepalese Terai was unusual. But similar tiger shoots went on all over British India, and especially in the quasi-independent princely states whose rulers—be they maharajas or nizams or nawabs—liked to hide their political impotence behind a façade of refined manners, luxury, and ostentation. Much the same could be said of the Shah kings of Nepal during their “period of captivity.” They were encouraged to be frivolous because this reduced the likelihood of any future king ever trying to seize back his rightful authority. Again, there was nothing unusual about this, at least not in the milieu of Indian princely courts. An endless round of picnics, polo matches, and hunting expeditions was part and parcel of the listless maharajas’ lifestyle.

Nepal’s royal family imbibed this culture and adapted it to local conditions in their mountainous kingdom. The aspect of life in which tradition tended to prevail was in culinary arrangements, because as caste Hindus it was essential that all food be prepared by members of the appropriate caste, and in the dress and headgear of ladies of the court. Even then there was a strong compulsion to follow European fashions, though the elaborately curled tresses and pillbox hats worn by queens and ladies-in-waiting were still a feature of the Nepalese court far into the twentieth century.

The Ranas did at least enhance the independent status of Nepal. Full recognition by Britain in 1923 was of great significance, even

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though it was granted mainly in thanks for the Gurkha regiments' loyal service during the Great War. Among other things, it meant that the king was henceforth addressed by both his own subjects and foreign dignitaries as "Your Majesty," as opposed to merely "Your Highness."

There was also a fairly smooth transition of government from one hereditary prime minister to the next most senior Rana on the roll of succession. Not one Rana prime minister was assassinated after the Shamsheer brothers' coup of 1885. Although there were plenty of conspiracies, these were entirely confined to the ruling elite, and the country remained unified.

There were, however, obvious weaknesses in this hereditary system of government, quite apart from its dubious legitimacy. One was that, when he finally inherited the highest office, each prime minister was tempted to do all that he could to enrich himself and advance the prospects of his own family. This was not even considered to be corrupt: There was no distinction between public finances and what the prime minister claimed for himself. Moreover, the longer a prime minister remained in office, the more comfortable and secure became the position of his immediate family. Some of them clung to office for decades, and hence those next in line on the roll of succession grew progressively older until the regime was run by a group of deeply reactionary graybeards.

Another temptation was for the prime minister to tamper with the roll of succession in favor of his own immediate family. Given the Ranas' penchant for taking multiple wives and concubines, there were usually many younger sons and bastards who needed suitable positions found for them in the army or government service. The danger here was that any adjustment in their favor set back the prospects of other branches of the Rana family, thereby undermining the broad consensus upon which this self-serving regime depended for its survival.

Each time the consensus broke down, the conspiracies began all over again. At least two Rana prime ministers were forcibly removed from office. The first to go was Dev Shamsheer, whose hold on office lasted just over 100 days. He was duped into going to his younger brother Chandra Shamsheer's house on the pretext of sorting out a private dispute over property. Once inside, the prime minister was overpowered and trussed up in his own cummerbund. The coup almost went wrong when soldiers of the Bijuli Garad, the prime minister's personal bodyguard, refused to believe their master had been relieved of his office by royal command. But Chandra Shamsheer still had an ace up his sleeve. King Prithvi Bir had been brought along in advance, and now he was wheeled out before the restive troops. Somewhat hesitantly, he called the guards to order and pronounced that he had himself appointed a new prime minister. The king's presence was enough to awe the soldiers, and the bloodless coup went ahead. Dev Shamsheer was sent into exile, first to eastern Nepal and then into India, where he lived out his days comfortably on a Nepalese government pension.

Chandra Shamsheer ruled Nepal for the next twenty-eight years, during which time his branch of the Ranas amassed such wealth that even today his heirs are among the wealthiest in Nepal. It was he who devised a new system of classifying the legitimacy of Rana offspring and their relative position on the roll of succession. The children of a husband and wife of equal caste were declared to be "A" class Ranas, and in future only these could be promoted to the highest offices. The children of marriages between different castes were made "B" class Ranas, while the illegitimate offspring of lower-caste women became "C" class Ranas. Neither "B" nor "C" class Ranas could rise above the military rank of colonel, which effectively excluded them from holding high office. Chandra Shamsheer justified these changes as being necessary to achieve an orderly succession, though his real motive

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was probably to remove rival branches of Ranas from the roll of succession and so clear the way for his own "A" class sons.

Such an exclusive and caste-driven pecking order threw up some astounding anomalies. Two-year-old boys were promoted to general, while hardy veterans had to make do with a colonel's salary. It also created jealousies and divisions beneath the apparent unity of Rana rule. Subsequent prime ministers tinkered with the order to promote their own "C" class sons, but the triple classification lasted as long as the Ranas remained in power.

The most dramatic overhaul came in 1932, when Prime Minister Juddha Shamsheer summoned the entire Rana hierarchy to his residence at Singha Durbar. Machine guns were set up covering the entrance, and an armed ADC walked up and down, making sure everyone was present. Again, the royal presence was used to confer legitimacy on the proceedings. The twenty-five-year-old King Tribhuvan was not even required to speak, but merely entered the room and smoked two cigarettes before departing. The prime minister then entered with a pistol in each hand and declared that half of the assembled company, including the next in line to become prime minister, were struck off the roll and would be immediately sent into exile. Nobody dared resist, and this new variety of bloodless purge went ahead unhindered.

King Tribhuvan may have helped out on this occasion, but his relations with his prime minister became increasingly strained. For, despite the restrictive upbringing within the confines of Narayanhiti Palace, Tribhuvan was both open-minded and more decisive than his forebears. In stark contrast, Juddha Shamsheer was an old-style military man whose only response to any calls for change in Nepal was heavy-handed repression. His first instinct was to stand by tradition and defend the status quo.

True, some much-needed changes had been introduced by his predecessors, including the abolition of the widow-burning rituals of *sati* in 1920, and in 1924 granting freedom to more than 60,000 Nepalese who still lived in slavery. But in most other respects, Nepal remained locked in a feudal age while all around it change was gathering pace. Some aspects of modernity made their way in, to the capital at least. A handful of Nepali language schools were opened, the first newspaper was established, and a new post office and showpiece military hospital were constructed. Piped water and electricity were made available to the wealthier residents of Kathmandu. But there was no attempt to bring development to the scattered villages where 90 percent of Nepalis lived in conditions that had changed little since Prithvi Narayan's time.

Instead, the status quo was to be protected by keeping the Kingdom of Nepal in complete isolation from the changing world outside its borders. Apart from staff at the British Residency and a handful of technical experts, no foreigners were permitted to enter Nepal. It remained a forbidden kingdom. All of the early mountaineering expeditions that attempted to climb Everest had to approach it by a very roundabout route through Tibet, the more direct access through Nepalese territory being barred to foreigners.

Plans to build a road link to India were discussed but turned down on the grounds that this would open up the country to foreign invasion. That did not prevent the Rana elite from importing their Rolls-Royces, Hispano-Suizas, and Cadillacs, though these had to be carried by teams of porters over two mountain ranges before they reached the capital. Once they arrived, thousands of laborers were employed to build a few miles of tarmac road so that the notables could show off their latest acquisitions. Nepal's elite took great pride in these manifestations of "progress." A senior Rana once boasted to an Indian maharaja whose collection of limousines was confined to the palace garage because there

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were no motorable roads within his princely state: "At least *we* have the roads to drive them on."

It was not only foreign luxuries that were coming over the mountains. Even the Ranas' policy of deliberate isolation could not prevent new ideas from creeping in. Gurkha soldiers returning to their villages brought with them a broader perspective on the world, while just across the border Indian nationalists and pro-democracy activists were mounting a growing challenge to the British raj. For all its mountain ramparts, Nepal could not remain completely immune to these new ideas. Nepalese exiles seeking a fairer and more democratic government in their home country began forming the first political parties. They were joined by some of the wealthy, highly educated, and now disinherited "C" class Ranas, who had their own reasons for opposing the regime in Kathmandu.

Both King Tribhuvan and Crown Prince Mahendra were sympathetic to these liberal ideas. They also wanted to restore the Crown's authority, as is apparent from a conversation they had with the British Representative in Kathmandu. He quotes them as saying: "We and only we are the descendents of the Sisodia Rajputs and Nepal belongs to us. We, not the descendants of Jung Bahadur nor of Dhir Shamsher, are the hereditary rulers. Under the present system we are kept practically in captivity and have to look to the Prime Minister for our daily bread, the necessities of life and even our private money. Each Prime Minister, while in office, collects all revenue, pays all salaries and amasses all the wealth he can for himself and his immediate family, with the result that there is no progress in Nepal nor prospect of development." For the first time, the Shah dynasty's right to rule Nepal was being linked with ideas like "progress" and "development."

Since the royal family was kept under the closest surveillance, they tended to keep their liberal sympathies to themselves. There were other instances, however, in which King Tribhuvan was bet-

ter placed to stand up to his domineering prime minister. Like so many of his Rana predecessors, Juddha Shamsher sought marriage alliances with the royal family. He succeeded in having his granddaughter married to Crown Prince Mahendra in 1940 and subsequently arranged for two of his great-granddaughters to marry the younger royal brothers, Himalaya and Basundhara. But when he also asked that three royal princesses be given in marriage to three of his sons, the king equivocated. It was known that the old despot suffered from diabetes and was thinking of retiring from office to devote himself to religion as a "royal hermit." King Tribhuvan's waiting game paid off, and Juddha Shamsher resigned the prime ministership before any more weddings could take place.

The new prime minister might just have bridged the gulf between Nepal's backward-looking society and the modern world. In his first public address, Padma Shamsher declared himself to be "the servant of the people," and despite the opposition of conservative Ranas he pressed for a new constitution with a partially elected legislature. But he had neither great wealth nor enough support among the Rana hierarchy to push through with his plans. Some of his advisers suggested that he stage a coup d'état and have his commander in chief, Mohan Shamsher, and other arch-conservatives assassinated, but he could not contemplate so heinous a crime as murdering his own blood relations. Instead, fearful for his own life, he fled into India, where he was eventually prevailed upon to tender his resignation in return for a handsome pension.

With that, Mohan Shamsher assumed the titles of hereditary prime minister and maharaja of Kaski and Lamjung. He was the last Rana to be so instated, and the three years that he ruled Nepal were a desperate rearguard action against political activists, bomb plots, incursions by pro-democracy guerrillas, and increasingly

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strained relations with King Tribhuvan and other members of the royal family. Rather than try to accommodate some of these pressures, Mohan Shamsher ordered waves of mass arrests and relied exclusively on the most reactionary of his Rana relatives. But then another assassination plot was discovered in September 1950, and this time the implications were far more serious. Mohan Shamsher could not be certain, but it looked like the king himself was involved in the conspiracy.

SEVEN

KING TRIBHUVAN & SONS

King Tribhuvan was a bewildered five-year-old boy when he ascended the throne of Nepal in 1911. For the next thirty-nine years, like so many of his ancestors he was kept as a prisoner in Narayanhiti Palace. Over that time he learned to hide his real thoughts and feelings from a succession of overbearing prime ministers. But he was also aware that, in the last resort, their authority depended on the control they had over the king's person. If he could engineer a way to escape that control, then Rana claims to govern on his behalf would be revealed for what they were—a fiction. The legitimacy of the Rana regime would crumble. So he began to plot a way to free himself and his family from the clutches of his latest prime minister, Mohan Shamsher.

It was not easy. The king had to request his prime minister's permission to go outside the palace grounds. On the rare occasions that this was permitted he was always surrounded by secret

police. Even within the palace, there were so many spies and informers that Tribhuvan could not confide his plans to anyone outside his own immediate family. So it was to his two younger sons, Himalaya and Basundhara, that he entrusted the most delicate of missions. They were to make contact with officials at the Indian Embassy and sound out whether cooperation would be forthcoming for a daring escape plan.

Although the younger princes were less closely guarded than the king, their movements were also monitored by the police. On one occasion they were followed to an Indian diplomat's house and had to escape from the back while their host stalled their pursuers in his living room.

India's newly independent and democratic government took a dim view of the Rana regime. The very fact that Jawaharlal Nehru headed the world's largest democracy was the culmination of a long struggle for freedom and representative government. The Ranas had deliberately prevented Nepal from moving down that road. If anything, they were heading in the opposite direction.

With Nehru's blessing, the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu was secretly instructed to assist the Nepalese royal family. Mohan Shamsheer, meanwhile, had grown ever more suspicious, especially after the king refused to ratify the death sentences passed on some conspirators who had planned his own assassination. The prime minister therefore decided to remove Tribhuvan and place the king's eldest son, Mahendra, on the throne. When the crown prince declined, the prime minister thought of banishing the entire royal family to their ancestral palace in Gorkha. Both sides had an inkling of what the other was planning. But no one knew who would move first.

On November 4, 1950, King Tribhuvan drove himself over to Singha Durbar and requested the prime minister's permission to go out on a family picnic while the weather remained warm. Mohan Shamsheer assumed that this was just a cover, that the king

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must have somehow learned about his own secret plans for dealing with recalcitrant royals and was now trying to provoke him into giving the game away. He therefore readily granted his assent to so innocent a request as a picnic. The date was set for November 6. The king then returned to Narayanhiti, taking the opportunity to practice his driving technique. There had been few occasions to do so previously.

It was an unusual convoy that pulled out of the palace gates on the morning of November 6. As usual, a pilot car filled with security guards led the way. Next came the king, at the wheel of his own car, followed by his three sons, who were also driving their own vehicles. Also aboard were Tribhuvan's two queens and his grandson, the five-year-old Prince Birendra. The king had discreetly issued handguns to all adult male members of the family.

The motorcade exited Narayanhiti Palace and turned north toward a forested area outside Kathmandu where they were supposed to have their picnic. In fact, their destination was a Rana palace called Sital Niwas that then served as a temporary base for the Indian Embassy. Conveniently, it lay along their route. As the lead vehicle approached its entrance, the Indian military attaché swung the gates open. King Tribhuvan took a sharp left into the embassy grounds. He was followed by the cars driven by his three sons. It all happened so quickly that the Nepalese soldiers guarding the gate had no time to respond. Within a matter of seconds, Nepal's ruling family were safely within the embassy compound and claiming political asylum.

The royal family was now barricaded within the Indian Embassy, exiles within their own country while feverish negotiations went on between the Indian and Nepalese governments. It was a bizarre situation, equivalent to the entire British royal family seeking asylum inside the U.S. Embassy because they did not approve of the way the country was being run.

When Mohan Shamsheer heard of the royal escape he was at a

complete loss as to what to do next. He sent his own son to beg an audience and plead with the king that he should return to his palace, but Tribhuvan refused unless he was first given more concrete assurances. Some of the hard-line Rana generals wanted to storm the embassy compound and bring out the royal family by force. However, that would almost certainly have provoked a massive military response from India. Other expedients had to be found.

The embattled Rana regime formally deposed King Tribhuvan and installed on the throne of Nepal the only male heir left under their control, the king's younger grandson Prince Gyanendra. The three-year-old boy had no idea what was going on as he was taken to Hanuman Dhoka and the bejeweled crown placed on his head. After a standoff lasting four days, the rest of the royal family were allowed to board an Indian Air Force plane and were flown to New Delhi. They might be going into exile, but the royal family were at last freed from the constraints imposed by their Rana prime ministers.

Jawarhalal Nehru, India's first prime minister, welcomed the royal refugees from Kathmandu as his personal guests. He had his own plans for Nepal. First, he refused to recognize the boy-king Gyanendra as a legitimate sovereign and persuaded Great Britain and the United States, the only other countries that then had diplomatic relations with Nepal, to follow his lead. As a result, Mohan Shamsheer's government was denied any international recognition. It was treated as a pariah regime.

Meanwhile, pro-democracy guerrillas based in India crossed over into Nepal and fought several skirmishes with army troops loyal to the Ranas. There followed a series of mass demonstrations around Kathmandu demanding that King Tribhuvan be reinstated as the rightful monarch. Support from within the Rana family was

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crumbling, with highly placed "C" class Ranas refusing to cooperate or even leading their troops to mutiny. The internal situation was deteriorating fast, carrying with it the threat of anarchy and civil war on India's sensitive northern border. Nehru certainly did not want that. India's interests, he thought, would best be served by a more limited and peaceful revolution. So he proposed that King Tribhuvan be restored and an interim government set up under him made up of equal numbers of Rana and Nepali Congress ministers. It took time to persuade the various parties, but eventually they all agreed to the so-called Delhi Compromise.

On February 15, 1951, King Tribhuvan flew back to Kathmandu and a rapturous welcome. As he came down the steps of an Indian Air Force DC-3 Dakota, the king was flanked by B. P. Koirala and other pro-democracy leaders whose activists had helped in overthrowing the Rana regime, as if to symbolize that kingship was now inseparably linked with progress and democracy. They were greeted somewhat frostily by Mohan Shamsheer, but as the king was driven from the airfield to Narayanhiti Palace thousands of cheering citizens lined the way. On that February day, the king of Nepal reassumed his rightful authority again after a gap of more than 100 years.

It was the oddest of revolutions—half monarchist and half populist in inspiration, and thoroughly inconclusive in its end results. While it brought an end to Rana rule, the first prime minister appointed under the new dispensation was none other than Mohan Shamsheer Rana. The inner contradictions of the Delhi Compromise soon made themselves felt. The populist and revolutionary leaders could scarcely sit around the same cabinet table as their Rana colleagues, let alone agree on what should be done. The interim government fell apart, only to be replaced by a succession of equally unworkable and short-lived coalitions. Armed militants briefly took over the prime minister's residence at Singha Durbar, there was rioting in the streets, and once again Kathmandu was

placed under a curfew. King Tribhuvan might have toppled the Rana autocracy, but he was incapable of putting anything workable in its place. Perhaps the only pleasure he had during the four chaotic years of his rule was to see his old enemy, Mohan Shamsheer, dismissed from office and go into permanent exile in India.

He felt betrayed by his own family when his son and heir, Crown Prince Mahendra, insisted on marrying another granddaughter of the old tyrant Juddha Shamsheer. The king, his queens, and most of the royal family were against any match with the detested Ranas, but Mahendra was determined to stand up against his parents over the choice of his bride. In doing so he ran up against time-honored Hindu traditions of filial obedience and unquestioning acceptance of arranged marriages. But Mahendra had his own reasons for sticking to his decision.

While Mahendra's first wife and the mother of his six children, Princess Indra, lay dying, she beseeched him to marry her own sister, and he agreed. The main reason, apparently, was that the younger sister, Ratna, could be trusted to bring up the children as her own and not provide an alternative line of succession. The decision could be seen as statesmanlike, for some of the worst tragedies that had befallen the Shah dynasty arose from the ambition of a junior queen to replace the rightful heir to the throne with her own child.

King Tribhuvan did not see things that way. He objected to the proposed match largely because Ratna was the granddaughter of Juddha Shamsheer, the same overweening despot who had tried to marry off his grandsons to three royal princesses. Tribhuvan had scotched those wedding plans. He did not now want to see the crown prince marrying another of Juddha's descendants. So when Prince Mahendra insisted on the match, his father threatened either to strip him of his royal titles or, as a last resort, to abdicate the throne and go into exile.

The headstrong prince would not be intimidated, and the

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wedding took place anyway at Nagarjun, outside Kathmandu, in December 1952. Neither King Tribhuvan nor his two queens attended the marriage ceremony, but in the end he did not exclude the crown prince from the royal succession. Within three years of that unrecognized wedding, Tribhuvan was dead, Mahendra was crowned, and his second wife became Queen Ratna Rajya Laxmi.

A precedent had been set as to how a crown prince could defy his parents over marriage plans and still win out. The lesson would not have been lost on Mahendra's grandson, one Crown Prince Dipendra, when at the very beginning of the twenty-first century he faced similar parental disapproval over his choice of bride. Especially not as Queen Ratna, by now Nepal's septuagenarian Queen Mother, was still very much around. She had kept her part of the bargain with her sister and future husband. There had been no children. Instead, Queen Ratna played a pivotal role in bringing up two generations of the Shah dynasty—not just her sister's children, but those of the next generation as well, and especially Prince Dipendra. As queen mother, she was used to being respected and listened to on all family matters. For close to fifty years she was a power behind the scenes in Narayanhiti Palace.

King Tribhuvan's decision to seek asylum in the Indian Embassy may have been dictated as much by fear as by any statesmanlike vision of the future, but in carrying it off he single-handedly changed the shape of Nepalese history. For the next fifty years the Shah kings would be undisputed rulers of their ancestral lands. However, Tribhuvan's promise of bringing Nepal into the modern era did not bear fruit within what was left of his lifetime. His health was already failing him, and in 1955 he died in a Zurich hospital at the age of forty-eight.

It was his son, King Mahendra, who pushed this semi-medieval and backward-looking kingdom halfway into the twen-

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



1. Feeble minded but cruel, King Surendra had his father deposed and handed power to the Ranas.



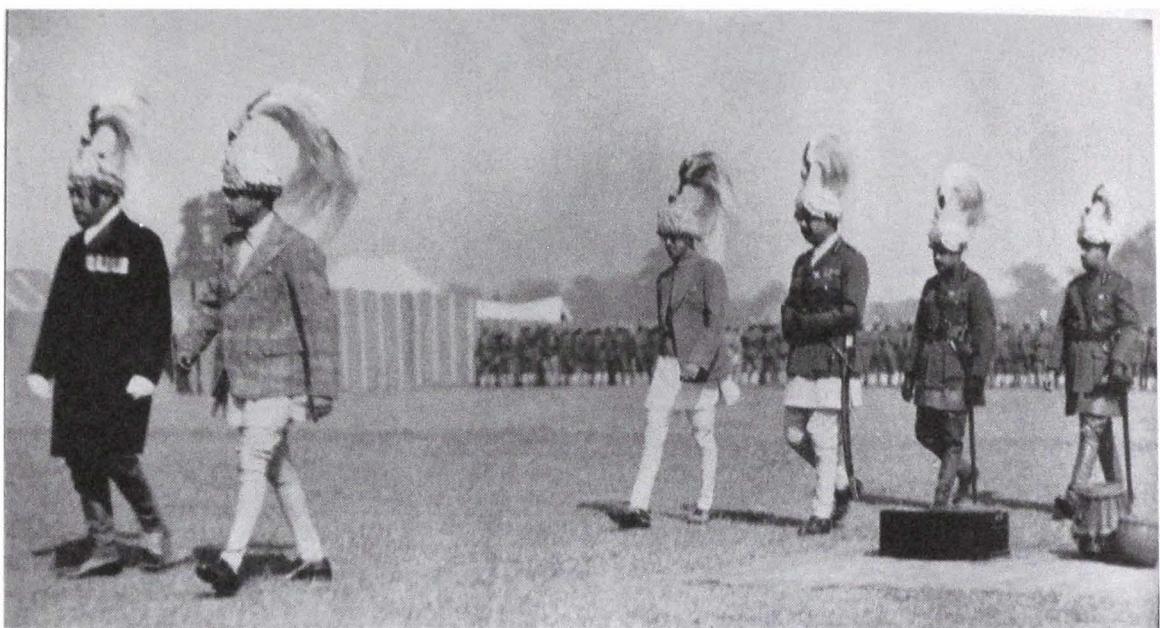
2. The young King Tribhuvan surrounded by Rana dignitaries.



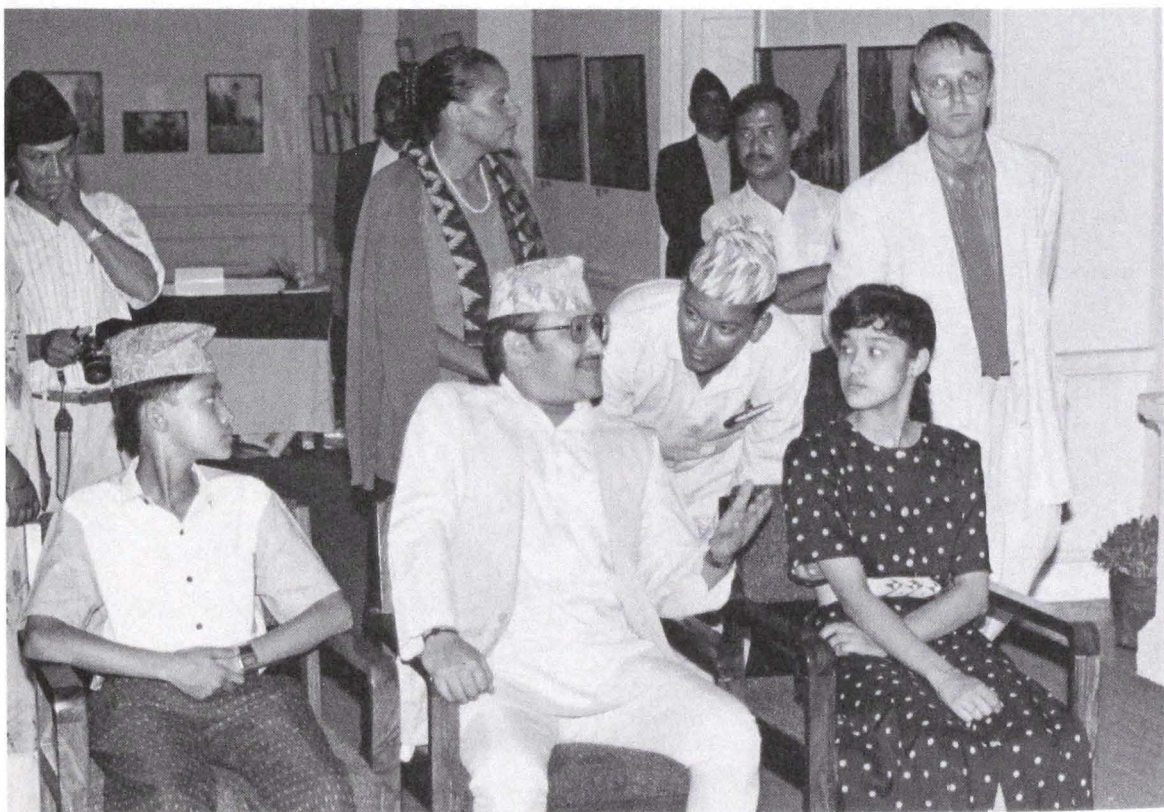
3. Lord Louis and Lady Edwina Mountbatten in Kathmandu.



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.



5. King Tribhuvan with Prime Minister Juddha Shamsher Rana and Crown Prince Mahendra following behind, on the Tundikhel parade ground, Kathmandu.



6. King Birendra relaxes with Princess Shruti and his younger son, Prince Nirajan. The court photographer Kiran Chitrakar is whispering in the King's ear.



7. King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya sit well apart from Crown Prince Dipendra during a public ceremony.



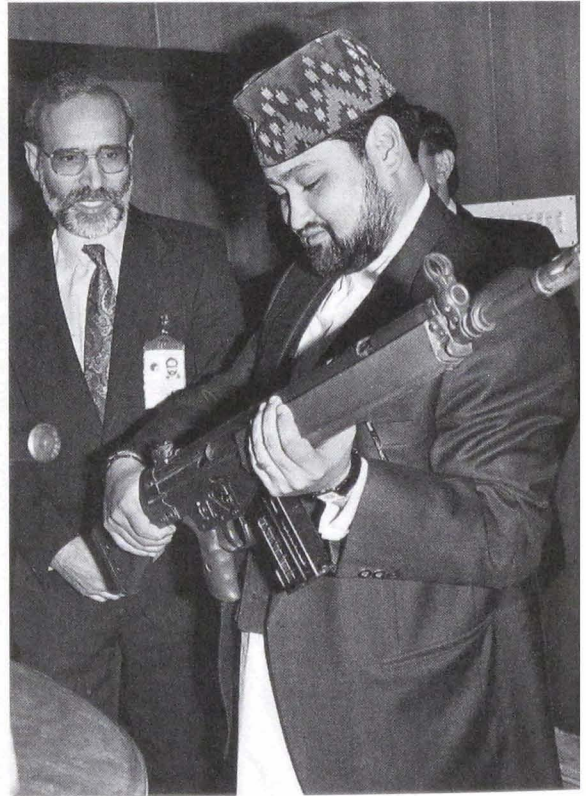
8. Princess Shruti visiting an art gallery shortly before she was killed. Her husband Kumar Gorakh survived to look after their two young daughters.



9. The sleeping Vishnu, near Budhanilkantha, in the hills to the north of Kathmandu, which the god-kings of Nepal should never look upon.

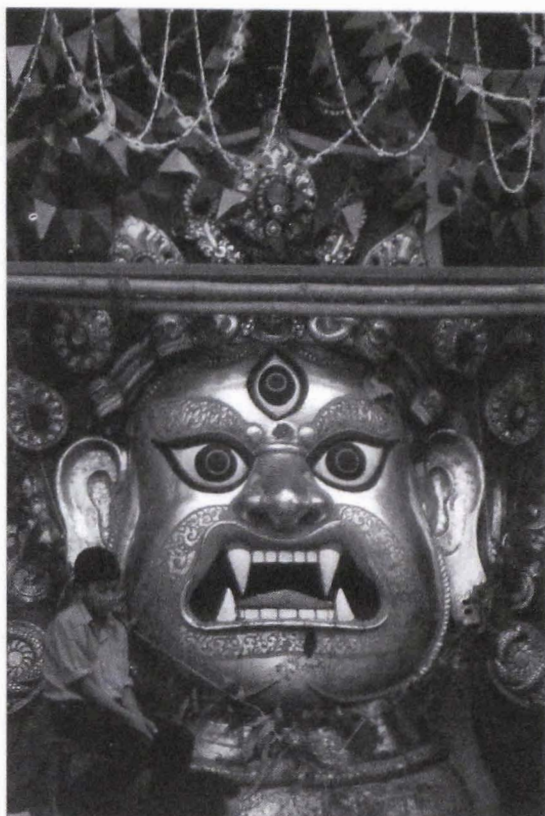


10. Devyani Rana might have become Queen of Nepal.



11. Crown Prince Dipendra had a passion for guns.

12. The ferocious image of Bhairav, near the Old Royal Palace, is only opened up during the Indrajaltra festival, when rice wine and beer flow freely.



13. The living incarnation of the god Ganesh, who joins the goddess Kumari and Bhairav as they are pulled on chariots through Kathmandu during Indrajaltra.



14. The first coronation of Prince Gyanendra in 1950, during the final days of the Rana regime.



15. Fifty-one years later, Prince Gyanendra is enthroned again after the royal massacre.

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Hinduism rather than the ancestral gods. So the curse of Gorakhnath was conveniently forgotten.

There were other aspects of Hindu kingship that were less easily ignored. Birendra had no choice but to go along with popular beliefs that he was an incarnation of Vishnu. However, the divine aspect of kingship was not something he felt particularly comfortable with, and whenever possible he tried to play it down—except possibly during the festival of Badha Dasain, when the elders in every family place a *tika* of red paste on the foreheads of younger members. Then the gates of Narayanhiti would open and thousands of Nepalese would line up for the king to bestow on them the *tika* in the belief that this would wash away at least some of their sins. Birendra may have felt something less superstitious but, for him, more tangible in this age-old ritual. It was an affirmation of his role as the father of all his people.

On some of the other vexed issues that surround orthodox Hinduism—the treatment of the “untouchable” caste of Dalits, for instance, or the prohibitions against people of different castes intermarrying or even eating together—the king had to walk a fine line between his own liberal views and the minimum requirements of a Hindu monarch. He had little time for caste divisions nor, for that matter, the issue of cow slaughter, which is firmly linked with the Gorakhnath cult and is still a live issue today.

King Birendra tried to stay above the fray. He was a Hindu monarch, but he was also king to all of his 23 million peoples—whatever their race, religion, or mother tongue. He was always punctilious about attending Buddhist as well as Hindu rituals and endeavored to steer a “middle way” between unthinking traditionalism and the equally uncritical copying of Western customs. “One should move with the times,” he once said, “but with roots firmly embedded in a country’s soil and the best of its legacies.”

* * *

The prospect of being assassinated is something that all ruling monarchs have to live with. It is like a stray dog that keeps following you around and won't be shooed away. Most of the time it can be kept at a safe distance, but its presence is always there, unseen, lurking in the shadows. Should you choose to rule the country in person, as a sort of royal dictatorship, then there is all the more reason for it to rush forward and bite in an unguarded moment. King Birendra was fully aware of this. In fact, from very early on in his reign, he believed that one day he would be assassinated. Of course, he never spoke of such foreboding in public. That would be alarmist and self-defeating. It would undermine the idea that "divinity doth hedge a king," and in the case of the Nepal's monarchs, that divinity was real enough.

For the young King Birendra, the "wake-up call" came in the late summer of 1979, when Lord Louis Mountbatten was blown up by Irish republicans. Mountbatten and his family had been staying at their holiday home on the west coast of Ireland, and he was aboard a small boat just outside the harbor of Mullaghmore, in County Sligo, when the bomb went off. The Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army claimed responsibility. Security was heightened for the state funeral in London, in which a riderless horse with boots turned backward in the stirrups preceded the gun carriage bearing the coffin.

Although this event happened half a world away, it had a profound impact on King Birendra. Mountbatten was not only the queen of England's cousin, he was the former commander in chief of the Allied Forces that had defeated the Japanese in Southeast Asia, and the last British Viceroy, who negotiated independence for India and Pakistan. Both he and his wife, Edwina, had visited Kathmandu. The young Prince Birendra would not have been able to remember that visit, since he was only one year old at the time, but he had heard tales of this glamorous couple from his older relatives. As a renowned soldier and world statesman, Lord Mount-

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batten embodied what many royal rulers believed they should aspire to. Now he had been blown to smithereens.

King Birendra was on a state visit to China when he heard the news. Like his father before him, Birendra favored a close relationship with China. This was mainly in the hope that the People's Republic would act as a counterweight to the otherwise overwhelming influence of India, which contained his landlocked kingdom on the west, south, and east, and through which practically all imports, including gasoline and kerosene, had to be transhipped. The king had recently declared Nepal a "Zone of Peace," the center of a strictly neutral area between Asia's two nuclear-armed superpowers that might in time extend across the entire Himalayan region. The Dalai Lama later proposed his own version of a Zone of Peace, with a demilitarized Tibet as its fulcrum.

China's support mattered a great deal to Birendra, which is why his visit there was not just to Beijing but extended to other regional cities as well. The Nepalese royal party had reached Urumchi, capital of the oil-rich province of Xinjiang in China's far west. Urumchi is a dusty, windblown, soulless place, most of it newly built to house the influx of Han Chinese immigrants. It is not the most uplifting of cities, and the king's thoughts that evening were somber. Taking aside his private secretary, he talked first about Mountbatten's unnatural death. Then the king declared that he expected to be assassinated rather than end his days peacefully. "To be blown up like that, suddenly," he said, "maybe it's not such a bad way to go." At the time, there were plenty of people who might have been happy to see Birendra dead—extremists from among pro-democracy movements, for instance.

The king was not only "above the law": Any criticism whatsoever could be construed as treason, and in Nepal, treason remained a capital offense. Nonetheless, there were people willing to risk imprisonment or death to rid Nepal of the king and his Panchayat system of government. There were constitutionalists

and Communists, students and lawyers, an emerging urban middle class and landless peasants. Already trouble was brewing on university campuses and high schools around Kathmandu.

It was the repressive system that these opponents hated, rather than King Birendra himself, but the king stood at the head of the Panchayat system. All key decisions were referred up to him, or at least to the Palace Secretariat that acted in his name. So if someone wanted to topple the system, the quickest way would be to target the head. Which may be why, in a far-flung corner of the People's Republic, King Birendra felt convinced that his life would end bloodily.

By the dawn of the new millennium, Birendra found his role to be greatly altered. Still king of Nepal, he was no longer its absolute ruler. Instead, he had become a constitutional monarch—not so different, in fact, from the queen of England or the heads of other modern European monarchies. Since 1990, Birendra had proved himself to be the very model of a modern constitutional monarch, always ready to help Nepal's fledgling democracy through its recurrent crises. For the past decade his country had been a multi-party democracy, ruled by elected politicians rather than directly from the palace. As a result, the king was far more popular than he had ever been. There were far fewer potential enemies out there.

The transition from royal autocracy to democracy had not been a tranquil one. In fact, the Shah dynasty was almost overwhelmed by the storm of popular protest that broke out in April 1990 against the old Panchayat regime, when thousands of Nepalese surged up Durbar Marg toward the reinforced steel gates of the royal palace. Riot police fired tear gas first. Then they tried baton charges. When that failed to hold back the crowds, they used live ammunition. Hundreds of unarmed protesters were killed or

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wounded, and once again a curfew was declared throughout the Kathmandu Valley.

At that stage the king could have called in the Royal Nepal Army, whose loyalty to the monarchy was unquestioned. Instead, he chose to enter into peaceful negotiations with opposition leaders and declare the old Panchayat system of government dissolved. He handed over most of his own powers. But Birendra was by nature a moderate and a pragmatist. By stepping back from the brink, he not only prevented his countrymen from spilling each other's blood; he also sidestepped the very real threat that the institution of monarchy would be jettisoned. The moment of crisis passed, and Birendra's moderation ensured the Shahs could at least remain on the throne. In terms of the dynasty's survival, it was a probably a shrewd move.

Not everyone inside the royal palace agreed with the king's decision to give way gracefully, however. Some hard-liners went into exile until such time that they might be recalled. That was not an option for Queen Aishwarya, who had to grin and bear it while staying at her husband's side. During the *Jana Andolan*, the "Spring Awakening" of 1990, the queen had been singled out as a target for anti-monarchist slogans. This was mainly because of her role as head of a special commission that channeled huge sums of foreign aid into the country, much of which had been siphoned off. Indeed, the whole organization was deemed to be irremediably corrupt.

If anyone had contributed to the monarchy's unpopularity, it was Queen Aishwarya. However, that did not stop her from criticizing her husband's "weakness" in giving in to a handful of self-styled revolutionaries. Aishwarya may not have been the most intellectual member of the royal family, but she had a will of iron, and there were many others in the palace and among her Rana relatives who supported her stand.

Crown Prince Dipendra was still a teenager and away at school

in England when the Spring Awakening erupted in Kathmandu. At the time he supported his father's decision to accommodate change and sent an encouraging fax from Eton. But as the years passed and a series of democratically elected governments came and went in rapid succession, each one of them as inadequate and corrupt as the last, the tides of opinion began to turn.

In the country at large, King Birendra was more popular than ever, if only because the failings of Nepalese-style democracy made people look to the king for leadership again. But within the some parts of the palace and the military establishment—precisely those circles in which the crown prince spent much of his time—there was a growing sense of dissatisfaction.

It was not just the failings of the new constitutional monarchy that caused unease. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Kingdom of Nepal faced a serious guerrilla insurgency. The Maoist rebels promised to rid the country of its corrupt parliamentary leaders and to put an end to monarchy. They controlled entire districts of western Nepal, where they had set up an alternative government, and their armed bands marched unimpeded through more than a third of the country. The police sent out against them were poorly armed and not trained in anti-guerrilla tactics, with the result that many police posts were surrendering without a fight. Only the Royal Nepal Army could take on the Maoists and win, it was argued, and the crown prince, who thought of himself first and foremost as a soldier, sat in on these discussions. With the monarchy itself under threat, surely it was time to act.

But the king was unwilling to countenance either a full-scale civil war in his country or, for that matter, a military coup d'état. As commander in chief, only he could order the army into action. He was coming under increasing pressure from his own prime minister to do so. Another constitutional crisis loomed. Yet the king steadfastly refused to give the green light for deploying the army.

EIGHT

HEIR APPARENT

Even his closest friends say that they did not really know Crown Prince Dipendra. In public, he was always affable, charming, self-controlled. There was a spontaneity about him that had not been seen among previous generations of Nepal's royal family. He liked a good joke, and his broad, unmistakably Nepali features were always ready to break into a smile. He had what one courtier described as "the common touch," the ability to stretch beyond the restrictive formalities of his royal status and make some sort of direct contact, however fleeting, with ordinary citizens.

The crown prince liked to go trekking into the more remote and mountainous areas of Nepal. He often preferred to travel in disguise, passing himself off as an army officer on leave. This enabled him to talk to villagers far more openly than would have been possible had they known that the crown prince was in their midst. It allowed him to feel he had become a different person, a

“man of the people,” and he liked that sensation. He also enjoyed seeing the surprise on people’s faces when they finally realized who he was. Since he was a child Dipendra had had a weakness for practical jokes.

Of course, as crown prince, he was expected to attend all manner of formal receptions, state dinners, and religious ceremonies. Generally, he was conscientious about carrying out these royal duties. He may have found standing around at some of the lengthier ceremonial functions tedious, but he got through them by downing a few large scotches beforehand, which did not seem to affect his public behavior in the least. He could drink like a fish and still show no outward signs of intoxication. If something was troubling him, he just became quiet. His drinking caused no outbursts of temper or falling over or excessive affability.

Those palace officials responsible for ensuring that public functions went smoothly admired the prince’s capacity for “seeing things through” without causing any embarrassment. This kind of self-discipline is one of the prime requirements of a royal. For no matter what you do in private, when in the public’s gaze you are expected to keep up the image, show interest and concern as appropriate, and never, ever “let the side down.”

This is not something that junior royals have any say in. It is a completely different situation from that of people who run for public office. They generally choose to do so, and they accept the personal costs of holding high office. For them, there is always the prospect of honorable retirement. Not so for crown princes. From the moment they are born there is a fixed responsibility ahead, and it is a job for life. The only ways out are to abdicate, be declared insane, or commit suicide. Or in Nepal, to marry into a beef-eating caste—which, from the standpoint of most traditional Hindus, amounts to a type of insanity.

* * *

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The boy-child who was to be king of Nepal was born on June 27, 1971. The precise location and time of his birth—down to the last minute and second—were carefully recorded and, along with other requisite details, taken to the royal astrologer, Mangal Raj Joshi, so that he could draw up the infant prince's birth chart. As always, the finer details were kept secret to prevent other, unofficial astrologers from making their own predictions. It was important to get all the details right, for on the accuracy of that birth chart depended not only the fortunes of this boy-child, but the future of the royal dynasty and the well-being of all the people of Nepal.

At his naming ceremony the boy was given an old Sanskrit name, Dipendra, or "Lord of Candlelight." The next major rite in Hindu households would normally be the first rice-eating ceremony. Not only does this mark the infant's progression to solid foods; it also confirms his acceptance as a full member of the family's caste, since, traditionally, boiled rice can be eaten only together with those of the same caste. But before he reached that important rite of passage, King Birendra ascended the throne, and the one-year-old Dipendra was declared crown prince of Nepal. Security worries about the king played a part in this, for only when the heir presumptive had been confirmed as crown prince was the royal succession secure.

Dipendra grew up in Narayanhiti Palace, which had been almost completely rebuilt during the 1960s by his grandfather, King Mahendra. Its completion had been rushed forward to be ready for the royal wedding of Birendra and Aishwarya in 1970. The architecture is a strange mixture of traditional and modern, though from a child's point of view the overwhelming impression would have been how very new everything was. The interior furnishings conformed to the tastes of those times, with extensive use of vinyl and other synthetic fabrics. Despite the oversize portraits of royal ancestors staring down from the walls, there was little real sense of continuity.

The young prince spent most of his time in the royal couple's more homely private apartments, looked after by his devoted nurse and specially assigned servants whenever he was not being shown off to admiring royal uncles and aunts. The palace's artfully landscaped gardens, with their sculpted lawns and ornamental ponds, were his to play in, though there was always a watchful attendant to make sure he came to no harm. When he could scarcely walk he was presented with his first pony, good horsemanship being considered an essential quality in a prince. There were fancy-dress parties with his royal cousins. But for most of the time his world was circumscribed by the stout brick walls and steel gates that surround Narayanhiti.

As is often true in such large households, the child spent more time with servants than with his own parents. King Birendra, preoccupied with ruling the country, was a distant figure whom the young prince was taught to address as "Your Majesty." Queen Aishwarya was herself deeply involved in palace politics and in running the Social Service National Coordination Council. She was chairperson or patron of many charities—all time-consuming duties—and liked to keep some time to herself, writing lyrical poems under the pen name Chandani Shah, some of which were set to music.

Besides which, there were new family members to care for. A little sister, Princess Shruti, was born in 1976, and Prince Nirajan two years later. Whereas Dipendra was brought up to be tough enough to handle his future role as king, his younger siblings were deeply indulged. Queen Aishwarya was also keen on philanthropic projects, one of them being to look after an orphan boy who was taken into the palace and showered with affection. None of this can have made Dipendra feel secure about his mother's feelings. Add to this the absence of both his parents when they made state visits to other countries, and it is understandable that the young prince might have felt left out. While the king and

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queen were abroad, Dipendra was left in the care of Queen Mother Ratna and his uncle, Prince Gyanendra, who may well have understood the boy better than his parents. Gyanendra also stood in for the king as head of government at such times.

The crown prince was sent to his first school when he was three. The Kanti Ishwari kindergarten is named after the two sisters who married King Tribhuvan. It stands beside the sacred Bagmati River, not far from a statue raised in honor of the royal revolutionary who freed Nepal from the Rana autocracy and so restored the Shah dynasty to meaningful power.

After the peculiarities of palace life, it must have seemed like a breath of fresh air to be able to play freely with other boys and girls. Of course, the heir to the throne was driven to school by armed ADCs who then hung around as inconspicuously as possible until it was time to escort their charge back to the royal palace. But during schooltime he was supposed to be treated just the same as other children, though naturally everyone was aware that he was the crown prince. On the school's open days, the king and queen held the place of honor, and before long Dipendra was joined by other royal siblings, first his cousin, Prince Paras, and then by his sister, Princess Shruti. Although thoroughly exclusive, the school provided a first taste of normality for Dipendra. He retained fond memories of his time at Kanti Ishwari and later helped form its alumni association.

From there he went on to Budhanilkantha School, set up in the hills to the north of Kathmandu. The school takes its name from a nearby shrine to the Sleeping Vishnu, at the center of which is a gracious figure of the recumbent deity, carved in pale stone and surrounded by a sunken pond. Since the kings of Nepal were themselves considered to be incarnations of Vishnu, it was deemed extremely unlucky for them to set eyes on the statue of

Vishnu in his sleeping form. In fact, it was forbidden them. Despite these warnings, the young prince still wanted to enter the temple.

Modeled on a British boarding school, with a house system and prefects, Budhanilkantha deliberately aimed to circumvent the intricate class and caste hierarchies that still survive in Nepal. Students were not known by their surnames. Instead they were given numbers, like serving members of the armed forces. So eight-year-old Crown Prince Dipendra Bir Bikram Shah was known as plain Dipendra, No. 832.

Life was not wholly untroubled for No. 832, who was occasionally subjected to the school's strict discipline for his misdemeanors—like raiding the kitchens when he felt hungry in the middle of the night. During his nearly eight years there, several new masters were taken on who were not professional teachers at all, but high-ranking army officers. This was partly to ensure the crown prince's security, but it also had a lasting impact on Dipendra. His history teacher, Dharmapal Thapa, captivated his students with stories of Napoleon and Prithvi Narayan Shah. These appealed to the bright but intellectually lazy prince, who grew to admire the military and martial values above all else. He also took up boxing and other “manly” sports. It was on his eighth birthday that his parents gave Dipendra his first real pistol.

Dharmapal Thapa established a lasting relationship with the crown prince, who regarded him as a sort of guru. After his spell of schoolteaching, Thapa returned to the army and rose to become commander in chief. Even after he retired from the post, he remained one of Dipendra's closest confidants.

Even though Budhanilkantha School was established along British lines and had an English headmaster, it was still a departure from royal tradition to have the crown prince educated alongside commoners in his own country. Previously there had been private tutors within the palace, while King Birendra's schooling had been

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mainly abroad—first at St. Joseph’s, an elite Catholic college in India, and then at Eton. Dipendra’s was the first generation of young royals to be educated mainly at Nepalese schools. The king, however, wanted his son to have some experience of the wider world. He himself valued the time he had spent at Eton, and it was decided that Dipendra should follow in his footsteps. So, at the age of fifteen, the crown prince bade farewell to his Nepalese schoolmates and took the plane to England.

Eton has been in the business of educating the English ruling classes for nearly 600 years. It is a royal foundation, having been established near Windsor Castle by the same King Henry VI who first lost half of France in the Hundred Years’ War and then, after a bitter civil war, the crown itself. Since then Eton has produced eighteen British prime ministers, countless generals and admirals, novelists and poets, ambassadors, bankers, and, of course, landed magnates. Old Etonians, it is said, manage to convey a sense of “effortless superiority.” Nor was there anything unusual about princes attending the school. The heirs to the House of Windsor, Prince William and Prince Harry, were sent to Eton, partly because there is a tradition of treating royals no differently from other boys. In such company it would be far more difficult for a Nepalese prince to make his mark than back home in Kathmandu.

Things did not get off to a good start when Dipendra smuggled alcohol into the school and another pupil sold the story to the newspapers. Headlines about an exotic oriental prince selling booze to his upper-class friends did not go down well with the school authorities. The other boys nicknamed him Dippy, with its connotations of being either slightly mad or a dipsomaniac. (When his father, Birendra, had been at Eton he was known as Nipple, a corruption of Nepal.) A somewhat chastened Dippy decided to concentrate on what he was best at—the martial arts,

target practice on the shooting range, and playing at being a soldier in the school's Combined Cadet Force.

Everyone acknowledged that he was "a crack shot" as well as being one of the best students of karate in years. Some found him slightly scary. In one incident, when a fight was brewing between a group of Etonians and local boys in the town, Dipendra showed no fear whatsoever as he advanced into the *melée*. When he lifted a fellow pupil by the jaw because he thought he was being laughed at, he crossed the line of acceptable courage. He had a habit of punching people "as a joke," which some Etonians did not find so funny.

Dippy did not excel in any of the school's major sports, like cricket or rowing, that bring popularity. Though bright enough to "sail through" his examinations, he lacked the intellectual polish to make much headway among the arty, slightly *louche* set whose authority derived from acerbic wit rather than physical prowess. As a result, Dipendra was never asked to join Pop, the self-electing society—not so very unlike the traditional Nepalese aristocracy—that sits at the pinnacle of Eton's hierarchy and whose members have the right to wear fancy waistcoats. Instead, Dippy tried to win friends by bragging about his possession of a loaded revolver or how he could have any girl he wanted back in Nepal. The fact that he returned from one Christmas holiday with the status of a god—because his coming-of-age ceremony had been celebrated—meant that he was excused from going to chapel. It also marked him as being even more peculiar. He enjoyed the freedoms that went with living in Britain, but he often felt very lonely.

On weekends he would usually stay with his guardian in England, Lord Camoys, who had previously looked after Birendra when he had been at Eton. But Dipendra also sought out the company of his fellow Nepalese, driving down to the barracks of the British Gurkhas near Aldershot so that he could talk and join in Nepali singing and dancing. He often said to friends that

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he missed his homeland. He also missed the company of women. At the age of nineteen that is hardly surprising, and back in Nepal he had a girlfriend, Supriya Shah, who he very much wanted to marry. Toward the end of his time at Eton he met Rosella Scarcella, an equally lonely Italian girl who was working at a shop in Windsor. The two of them went for long walks together, and he confessed that while he expected to go through with an arranged marriage, he hoped that love would also be involved.

Dipendra left Eton with a small circle of English friends who would stick with him through thick and thin. He had passed both O- and A-level examinations with reasonable grades. But whereas his father had gone on to study at Harvard, it was thought best for Dipendra to return to Nepal. He enrolled as a student at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, where he took an M.A. in geography. At the same time he was being groomed for his kingly duties. The waiting years had begun.

It has always been the fate of crown princes to wait, sometimes for decades, before they can assume any meaningful role in life. There is no choice in the matter. From early childhood they are aware that only one road is mapped out for them—to be king and the father of future kings. Nor do they have much say in when they take up those responsibilities. That depends on the previous king's health, the chances of war, or the assassin's bullet.

Keeping the heir apparent usefully employed has always posed a problem. Some dynasties have granted them private estates, principalities or duchies, to rule over. Others have given them command of armies and fleets, even when, as was often the case, they showed little natural military ability. It was all good training for their future role, made them feel important, and, if nothing else, kept them occupied.

Neither of these options was open to Nepalese crown princes.

Prithvi Narayan was the last Shah king to have commanded troops in battle. He also introduced strict laws of succession whereby all lands were held directly from the king and could be transferred only to his eldest son when he died. While this preserved the Kingdom of Nepal's unity, it left future generations of princes without lands or a meaningful role of their own.

Martial values continued to be fostered among the Shah kings, though the actual waging of campaigns was delegated to generals rather than princes of the blood.

Besides, the opportunities for winning military glory all but vanished once Nepal was hemmed in by British India. Apart from the occasional punitive expedition against Tibet, the Royal Nepal Army has not fought on its own account for nearly 200 years. Only the Swiss and the Swedes have maintained perpetual peacetime armies for longer.

Although largely inactive, the Royal Nepal Army has been kept up to strength and enjoys a privileged position in society. The officer corps is still dominated by Ranas. In recent years Nepalese units have been part of UN-sponsored security forces in East Timor and other trouble spots, but otherwise the RNA's chief concern is internal security. Its allegiance is directly to the king himself, and the crown prince is customarily given the title of colonel in chief.

Here was an institution, with its own archaic codes of duty and honor, into which Dipendra could throw himself wholeheartedly. He volunteered for tough infantry training and parachute courses that were not strictly necessary to fulfill his honorific duties as colonel in chief. He learned to fly helicopters. He became involved in testing small arms. He liked the military-style banter down at the Army Club and preferred the company of Sandhurst-trained ADCs to civilian courtiers and palace officials.

His was an exalted idea of a soldier's duty. He expressed this in one of the few poems he allowed to be published. It is entitled

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“Soldier,” and in it he imagines himself in Nepal’s high hill country, cold and exhausted, missing the city lights and the one he loves. And yet he is determined to do his duty:

Left bonds of love and affection, having duty understood
If needed soaked in blood, be ready to fight I would,
To flames reduce, will lightning halt, spray with blood I will,
On this uniform, the country’s vermilion, shake this earth I will.

Here is a strange and darkly apocalyptic sense of a soldier’s duty. Precisely which enemy he is called on to combat is never made clear. Maoist guerrillas? Invading armies from India or China? Perhaps the resolve he expresses stems from the fact that, if Nepal ever were attacked by an external enemy, the best its small and poorly equipped army could do would be to go down fighting. That kind of suicidal last stand seems to be what the crown prince imagined as a soldier’s duty.

Writing poetry, sketching, and painting were encouraged within Nepal’s first family. Following his mother’s example, the crown prince planned to have a collection of his own poems published to mark his thirtieth birthday. King Birendra preferred sketching and painting in the abstract manner. The whole family believed that self-expression rather than formal values counted for most. As King Birendra put it, “The highest form of literature is always ingenuous.” He held that “such literature emanates from the vibration of people’s heart where a rock articulates, a mountain drips, and everybody gives full expression to his or her inner-self.” In that, at least, his son followed in the family tradition.

The crown prince’s fondness for music extended to playing the piano and guitar as well as the handheld traditional Nepali drum. He wanted to excel in all he did—as soldier, poet, musician, scholar, lover. In this he followed the model of a well-rounded and accomplished prince. He spent time grooming himself to become a states-

manlike monarch, setting himself all manner of self-improving goals.

After completing his master's degree in geography at Tribhuvan University, Dipendra went on to enroll as a Ph.D. student. His thesis was "Demographic Factors Affecting Fertility among Migrants and Non-Migrants in Kathmandu"—a down-to-earth topic for which the research materials were conveniently at hand. He rarely appeared on campus. Instead, his thesis supervisor, Dr. Bal Kumar KC, came to the royal palace and taught him in his private apartments at Tribhuvan Sadan.

Very often it seemed that Dipendra's quest for self-improvement only thinly disguised a more basic hunger for excitement. The crown prince took up paragliding. He pursued his earlier interests in the martial arts under a Japanese master. He earned his pilot's license and then used any excuse to practice his skills flying around the country. He insisted on taking an advanced driving course on the pretext that, like his firearms training, such a skill might contribute to his personal security in emergency situations. The reality was that he liked to drive extremely fast. He knew he was good at it. He also knew there was not a single police officer in the entire Kathmandu Valley who would ever try to stop him. As crown prince, he stood above the ordinary laws of the land.

Dipendra spent much of his twenties being quietly initiated into the skills and procedures of kingship. He sat in on meetings with his father and top palace officials during which key policy issues were discussed. He learned about all the correct procedures and how the Palace Secretariat functioned. But when it came to decision making or face-to-face discussions with the prime minister and other political heavyweights, the crown prince was generally excluded. That was the king's business.

Learning about the real conditions in which people lived was

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an important part of this “grooming” process. Dipendra had access to all manner of reports and privileged information, to which he added his own personal experience. He was forever making flying visits to different corners of the realm, some of them official tours of inspection, others private excursions for trekking or hunting. As a result, he gradually built up a thorough knowledge of his country and its peoples.

Most certainly he did not like everything he saw. The grinding poverty in which most of the population lives, the shortage of schooling and medical facilities, the persistence of feudal-style landlordism and bonded labor, the fact that every year some 6,000 young Nepalese girls are sold to become sex workers in India or in Arab countries—that is as much the reality of modern Nepal as are rhododendron forests and mountain vistas. Dipendra’s response was to set about creating a charitable foundation that would both raise funds and channel them into the kind of integrated development programs that, based on previous experience, work best in rural Nepal. It was to be loosely modeled on the Prince of Wales’ Trust.

Dipendra threw all his energies into the project. He had found a new role for himself, and one that fitted well with his idealistic nature. It offered him the chance to do real good for his people. Plans were at an advanced stage when, for unexplained reasons, the entire project was dropped. Those closest to the crown prince suggest it was vetoed by somebody at the top of the palace hierarchy, possibly Queen Aishwarya herself. If so, it can only have worsened relations between mother and son.

Any real warmth in the crown prince’s relationship with his father was artificially constrained by palace protocol. Dipendra always referred to him as “His Majesty” and did his utmost to be an obedient and respectful son. It was his duty to comply with the king’s wishes, even when he disagreed with them. Occasionally, as in the Hindu spring festival of Holi, the normal pattern of respect-

ful behavior was abandoned. Everybody would deliberately get drunk and “let their hair down”—in the fairly certain knowledge that whatever was said would be buried in tomorrow’s hangover. But even these rare opportunities for airing differences were bound up in tradition and ritual. In the absence of any other, less formal conduits for expressing disagreement, it was only to be expected that tensions would build up as the crown prince grew older and more entrenched in his own opinions.

That has always been the case with hereditary monarchies. The early Hanoverian kings of England were all cordially loathed by their successors-in-waiting. It often has less to do with the personalities involved than the frustrations that go with being a crown prince. Differences of opinion emerge—over policy, the use of the army, or whom the crown prince should marry. While such matters can be talked over privately, at the end of the day the king’s decision cannot be questioned. The only option for the heir apparent is to sit it out until the power structure has changed. Pushed into such a corner, one does not have to hate the king personally to wish sometimes he were dead or at least out of the way.

What is certain is that by the late 1990s a deep frustration was building up within the crown prince. Every time he tried to do something positive it was blocked. The only public role he could call his own was as head of the National Sports Council and his work on Nepal’s Olympic Committee. He liked sports, but the administrative side meant putting in a lot of not very entertaining hours. Nor did such mundane duties fulfill his own sense of high purpose. The years were slipping by and he had nothing to show for them. He was still living in the same bungalow in the grounds of Narayanhiti that he had moved into when he was eighteen.

Above all, he was frustrated in love. At the age of nineteen he had asked permission to marry his first love, Supriya Shah, but his mother had told him he was still far too young. He obediently accepted his mother’s decision, but his affections eventually turned

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to another beautiful and aristocratic young woman called Devyani Rana. Although they lived within minutes of each other in central Kathmandu, the two first met in England, at the country estate of Dipendra's guardian, Lord Camoys. But once Queen Aishwarya was informed about how serious their relationship was becoming, she decided to put a stop to it. She enlisted other senior ladies of the royal family to join her in condemning the crown prince's wish to marry Devyani Rana as an unsuitable match. From Dipendra's point of view, what seemed to offer a path to happiness had once again been blocked. Everything seemed to conspire against him.

Like most of the younger members of the royal family, Dipendra had been smoking hashish since he was a teenager. There was nothing unusual about that in Kathmandu. The crown prince even had palace servants roll his joints for him, and he kept a special Cartier cigarette case to carry them around—hashish on one side, marijuana on the other. But it was around the same time that Dipendra declared to friends that he was “serious” about Devyani, even though his mother was against their relationship, that those closest to him started noticing how much his drug consumption had increased.

He stayed clear of hard drugs, against which he held very firm opinions, blaming the growing number of chemical substances available for the corruption of Nepal's youth. Nonetheless, when Dipendra started smoking ten to fifteen joints a day even his closest friends started worrying about his state of mind. Especially when he started waving around one of his guns.

Although the crown prince had retained his love of shooting, his collection of guns had expanded far beyond what might be considered normal, even in a family whose male members customarily carried sidearms and had for generations been addicted to the

pleasures of *shikar*. His private arsenal comprised not only shotguns and hunting rifles, but various sidearms and a machine pistol issued for his personal security. As colonel in chief of the Royal Nepal Army, he had access to all the weaponry to be found in a modern armory, especially since he had responsibility for assessing infantry weapons as part of the RNA's procurement program.

Dipendra was therefore able to sign for and obtain from the palace armory a 5.56 caliber Colt M-16 automatic assault rifle with a laser-equipped telescopic sight that was capable of firing up to 1,000 rounds a minute. There was also his 9 mm Heckler & Koch MP5K submachine gun (900 rounds a minute), a single-barrel twelve-gauge SPAS shotgun made in Italy, and his customary 9 mm Glock pistol.

It was all too easy for the crown prince to assemble this private arsenal. The M-16 was requisitioned from the Royal Nepal Army arsenal on May 31, 1999, and handed over at the *kotkhana*, the armory within Narayanhiti Palace, to the Royal Guard Military Police, who in turn handed it over to the crown prince. The Heckler & Koch submachine gun was obtained through a different route, from the ADCs' office, on July 27, 1999. For nearly two years, therefore, Prince Dipendra had both of these highly lethal weapons in his possession. That might have been acceptable if they were kept in a secure place, but as his personal ADC Gajendra Bohara admitted, the crown prince was accustomed to taking weapons directly from the royal palace armory whenever he so wished.

Dipendra liked to keep his guns with him practically all the time. He usually carried at least one pistol, sometimes two, either openly in a military-style holster or in a concealed shoulder holster. He took the M-16 with him whenever he went out trekking in Nepal's mountains, on the grounds that he might be a target for Maoist terrorists. While driving about town in one of his Toyota Land Cruisers he had the M-16, his weapon of preference, together with a Heckler & Koch G36 carbine mounted in a gun

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rack specially designed for easy access, right beside the gearshift. Since he liked driving extremely fast and kept his 9 mm Glock loaded and ready to fire, palace security was worried about the very real possibility that he might be killed or injured from a weapon going off accidentally. Kathmandu's notoriously pot-holed roads only increased the likelihood of an accidental discharge. But as one palace official put it, "Who was going to tell him not always to be carrying so many guns? He was the crown prince. Only his father could have ordered him not to."

NINE

BEHIND PALACE WALLS

The lack of control over the crown prince's access to weaponry was symptomatic of a much larger problem within Narayanhiti Palace. Nobody was really in control. The king worked long hours in his private office but avoided making any difficult decisions. Too often he used the excuse of work to absent himself from family discussions, especially when he knew disagreements would be aired.

Since the smooth working of any monarchy depends on there being a clear chain of command, King Birendra's reluctance to become too closely involved left a void at the very top of the palace pyramid. This caused some confusion, for the royal family and its servants and advisers abided by the same patriarchal values as most other extended families in Nepal. There needed to be a strong man at the top, ready and able to enforce his authority. Otherwise, rival power centers would establish themselves else-

where within the palace, and family unity would be displaced by faction.

The layout of Narayanhiti Palace may have encouraged this disintegrative process. Within its enclosing walls, a whole complex of buildings—offices, barracks, temples, and private residences—had gradually been built over time with little concern for architectural coherence. The broad driveways leading straight in from the main gates to the south and west soon gave way to a tangled network of internal roads linking all the different parts together. The grounds were similarly divided up between private gardens around each of the royal residences, which reflected the tastes of their particular inhabitants, and more formal, “public” lawns with artificial lakes and fountains, upon which ordinary citizens could peer through the massive steel bars of the southern perimeter fence. Seen from the air, the palace complex more closely resembled an exclusive holiday resort, with its separate villas and service areas, its private helipad and stables, than a palace occupied by a single royal family. As with some metropolitan cities, it was difficult to identify exactly where its center lay.

The main body of the palace was used for state occasions and formal receptions. It was built to impress rather than to be lived in; though beautifully maintained by palace servants, it remained empty for much of the time. Apart from Prince Nirajan, who still occupied part of the private wing, all other royal family members had moved out to their own separate residences that dotted the palace grounds.

The king and queen lived in Sri Sadan, a comfortable but modest three-bedroom house to the southeast of the main block, its beautifully kept flower gardens shielded by trees and an internal wall from the main entrance to the palace. The queen mother had her own residence nearby. It was named Mahendra Manzil, after

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her late husband. As for the crown prince, since his coming of age he had occupied a residential bungalow to the north of the main palace, part of a complex of buildings known as Tribhuvan Sadan. His private quarters were linked by a little bridge to the rest of Tribhuvan Sadan, which had formerly been used for private audiences but since been equipped with a billiards table, bar, and dining room for entertaining family and friends.

It is understandable that each member of the royal family wanted their own space to retire to. Living on top of each other in the residential wing of the main palace would have been intolerable. Moreover, the modernist architecture of Narayanhiti's main block made it far from cozy. Its rebuilding had been ordered by King Mahendra during the 1960s as a deliberate break from the Rana past. The stately neoclassical pile originally built by Prime Minister Ranaudip Singh Rana during the 1880s was demolished, and a new palace rose up in its place.

It was supposed to express a marriage of modern and traditional Nepalese architecture, though the results are unconvincing. This new Narayanhiti presents a confusing assemblage of contradictory styles, with its pagoda-roofed throne room flanked by a needle-thin and thoroughly modernist tower, and its austere plain frontage broken up by a fanciful double staircase adorned with statues of elephants, peacocks, and other auspicious animals.

The immense staterooms are filled with great mirrors and chandeliers, stuffed tigers and other sporting trophies, glass-fronted cabinets to display gifts of porcelain and crystal, and over-size portraits of former kings of the Shah dynasty. The effect is to create an impressive backdrop for ceremonial occasions, such as the swearing in of a new government or the receiving of the credentials of foreign emissaries. There is a great deal of rather heavy-handed symbolism that is meant to convey how a traditional Hindu monarchy is embracing the modern world. The throne room has a tapering false roof designed to resemble that of a

Hindu temple, while the throne itself is supported by carved lions and elephants; its arms are covered with golden serpents, and its canopy is covered by an umbrella with the royal symbols of the sun and moon. The divine aspect of Nepalese kingship is conveyed by the guardians of Lord Vishnu standing on either side of the royal emblem. Yet for all this carefully thought-out symbolism, there is little sense of either the mystery or the majesty of kingship.

Just visible from the palace's upper floors, hidden in the south-east corner of the grounds, is a temple dedicated to Narayan, the avatar of Vishnu the king of Nepal is commonly held to embody. It is from this temple and the *hiti*, or water spout, that stands beside it that Narayanhiti derives its name.

As usual, there is a myth surrounding the temple. This one concerns one of the Licchavi kings who ruled in the fifth century A.D. According to the legend, the king sought the advice of a tantric priest as to how a terrible drought afflicting his lands might be ended. The priest advised that the holiest man in the land, one endowed with all the auspicious qualities, be offered as a sacrifice. After much searching it became apparent that there was only one person fit for such a role, and that was the king himself. So he ordered his son to go to the Narayan temple the following morning and kill the person he would find sleeping there. The crown prince obeyed, and no sooner had he carried out the sacrifice than great thunderclouds gathered and water gushed forth from the spout beside the temple. The drought was over, as had been foreseen. But when he discovered that he had killed his own father, the new king was filled with such remorse that, according to Newar traditions, he founded the great stupa at Bodhnath to expiate his terrible sin.

As might be expected, that particular story of royal parricide is not celebrated among the religious symbols that adorn Narayanhiti Palace. But the legend survived.

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In contrast to the megalomaniac grandeur of its centerpiece, the working parts of the palace were designed to be austere and strictly functional. The barracks that house the Royal Guard are no better built than other army installations, while the Palace Secretariat operates out of a sparsely furnished, whitewashed block down by the West Gate that is already showing its age. Despite its unremarkable appearance, the Secretariat is still the nerve center of much that goes on both inside Narayanhiti and far beyond its walls.

The principal royal secretaries and their countless assistants perform many roles. They act as the eyes and ears of their master, ferreting out information from sources it would be inappropriate for the king to meet in person. They also filter information received and carefully screen anyone seeking a royal audience. Their internal procedures are shrouded in mystery, and they are accountable only to the king himself. Very often their functions go far beyond what might be implied by their official titles. They tend to recruit from a close-knit group of families. For all its modern façade, Narayanhiti is heir to an ancient court culture.

This is partly because the same families have served the Shah dynasty from one generation to the next. Household positions are usually held by Newars, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, while royal secretaries and advisers are chosen from the same families of *bharadars*, or burden-carriers, who accompanied the first Shah king on his campaigns of conquest 250 years ago. The names of the Gorkha clans, with modern spellings—Pandey, Thapa, Basnet—crop up among today's palace officials, just as they did throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, their roles have changed over time, but the traditions of loyal service and total discretion live on.

Some key positions have been held on an overtly hereditary basis, the job passing automatically from father to son. That has

certainly been true of the royal preceptors, whose role as personal spiritual advisers or gurus to the king and other members of the royal family gave them enormous influence within the palace and the country at large. Until the codification of Nepalese laws in the nineteenth century, the royal preceptors were responsible for interpreting the holy *shastras* and then pronouncing legal judgments. Although their powers have since been reduced, they continue to have authority over cases involving caste rules and their infringements.

As the recently retired royal preceptor Nayan Raj Pandey points out, there have been some changes of late. It is now required that the royal preceptor be proficient in Sanskrit and complete his studies up to or beyond the official requirements. But continuity is much valued in a role similar to that of a family priest. As proof, faded sepia portraits of previous royal preceptors stare down from the walls of Nayan Raj Pandey's living room, all of them ancestors who fulfilled the same duties he had.

Since the times of King Surendra, every Nepalese monarch has had as his royal preceptor a member of Pandey's clan. The preceptors have anointed successive kings on their coronation days, recited the appropriate texts at their coming-of-age ceremonies, and overall have exerted an invisible influence over the Shah dynasty. If anyone is responsible for promoting the godlike status of Nepal's kings, it is this line of royal preceptors. For Nayan Raj Pandey there is no room for doubt: The king is indeed the incarnation of Vishnu.

Another prominent member of the royal household, the master of ceremonies, is equally proud of the way in which his family has served Nepal's rulers over the centuries. Chiran Thapa points out that a family member has been present on every state visit to Britain since Jung Bahadur Rana led the first one in 1850. His branch of the Thapa clan came to Kathmandu before the Gorkha conquest and possibly for that reason did not rise to become

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prime ministers under the early Shah kings like Bhim Sen and his nephew Mathbar Singh Thapa. For the same reasons, they survived the bloody purges that decimated the more illustrious branch of the Thapa clan and have served successive Rana prime ministers and Shah kings.

Chiran Thapa rose to be one of King Birendra's closest advisers during the Panchayat years, when the Palace Secretariat was effectively running the country. So closely was he identified with royal absolutism that, after the democratic revolution of 1990, Thapa left for England, where he resumed his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. But once things had settled down in Nepal, with King Birendra building up his new role as a constitutional monarch, his old confidant returned to become master of ceremonies. As always in the palace, the official title does not necessarily limit either the functions or the influence of the incumbent. What matters more is whether one enjoys the confidence of the king.

A more recently established court position, although one that has been held by the same family since its inception, is that of royal photographer. The Chitrakars are an ancient Newar family who have been painters, sculptors, and makers of ceremonial masks for the wealthy of Kathmandu for generations. One Bhagu Man Chitrakar was attached to the state visit to Britain in 1850, during which he made numerous paintings of Jung Bahadur's progress, one of which survives in the British Library.

It was his grandson, Dirga Man Chitrakar, who expanded the family's artistic traditions into photography. Dirga Man accompanied Prime Minister Chandra Shamsheer Rana to London in 1908 and made good use of the opportunity to buy the latest photographic equipment and learn how to use it. He also painted a portrait of King Edward VII for which he was offered the then enormous sum of £10,000, but the payment was refused on his behalf by the Nepalese prime minister, who insisted it be a gift. Upon

returning to Kathmandu, Dirga Man Chitrakar set up a photographic studio at his family home in the Old City. There was no electricity, and the glass plates were exposed onto contact sheets using sunlight that came in through a small hole in the roof that was made for that purpose. For all that, the results were impressive, and very soon an indoor studio was installed for taking artfully arranged portraits, complete with painted backdrops to suggest that the sitters were in front of a mountain range or some magnificent palace.

While the Chitrakars were, as court photographers, responsible for recording coronations, tiger hunts, and other important events, most of their everyday business came from wealthy Rana families, so that, after the Rana regime was overthrown, this family of royal photographers was not invited back to the palace for a number of years. Eventually they were reinstated, and members of the current generation of Chitrakars are still official photographers at enthronements and other royal ceremonies. But it is only occasional work, and their main employment these days is as TV cameramen.

The royal adviser who claims his family has worked in the same profession for the longest time is the royal astrologer. Mangal Raj Joshi reckons that thirty-two generations of his family have practiced oriental astrology. He operates out of a run-down town house in one of the older districts of Patan. Despite the dismal surroundings, there can be no doubt that this is a thriving business. Customers arrive for consultations so early in the morning that he often stays overnight in a flea-ridden bed rather than return to his much more comfortable family home. An entire floor of the house is occupied by assistants who squat on the floor, rapidly scanning birth charts and pumping the data into computers and pocket calculators.

Joshi's reputation for delivering accurate predictions used to be second to none, or at least that was true within the Kathmandu

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Valley. The extent to which that depended on his being astrologer to Nepal's first family, and whether his failure to predict their untimely demise will affect his other business, is uncertain. Mangal Raj Joshi explains away this glaring gap in his astrological predictions by claiming that his royal clients canceled a crucial series of calculations. Be that as it may, the royal astrologer is currently soliciting new business. Among the many horoscopes in his In tray was one labeled "Nancy from Seattle."

The royal astrologer's technical qualifications are impressive. Not only has he mastered Sanskrit, the classical language of oriental astrology; he has also studied geology, meteorology, mathematics, and modern astrology so as to bring together scientific accuracy and Eastern traditions. He claims to have predicted the outbreak of the Gulf War, right down to the day and time of the first attacks, and to have given timely warnings of several major earthquakes. But of his dealings with the royal family, and the knowledge he still holds of their birth charts, the wily old astrologer will not comment. Partly this is professional ethics, though Mangal Raj Joshi is also imbued with the discretion that is the hallmark of any royal adviser.

Loyalty, continuity of service, discretion—these are the qualities that have kept the same families as servants and advisers to the Nepalese crown for generations. It has not always been easy. The Brahmans and Bharadars have had to survive three revolutions—Jung Bahadur's usurpation of royal authority in 1847, King Tribhuvan's triumphant return in 1951, and most recently, the Spring Awakening of 1990, which ushered in democratic rule. But no matter who was in power, these palace officials somehow remained in place, survivors from an ancien régime.

Despite the fact that the royal palace no longer governs Nepal, the size of the Palace Secretariat remains much the same as before 1990. Its role has shifted from deciding national policy to information gathering and analysis, but it is nonetheless a well-oiled

machine. Some would say that for the purposes of a constitutional monarchy it is excessive, rather like taking a Rolls-Royce to do the supermarket shopping. It marshalls established procedures to cover every eventuality, both human and divine, or so it was thought.

So when a dreadful warning came in the spring of 2001 from eastern Nepal, where a statue of the god Bhimsen was found to be “perspiring,” the palace checked on the appropriate response and dealt with the matter expeditiously. The piece of cloth soaked in the deity’s sweat was duly accepted, the eyewitness report of this miraculous event was noted, and the appropriate articles of worship, together with a he-goat, were dispatched to the temple in order to ward off this ill omen. Previously, earthquakes and other calamities had followed shortly after Bhimsen had given his warning. That potential danger was recognized; but having taken all the appropriate steps, there was nothing else that the palace officials could do about it.

For much of the time the palace appeared to be running on autopilot. Deprived of a meaningful role, too much of its energy and analytical capacity became turned in on itself. In an echo of the past, palace politics began again to become removed from what was happening outside the walls. Internal matters acquired an artificially exaggerated importance. It was a claustrophobic world, heavily laden with petty intrigue, which may explain why Crown Prince Dipendra was forever trying to cut loose from it all.

King Birendra was no fool. He knew that all was not well within the palace. But he was too indulgent a monarch to dismiss faithful servants, let alone undertake a wholesale purge. Besides, he still thought of the Palace Secretariat as his personal power base.

Instead of overhauling the machine, Birendra led by personal example. He had gradually steered the royal family toward a more

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informal style. Many old practices had not changed since his grandfather Tribhuvan's time, and court etiquette still decreed that the king and queen never smile in public, because such expressions of human emotion were deemed unfitting for living gods. All formal portraits, both of the royal family and the Rana aristocracy, showed them unsmiling, if not actually scowling, at the camera. Halfway through his reign Birendra abandoned the old habits and began to smile in public—a gentle, considerate smile that is hard to forget. So too did his queen and other members of the royal family. For ordinary Nepalese it was a revelation, and one they soon learned to appreciate.

Other changes were introduced behind Narayanhiti's high walls. Whereas outsiders previously met the king only during formal audiences or dinners with liveried bearers and court officials at hand, now they were invited to informal gatherings at which members of the royal family themselves handed around drinks and snacks. It was a quiet revolution, but a revolution nonetheless. Nepal's royal family was becoming more approachable, more human.

Whenever possible, King Birendra preferred to dress casually, either in the Western style or, more often, in the loose, wraparound shirt and jodhpur-style trousers that are part of Nepalese national dress. He usually sported one of the multicolored and typically Nepali cloth caps known as *topis* and encouraged other family members to do so. As "father of the nation" he believed he should at least look Nepalese. Some of the younger generation found this regressive and preferred Western clothes. But in this, as in everything else, Birendra sought to bring about changes gradually.

Another radical departure was to open up the staterooms of Narayanhiti Palace to the general public. Queen Elizabeth had done the same with Buckingham Palace in 1993, after all, so why not in Kathmandu? One argument against doing so was that most of the furnishings, from cabinets stuffed with over-gilded Sèvres

bowls to an extraordinary room where everything—table, chairs, lamp stands, and ornaments—is made of frosted glass, bear witness to royal extravagance rather than good taste. Nonetheless, the decision was made to go ahead. Nepalese citizens could visit one day each week, foreigners on another. No one in Nepal would previously have dreamed of entering Narayanhiti. It was hoped that opening it up would signal to the ordinary citizens of Nepal the monarchy's newfound approachability.

Dipendra continued to show the greatest respect for his father. He would not say a bad word about him, even behind his back. But the crown prince was increasingly frustrated that he was not allowed to build a meaningful role for himself. For this Birendra was at least partly to blame. So concerned was he to abide by the rules for being a constitutional monarch that he was wary of allowing his headstrong son any official status other than heir to the throne. Even if he were running a charitable trust, the crown prince might be tempted to speak out on the lack of rural development in Nepal. That would be overtly political, and it was the king's intention that the new constitutional monarchy should always stand above politics. It was safer to do nothing.

At times, Birendra appeared to be a "reluctant monarch" who fulfilled his role because it was his duty to do so, and not because he particularly enjoyed it. He preferred simplicity to pomp and circumstance. Birendra would dutifully get dressed in military uniform when that was required of him, in complete contrast to his son, who positively reveled in military dress and seemed ready to burst the buttons of his uniforms with suppressed energy and pride.

There were other differences between father and son. While Birendra tried to live up to the highest ideals personally, in domestic and family matters he would generally defer to his wife's opin-

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ion, even when this meant upsetting his eldest son. In the political arena, he preferred to analyze situations from every angle, and to listen and refer to his numerous advisers, rather than make any really tough decisions himself. In short, he dithered.

He had none of the hallmarks of a dictator, which nonetheless is how some of his opponents tried to portray him. Rather, his instinctive sense of moderation made him an ideal pathfinder in Nepal's first experiment with democracy combined with a constitutional monarchy. All who knew him remember King Birendra as a "true gentleman"—courteous, well-meaning, self-contained. At times it was hard to remember that this soft-spoken man was indeed a king.

Had the democratic system of government that he approved of worked better in practice, Birendra's quiet, benign style might have proved ideal. But the experience of the 1990s was of unstable and swiftly changing governments—ten in all—each more corrupt and self-serving than the last. So while the king's lack of forceful decision making was seen by some at court as weakness, the institution of monarchy was gaining in popularity, if only because it had distanced itself from government and could no longer be blamed for the mess.

Birendra's lack of natural authoritarianism led to muttered criticism within the palace, where there had always been a conservative clique, including Queen Aishwarya and most of the older generation of royals, that regretted Birendra's decision to surrender so much power to elected politicians. Senior army generals shared these views, and some of them were close to the crown prince. They were particularly worried about the Maoist insurgency spreading from western Nepal. The Maoists had already gained effective control of parts of the eastern hills and much of the countryside around the Shah dynasty's ancestral home at Gorkha.

More than 1,000 lives had already been lost in what threatened

to become the all-out civil war that Nepal had successfully avoided throughout the Shah dynasty's rule. The generals argued that if only they had been given the order back in the early days, when the insurgency was still growing, the entire problem could easily have been nipped in the bud. But for whatever reasons, the order never came. The king was still taking advice.

The waiting game, however, carries its own hazards. King Birendra suffered a serious heart attack late in 1998, and he was flown to London for a bypass operation. Queen Aishwarya accompanied him, and during their absence the crown prince stood in for his father in meetings of the royal council and at formal occasions. By then Dipendra was twenty-seven, a year older than his father had been when he ascended the throne.

The very real possibility that the king might die suddenly—the history of recurrent heart problems in the Shah family was known to everyone—was like a minor earthquake going off beneath Narayanhiti Palace. Courtiers, royal relations, palace officials, indeed anyone with an eye on the future, carefully examined how they stood with the crown prince and started shifting their positions accordingly. None dared to declare openly that a “crown prince's party” existed. While the king lived, that could be construed as disloyalty, and the palace puts a very high value on loyal service. It would also run against deeply ingrained habits of discretion. Sensitive topics are not, as a rule, discussed openly within Narayanhiti's walls. Possibilities are hinted at, undesirable consequences merely implied. The subtle shifting of allegiances is signaled by the swiftness with which a request is carried out, by the seeming sincerity of a smile.

When King Birendra returned from London after his successful heart operation, the people of Kathmandu came out by the thousands to cheer him home. It seemed that with each passing

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year he was becoming more popular. Birendra settled back into a period of gentle recuperation. His doctors had told him to give up smoking, strong drink, going on high-altitude treks, and many other pleasures of his youth. He was prescribed medication to counter his natural tendency to high cholesterol. The following spring, both the king and Queen Aishwarya went down to the royal retreat in Pokhara so that he could convalesce in peace. But while he was there, another government failed, another general election was called, and Birendra felt it his duty to return to Kathmandu.

Even after his heart attack the king put in long hours at the office. He needed to be kept informed, especially since the whole process of democratic change that he had embraced seemed to be falling apart at the seams.

The king was typically circumspect when it came to discussing Crown Prince Dipendra and the royal succession. He noted that whenever he himself traveled outside Nepal, his son automatically took over as chairman of the Council of Royal Representatives. Birendra expressed neither praise nor enthusiasm for his son and heir. Instead, he simply stated that Dipendra had been groomed to assume the responsibilities of kingship, that he had been exposed to all the requisite analytical and decision-making processes: "It is a role he knows he has to take on. But in the end, each individual must make his own job of it."

With hindsight, those might seem like fateful words. But King Birendra preferred to contemplate the long-term future of the monarchy in Nepal rather than any immediate problems. Kings, he explained, had to think through decisions and their consequences over a much longer time frame than elected politicians.

"Each one of us," he said, "must make a step, and be sure that it is solid enough to build the next one." With that statement, he expressed a thorough understanding of the true nature of monarchy, which is not so much about any individual's performance as

about the continuance of a relationship between a ruling family and the people of a country across many generations.

Naturally, the marriage of the crown prince and the provision of further heirs to the throne entered into the equation. But at the time this did not appear to be a pressing concern. The king had two adult sons: his youngest, Nirajan, and the crown prince. On that front, at least, the succession seemed secure. The royal ladies were in charge of the matter, after all.

TEN

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

On May 8, 1997, Princess Shruti, only daughter of Their Majesties King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya of Nepal, was married to Kumar Gorakh Shamsheer Rana. It was a splendid wedding. Representatives of the royal houses of Europe and Asia flew into Kathmandu. The young princess was borne aloft in a palanquin, a gold-flecked veil of transparent fineness covering her head. The timeless Hindu rites were performed. No expense was spared at the sumptuous wedding feast. All of Nepal's royal family were present. For Birendra, there might have been a tinge of sadness. Shruti had always been very much her father's favorite.

Like him, she was an accomplished artist and a skilled equestrian. At school, first at St. Mary's in Kathmandu and then at the elite Mayo College in India, she had revealed only average aptitude, but her unassuming ways won her many friends. She was kind, self-disciplined, considerate, even to the point of helping out

servants with washing the dishes. But Shruti was no pushover. She had firm opinions, and among her qualifications was a black belt in judo.

In time a slightly gawky young girl had grown to be a beautiful woman, a true princess. “Even when wearing a sari,” a friend commented, “she had the poise of a Botticelli Venus.” She was twenty years old when she was married.

It was some consolation to her father that the newlyweds were setting up house in Kesar Mahal, only a short distance from Narayanhiti’s West Gate. The marriage was an arranged one—Shruti would have never challenged her parents on that account—but the relationship between the newlyweds blossomed. A year later Shruti gave birth to the first royal grandchild, a little girl who was named Girvani. A second daughter was born the following year.

There was a constant coming and going between the palace and Kesar Mahal, for Birendra delighted in his granddaughters. Sometimes the king and queen would just stroll over, to the immense surprise of ordinary pedestrians, though mostly Shruti brought the grandchildren to them. She remained very close to her parents. In all respects, it seemed an ideal marriage.

Crown Prince Dipendra might well have had mixed feelings about his sister’s marriage. He was more than five years her senior and by rights should have been the first of his generation to marry. With each passing year he became less comfortable about being the country’s “most eligible bachelor.”

Of course, the crown prince had had the occasional “affair of the heart,” not to mention fleeting liaisons when his royal duties took him abroad. But by 1997 more and more of his friends and contemporaries seemed to be married. Being virtually the only bachelor in the group was becoming something of an embarrassment.

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Not that he had anyone particularly in mind. He still saw his teenage sweetheart Supriya Shah from time to time. They remained good friends, but the two of them were no longer in love. Besides, there were lots of other good-looking girls whom he counted as good friends. One in particular had caught his eye—the daughter of Pashupati and Usha Rana. There could be no denying that Devyani Rana was one of the brightest stars in Kathmandu society's admittedly limited firmament.

In fact, the two had first met not in Kathmandu, but at a far more cosmopolitan party in England. The crown prince was staying at Stonor Park near Henley-on-Thames, the country house of Lord Camoys, and it was there that they first set eyes on each other. Devyani was with her elder sister, Urvashi, who in 1995 married into one of India's wealthiest families, the Khemkas, and has since spent much of her time at their London town house in Eaton Square. In many ways the Rana sisters were much more sophisticated than Dipendra, even though he was crown prince of Nepal.

Quite apart from her aristocratic beauty, there were many things about Devyani that appealed to the crown prince. She had a natural exuberance that set her apart from other girls of similar class and background. She was decisive and straightforward—qualities the crown prince found a pleasant change from the artful ambiguities of the palace. There was a refreshing frankness about her, though Devyani was also bound by the constraints of Kathmandu's conservative and extremely gossip-prone society. Like others of her generation, she complained about being allowed to go out only when accompanied by a relation; when she did meet up with friends, it had to be at their parents' houses. For Dipendra, who had to live with even tighter constraints on what he could or could not do, she was like a breath of fresh air.

Devyani was also brighter than most of her contemporaries, having graduated near the top of her class from Welham's Girls'

High School in Dehra Dun, India, before completing her university degree at Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi. After returning to Kathmandu, she helped her father run both his political career and the family's extremely lucrative bottled-gas business. It helped that Pashupati Rana was then the country's foreign minister. But she still carved out a role for herself—not the easiest thing for an unmarried woman in Nepal. She had the knack of making herself indispensable. As a fund-raiser for her father's political party, she could always be relied upon to wring contributions out of even the most hard-nosed businessmen. She had charm, and she knew how to deploy it. So perhaps it is no surprise that, after nearly three years of platonic friendship, the crown prince should fall ever more deeply in love with her.

By his twenty-eighth birthday he was telling friends that he was serious about Devyani. From that point on it would be Dipendra who kept pressing matters forward. It was he who was ready to throw caution to the winds, and she who reminded him of the need for discretion. It was as important for her reputation, as an unmarried Hindu daughter of a high-profile politician, as it was for him that their relationship be conducted in secret.

They used all kinds of subterfuge so that they could be alone together. They would often arrange to meet at a supermarket, where they might not so easily be noticed. It helped that the crown prince's ADCs cooperated and even assisted with his clandestine assignations, driving over to Devyani's father's house in Maharajganj and whisking her off to Dipendra in his private apartments, Tribhuvan Sadan, inside the royal palace. At other times they used a friend's house in Patan for their meetings, or the ADCs would hire an upstairs room at the Shangri-la Hotel, midway between the palace and Maharajganj. When Devyani accompanied her father to a public function, the crown prince would turn up just as it was ending. Sometimes he would not even be able to talk to her because there were press photographers around

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or simply because the risk of so many people seeing them together was too great. Whenever they could not meet up, the two of them were forever on their mobile phones, sometimes just chatting, but as often planning their next assignation. The intrigue only added excitement to their romance.

But before long half of Kathmandu's chattering classes were talking about their affair, so they started to meet openly and went out for meals together. Their favorite place was a pizzeria called Fire & Ice, handily located on the road from the palace's West Gate toward the backpackers' district of Thamel. The restaurant was more popular with tourists than locals, so there was less chance of being recognized. Whenever he was in the mood, Dipendra would ask for a table on a few minutes' notice and then drive over in his old Land Rover. A corner table would be cleared for him and Devyani. The ADCs who always had to accompany him sat at a separate table between them and the rest of the diners. He usually ordered a pizza—capricciosa with extra cheese, ham, salami, but no olives. She liked spaghetti carbonara. He would have a few beers and on one occasion was invited to try grappa. Throughout, the ADCs kept a watchful eye on the exits and the other diners.

What Dipendra was trying to achieve through these impromptu outings was a sense of normality. He wanted just to go out for a meal with his girlfriend and talk and enjoy for an hour or two the illusion of being an ordinary person having a good time. They would share each other's food, then he would order an ice cream, which he loved, and try and persuade her to have some. Whenever he had misplaced his mobile phone or cigarettes, she always seemed to know which pocket they were in, and though they would not be seen holding hands or having any physical contact since this was a public place, they talked and laughed together until the meal was over. Usually they left no later than 9:30 P.M.—Dipendra had to get back to the palace.

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For the crown prince, however, such interludes were all too rare. Most of the time he did not enjoy the freedom to be himself rather than acting out some preordained role. It had been like that for as long as he could remember.

His parents had selected boarding schools for him where he was in theory treated no differently from commoners in order to “toughen him up.” Certainly it was a stark contrast to his pampered existence during the school holidays, when palace servants and functionaries were always at hand. His life became compartmentalized, and he had to assume a different persona in each compartment. Dipendra, No. 832, at Budhanilkantha School had to abide by different norms than did HRH Crown Prince Dipendra Bir Bikram Shah at home. Dippy the Etonian had to learn to abide by yet another set of rules—not just the school rules, but those subtle codes of behavior laid down by other boys.

Back in Nepal, he was taught to assume a different persona when he appeared at formal occasions in public. Yet another side of his personality came to the fore when he was training with the army or socializing with fellow officers. Even his relations with his parents involved an element of role-playing. Indeed, so much of his time was spent acting out a variety of roles that he may have wondered sometimes which of them was the “real” Dipendra.

The question of the crown prince’s marriage was becoming a matter of some urgency within the palace. Many people considered that, at nearly thirty, he was getting too old to be a bachelor and should really settle down with a good wife who could produce heirs to the throne. So Queen Aishwarya decided to take things in hand. She asked her mother, Shri Rajya Laxmi Rana, to find a suitable bride.

The possibilities were eventually narrowed down to three

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names. One was Dipendra's old flame, Supriya Shah, despite the fact that Queen Aishwarya had previously forbidden their marriage. Then Supriya and Dipendra had been deemed too young, but Supriya was of good family, a great-niece of the queen mother, and although her relationship with Dipendra had cooled, the two of them still got along well. Second was Garima Rana, a bright young lawyer who was related to Princess Shruti's husband. She was probably the queen's preferred choice, and her son dated her for several months until they both decided it would not work out. The third name on the shortlist was Devyani's.

When discreet inquiries were made about an arranged marriage, Devyani's mother, the formidable Usha Rana, replied that the proposed bride was the granddaughter of Vijaye Raje of Gwalior and famously wealthy. This response could be said to imply that Nepal's royal family was less well off. Indeed, that was almost certainly the case, since the former ruling family of Gwalior, the Scindias, were major industrialists and owned extensive properties in New Delhi. However, Queen Aishwarya did not like to be reminded of the fact that the Shahs were not the wealthiest of royal families, and she appears to have taken Usha Rana's message as a snub. Aishwarya was a strong-minded woman and sensitive about her own royal dignity. To be sneered at by a commoner was something she would not forgive, regardless of the consequences.

Aishwarya had shown the same unbending spirit before. At a summit meeting of South Asian leaders in 1989, she apparently had had a run-in with Sonia, the Italian-born wife of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, over who should take precedence. India may have been by far the largest country represented, but as queen and wife of a head of state, Aishwarya thought she was above a mere prime minister's wife.

One of the unfortunate consequences of that spat was that it strengthened Rajiv Gandhi's determination to teach the Shahs a

lesson they would not forget. An economic blockade was imposed on landlocked Nepal, using the pretext that negotiations over the trade treaty between the two countries had reached a deadlock. The blockade of such essentials as gasoline and kerosene caused real hardship for ordinary Nepalese, and within a year there was a revolution in Kathmandu, the so-called Spring Awakening of 1990.

It was Queen Aishwarya's exaggerated sense of royal dignity that led her to stir up trouble with the Gandhis and ended in undermining Nepal's monarchy. But she would not learn from past mistakes. Instead, when the widowed Sonia Gandhi announced a visit to Kathmandu, the queen saw to it that she was denied entry to Nepal's holiest temple at Pashupatinath on the grounds that she had been born a Catholic and only later became a Hindu. A feeble enough way to exact some sort of revenge, but as head of the Pashupati Area Development Committee, the queen at least knew she would have her way. It did not matter to Aishwarya that this slight might damage relations with the leader of India's Congress Party, the woman who might one day become that country's prime minister. So much the better, as far as she was concerned. In imagining she had somehow defied the "Indian juggernaut," the queen was only too happy to drape herself in the folds of strident Nepali nationalism.

The episode reconfirmed Aishwarya's already strongly anti-Indian sentiments. She had long suspected that Indian intelligence was behind the riots in 1990 that led to democracy and, as she saw it, the emasculation of Nepal's ancient monarchy. Like other former Panchayat conservatives, she was swift to blame India for whatever went wrong in Nepal. Now, when the marriage of her eldest son was being discussed, this Usha Rana, the daughter of some Indian maharaja, bragged of their family's wealth. It would never do.

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There were plenty of other reasons circulated—some more imagined than real—as to why Devyani was unsuitable as a bride. The most tangible was that the queen would not tolerate a woman as independent and tough-minded as Devyani becoming her daughter-in-law. What others found spontaneously charming in Devyani, the queen saw as calculating and manipulative. Such personal antagonisms, however, were not enough to deny the crown prince's happiness. So other objections had to be produced.

First, it was suggested—without any medical evidence whatsoever—that Devyani was unable to bear male children. The queen and others “antis” pointed to the fact that Devyani had no male siblings. Since producing a healthy male heir is one of the prime qualifications for a crown princess, this automatically ruled her out. Even her name, Devyani, was considered inauspicious.

According to the Hindu scriptures, Devyani was the daughter of a renegade Brahman who assisted the demons in their battle with the gods. This Brahman knew the secret of restoring life to the dead, and he used it to revive the slain host of demons so that they could fight the gods once more. The gods therefore chose one of their number, called Kach, to go to the Brahman and learn from him the magical rites. The Brahman refused, despite his daughter Devyani falling in love with Kach, but when the god was caught by the demons and killed, Devyani pleaded with her father to restore him to life and teach him the mysteries. She was so persuasive that the Brahman complied, and the revived Kach immediately recognized him as his personal guru.

Once he had learned the secrets, Kach prepared to leave so that he could assist the other gods. This did not please Devyani, however, who wanted him to stay and marry her. He said he could not, because the daughter of his guru could only be like a sister to him and no more. A furious Devyani laid a curse on him to prevent his ever being able to apply his ill-gained knowledge. Kach retaliated in kind, prophesying that she would have to do the

unthinkable and marry outside her Brahman caste. And so it came to pass, with Devyani forced to marry a king belonging to the warrior rather than her own priestly caste.

Is this nothing more than a fable from the distant past? Perhaps so, but given that Queen Aishwarya was becoming increasingly religious with age, such warnings from the ancient scriptures only confirmed her instinctive hostility toward Devyani Rana. Nepal's royal family did not want the heir to the throne—and therefore an incarnation of Lord Vishnu—to commit himself to a mismatch comparable to that of the legendary Devyani.

There also existed doubts about the purity of Devyani's lineage. On her father's side she was descended from the Shamsheer Ranas, and some genealogists claim there was an improper inter-caste marriage in the distant past. Besides which, she was the great-granddaughter of the last Rana prime minister, Mohan Shamsheer, whose memory was not held dear by either the Shahs or the queen's family of Juddha Ranas. On her mother's side, as Usha Rana had been all too quick to emphasize, Devyani was descended from an extremely wealthy and influential Indian princely family, the maharajas of Gwalior. But objections could be raised against such wealthy ancestors: They were dispossessed princes, and not of pure Rajput stock. Such subtle distinctions of clan and caste are increasingly overlooked in the modern world, but they still mattered to Queen Aishwarya, who set great store by purity of caste and blood lineage. If nothing else, they provided her with good excuses for continuing to oppose her son's desire to marry the woman he loved.

On this the queen was absolutely determined. If the crown prince refused to marry either of the other two perfectly suitable girls put forward, then the whole question of wedding plans could be put on hold. To justify further delay, word was put about that an astrologer had predicted that great harm would come to the king and the kingdom as a whole if the crown prince were to

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marry before he was thirty-five. For him to go ahead regardless would be both selfish and irresponsible.

The official royal astrologer denies ever making such a prediction, and its true source (if indeed one ever existed) has never been revealed. But the story soon got around Kathmandu, and those who knew what was going on inside the palace could read these astrological rumors for what they were—another salvo aimed at sinking Dipendra's plans to marry Devyani.

The atmosphere inside Narayanhiti became increasingly sour as the "marriage question" divided the family. The queen had most of the elder relatives on her side. The king generally went along with her on family matters. The queen mother was close to Dipendra: He was forever popping over to see her at Mahendra Manzil or running errands for her. But as to what the former Queen Ratna really thought, one could never be certain.

Dipendra could count on the support of his younger brother, Nirajan, and his cousin, Paras. With them he dispensed with the old-fashioned formalities. He insisted they call him *dhai*, or elder brother, rather than by his official titles. They went out drinking and to restaurants together. They all assumed a similar irreverence toward their hidebound elders. But Dipendra always made sure the young bloods looked up to him.

Of the younger generation, Princess Shruti was most strongly opposed to her brother's relationship with Devyani, perhaps because she was a close friend of Supriya Shah. In a traditionally male-dominated society like Nepal's, her opinion would not have normally mattered a great deal. But since she was a happily married mother, Shruti could claim to know how things work out in marriages.

Dipendra did not appreciate this opposition from his younger sister. Nor did he like all the conversations about him and Devyani

going on behind his back. So at his twenty-ninth birthday party he went public about his feelings, and in spectacular fashion.

The party was held at Tribhuvan Sadan, his own set of apartments within the grounds of the royal palace. Dipendra had been steeling himself for a showdown all evening, slipping back to his bedchamber several times to smoke another of his “special cigarettes.” He waited until after the older family members had left before dropping his bombshell. He suddenly declared to the assembled company that he was going to marry Devyani. If anyone opposed the idea, they could leave straightaway. The others could stay. Anyone who wanted to speak their mind should do so now.

The message was clear enough: “You’re either with me or against me.” His guests, most of them royal cousins, fell into an embarrassed silence. But Dipendra was not through yet. He openly threatened to kill anybody who opposed his marriage, his own parents included. At which Shruti went over to speak to him, accompanied by her husband, Gorakh, who later claimed to have had sharp words with the crown prince. Others dispute this, saying that he would never dare to do any such thing and was just building up his own role in the fracas. What is clear is that Dipendra was in an uncontrollable state. He slapped his own sister, who was heavily pregnant at the time, making her fall hard onto the floor. The crown prince had to be led out of the room by his younger brother and cousin Paras.

His behavior that night had been unworthy of any future king of Nepal. Worse still, Dipendra apparently thought *he* was owed an apology because his sister had been “disrespectful” toward him. The birthday party provided the clearest possible warning that there was a confrontation ahead, and that it would be extremely bitter.

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In fact, the palace was fully aware that Dipendra's behavior had become increasingly erratic. He was drinking heavily and had been abusive to servants and palace officials. He himself recognized that he had a problem. The previous spring a thoroughly depressed crown prince had sought psychiatric help. He had been prescribed a course of antidepressants that required he give up alcohol. Given his previous consumption of up to ten pints of beer and a dozen whiskeys a day, this must have been a shock to the system. Dipendra "compensated" by smoking more marijuana and hashish.

As their affair intensified, Dipendra and Devyani had become increasingly reckless. They were seen out together more often in Kathmandu. The gossipmongers went into overdrive. Articles linking their names appeared in the local press, apparently to the queen's intense displeasure. It was also rumored that a secret tantric ceremony had been held in Devyani's house, that a spell had been cast upon a ring to bind the two lovers together, and that the tantric priests who officiated had been asked to come up from India to perform these arcane, power-enhancing rituals by one of Devyani's mother's Indian relatives. For those Nepalese who believe in tantrism's mystical and life-transforming potential, there was something slightly sinister in this appeal to supernatural powers.

Whatever was fueling their passion, they both felt that just seeing each other for an occasional hour or two was not enough. What they wanted most of all was to spend whole days together, alone and unrecognized. That was clearly impossible to arrange within Nepal because the crown prince was known everywhere. So they decided to meet overseas.

An opportunity arose not long after the disastrous birthday party. Dipendra had for many years been involved in sports and athletics, and not just as patron of the National Sports Council and various other organizations. He had put in some hard work on the South Asia Federation Games and Nepal's Olympic Committee.

Now he had been invited to the Olympic Games in Sydney as head of the Nepalese delegation. The secret plan was that Devyani would join him there.

This required as much subterfuge on her part as on his. She told her family she was off to London to visit her elder sister—Urvashi could be relied upon to keep a secret. In fact, Devyani obtained a visa from the Australian Embassy in Kathmandu and booked a separate flight to Sydney. The two of them stayed in the same hotel, reveling both in each other and their newfound anonymity. Dipendra had squared things with his ADCs and the sports officials staying in the hotel. Nobody needed to know anything about the Olympic assignation.

It was an unrealistic hope. Inevitably, word trickled back to Kathmandu. At first Devyani's family could not believe it. When confronted by an angry relative she lied, insisting she had been in London with her sister. Only when her presence in Sydney was confirmed by the Australian authorities did Devyani admit being with the crown prince.

Dipendra's parents made it plain they were not amused by this latest escapade. It was nothing short of scandalous. All kinds of "special favors" and effort had been needed to hush things up. It was no way for the heir apparent to conduct himself. If anything, the episode reinforced the convictions of Queen Aishwarya and those who shared her views that Dipendra could never marry such a shameless woman. Confrontation loomed.

Sharp words may have been exchanged in private, but on the surface, at least, life at Narayanhiti Palace continued as usual. Dipendra still regularly joined his parents for meals and ran errands for the queen mother. His sister, Princess Shruti, turned up with the grandchildren. The appearance of all being a happy family had to be maintained.

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Beneath the surface, however, hostile coalitions were assembling. Some kind of showdown over Dipendra's wedding plans was inevitable. The queen relied on the moral indignation and prejudices of the older generation, the crown prince on the fear that he inspired—not least because he knew exactly what his younger brother and cousins did in private. The art of gentle arm-twisting is perhaps the oldest of royal sports and, in more brutal times, the key to survival.

After the Australian jaunt, Dipendra reverted to the tactics he had clumsily announced at his twenty-ninth birthday party. He no longer seemed to care what other people thought. He was going to marry Devyani, and that was the end of it. Who could prevent him? It would be contrary to the Royal Constitution to force him to stand down as crown prince. It was his birthright. If threatened with that, he would just “blow them all away.” Or so he boasted when he was among friends, far away from any figure of authority.

It was dangerous talk, though none of his friends believed him. It was just “CP”—which he was called among close friends—making a show of bravado. They all laughed at the absurdity of it all. CP was known to like jokes.

If anybody realized how serious things were, it was Devyani. She knew Dipendra better than anyone. She knew how to mother him as his own mother never had. She saw that he ate properly, sending him home-prepared low-calorie meals because she knew he shared the inherited cholesterol problem. She reassured him. When he had to make a parachute jump, it was Devyani who was there. She had also been present when he was so drugged with hashish that he covered up by suggesting, “Let's not talk about anything serious now.” Devyani knew him well enough to realize whether he was joking or not.

One of their closest friends described them as “soul mates.” And so they were, at a certain level, though the relationship

resembled that between a nurse and an emotionally needy patient. It was always Dipendra who demanded that she marry him. On one occasion he produced a vial of what he said was poison and threatened to commit suicide if she refused him. On her side, Devyani was conscious of the need to keep the increasingly volatile prince more or less on the rails. For his sake she had already passed over a raft of marriage proposals from eligible young men, including one belonging to an Indian princely family who flew up to Kathmandu and waited in vain for her response. Devyani was also painfully aware that time was slipping by. But as long as Dipendra's parents remained implacably opposed to their marriage, she reasoned, then nothing could be done about it.

In taking this line, Devyani was the more realistic of the two. Where Dipendra looked ahead to an idealized future together, she was more grounded in the realities of the present. She tried to "improve" him, urging him to lose weight and cut down on the booze and drugs and cigarettes. She knew that if Dipendra continued to consume at the same pace, he was going to burn out sooner rather than later. Devyani knew from history that little joy awaited her as a Nepalese prince's widow. Besides, he had put on so much weight recently that he was beginning to lose his looks.

What kind of love or affection Devyani and Dipendra shared was conditioned both by his position as crown prince and by all the rows between families and within families that ensued. But once he had declared he would marry her, Dipendra was determined to win out whatever the cost. He may have been driven as much by old-fashioned self-esteem as by "true love." He certainly did not stop seeing other women, including his old girlfriend Supriya Shah, because of his love for Devyani. In fact, he had both their photos in his wallet alongside each other. He telephoned Supriya regularly right up to the end. But then, as crown prince, he stood above ordinary conventions.

ELEVEN

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

The crown prince combined a strongly romantic streak with a remarkable memory. Since his school days he had been in the habit of committing entire poems or scenes from Shakespeare to memory. Predictably, *Romeo and Juliet* was among his favorites, for it seemed to treat of matters very close to his own heart. When he toured Verona, therefore, he made a special point of visiting the balcony where Juliet is supposed to have listened to her lover's impassioned pleas. The disrespectful graffiti around the courtyard annoyed him: It was not fitting in such a shrine to romantic love.

Astrology was also of great importance to Dipendra, especially when it came to his choice of bride. Although determined to marry Devyani, he still wanted to be certain that the marriage would be auspicious. He needed assurance that they would prosper and have male children, that Devyani and he would have a long and harmonious life together. An appropriate date for the

wedding ceremonies needed to be found, and so Dipendra followed the normal course and consulted the family astrologer about their horoscopes.

In arranged marriages, the two sets of parents would organize the comparing of astrological charts. These were deemed to be extremely valuable and sensitive documents that would normally be kept locked up in a safe. Dipendra's situation, as a young man seeking to marry against his parent's wishes, was somewhat different.

It required secrecy and subterfuge. Somehow Dipendra got hold of both sets of charts and took them to an unprepossessing house up a side lane in Dilli Bazaar. This was the residence of his personal guru, Nayan Raj Pandey.

As Dipendra related the incident to his friends, Nayan Raj Pandey was only too pleased to assist in such a delicate matter. The Brahman studied the two birth charts, compared the alignment of the stars and planets in each case, and concluded that they were very beautiful. These two young people were compatible astrologically. Indeed, they seemed to be unusually well matched. Their union would be fruitful.

Dipendra was elated by what he heard. It was true: He and Devyani really were predestined lovers. They would be married after all. He and Devyani penciled in a date for the upcoming winter wedding season.

But for Nayan Raj Pandey, this unsolicited consultation was not the end of the matter. His first obligation was not to Dipendra but to the king, whose foremost spiritual adviser he was. His wife was guru to Queen Aishwarya. It was Pandey's duty to tell them both about the crown prince's visit to his house. In his account to the king and queen, his judgment was that Dipendra and Devyani's horoscopes were exceedingly ill matched. He knew this was precisely what they, or at least the queen, wanted to hear.

Quite understandably, Dipendra was furious when he heard what Nayan Raj Pandey had done. His confidence had been

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betrayed. Worse than that, he had been set up. In his anxiety, he felt that his status within the palace was reduced to that of a star-struck fool.

Among his own circle the prince railed long and hard against that two-faced old priest, who “was nothing better than a bat.” It was a telling jibe, because in Hindu mythology the bat was forever changing sides in the epic battle that is supposed to have been fought between all the animals of the earth and the birds of the air. The bat vacillated: When the animals were winning it proclaimed itself to be one of them, and when the birds looked dominant it argued that, since bats can fly, they must obviously be counted among the birds. This legend is the source of the idea that the bat is synonymous with cunning, deception, and selfishness. It never joins the fight itself, but prospers by joining the winners of the contest. As an insult, it is particularly fitting for Brahmanical priests like Pandey who neither fought nor tilled the soil but have always prospered by hanging on the coattails of princes.

The crown prince may have decided unilaterally that he was going to marry Devyani, but his equally strong-willed mother stood resolutely against their union. The more frantic and outrageous Dipendra became, the easier it was for the queen to gather support for her stand among other members of the royal family. Thinking that the whole matter was on hold, she turned her attentions to another prospective marriage—that of her youngest child, Prince Nirajan.

Nirajan had always been Queen Aishwarya’s favorite, and she took pleasure in indulging his whims. Perhaps it was his more delicate features and winning smile that made the queen prefer him to his elder brother. His character was more straightforward and easygoing. From the queen’s perspective, he was simply much less trouble than her firstborn.

That said, Prince Nirajan had gotten himself into some embarrassing scrapes. He had disappeared from Eton for several days to

go on a drink and drugs binge in London. The queen and the crown prince immediately had felt compelled to fly to England to take him back to school and persuade the authorities that the boy really should not be expelled for one transgression, however serious.

But after that, Nirajan had turned out pretty well. He was a fine athlete, a competition-level swimmer, and seemed to be studying hard for his college degree in commerce. He was well liked by his friends and possessed none of the erratic and domineering traits that were becoming all too apparent in his brother. When the two were compared side by side, some thought that Nirajan would make the better king—especially in a constitutional monarchy, where the skills most needed were tact and diplomacy. But Nirajan was only the younger brother: The Royal Constitution stated unequivocally that the eldest son must inherit the crown.

Still, there was nothing to prevent the younger brother from getting married first. He had turned twenty-two, and his mother felt it would be good for him to settle down once his final examinations were over in June 2001. Queen Aishwarya and the other royal ladies already had matters in hand. There was a girl of good family, Ayushma Rana, who would suit him admirably. The astrologers pronounced them compatible, and they seemed to get on well together. Their engagement could be announced after Nirajan's graduation, and the wedding could take place during the winter season, once an auspicious date had been determined.

For the crown prince these were disturbing developments. If Nirajan went along with an arranged marriage, Dipendra would be even more isolated. It would be humiliating to be still unmarried and have to attend the wedding of a brother more than seven years his junior, doubly humiliating, since everyone there would know about his rash and unfulfilled promise to marry Devyani.

There was another, even more disquieting historic undercur-

rent. What would happen if his own marriage prospects remained deadlocked and Nirajan went ahead and produced an heir? Of course, nobody would dare to suggest that the crown prince be removed from the royal succession. That was not how things were done in Naryanhiti. But if Dipendra openly defied his parents in marrying Devyani, the possibility of an alternative succession was always a silent threat.

The crown prince did not have the time or the inclination to analyze the situation carefully, as his father would have done. That was not in his nature. Besides, he had many distractions. Through the early months of 2001 he was very much involved in preparations for the country's biggest sports event, the Fifth National Games. The administrative load was more than he had anticipated, and there would be a round of site inspections and last-minute details to attend to in June.

Such administrative duties were time-consuming, but not nearly as stressful as Dipendra's dealings with the army's top brass. It was a highly sensitive role, entrusted to him by his father, and by the spring of 2001 the question of whether to deploy the Royal Nepal Army against the Maoist insurgency rebels could no longer be avoided. The king was hesitant about the idea, and one of the few real powers left to him as constitutional monarch was to order the army into action. Prime Minister G. P. Koirala wanted to deploy the troops.

Birendra dealt with the prime minister and other politicians in person, but other key roles had been delegated to the more active members of the royal family. His youngest brother, Dhirendra, had the delicate task of maintaining lines of communication with the Maoists. Dipendra's role was to liaise with the generals and report back to the palace what they were thinking. If the situation across the country deteriorated, some of the hard-liners might be tempted to act on their own and impose martial law without the king's consent. The crown prince was chosen as the conduit

because had always been close to the military, but the role was taxing. For the first time in his life Dipendra found himself with seriously high-pressure responsibilities.

The crown prince did not respond well to stress. A heavy drinker and smoker, he justified his sometimes prodigious drug consumption as necessary to “de-stress.” Dipendra also had a weight problem as a result of being a greedy eater ever since early childhood. In his early twenties he tried to stay reasonably trim through jogging and hard physical exercise. But more recently he had let things slide and had become so overweight that his doctors suggested he have a medical examination. Dipendra may well have dreaded the results, being only too aware that he was seriously out of condition and growing old before his time.

In early May, just after returning from his official visit to Japan, the crown prince asked a much older courtier how he managed to look so young. “I dye my hair, Your Highness,” was the response. Dipendra then jokingly replied that would not do much good for him as his own hair was coming out. At which he yanked off his *topi* and pointed to all the loose hairs inside the brim. He laughed it off at the time, though in private he worried about yet another sign that his youth was behind him. What concerned him most, however, was how unfit he had become. A forthcoming demonstration karate match with his Japanese teacher required that he really train hard if he was not to make a complete fool of himself in public. He promised he would start on a strict regimen—no cigarettes, no alcohol, no drugs, just plenty of disciplined exercise. But he never quite got around to it.

Underlying all the day-to-day pressures there remained, as ever, the “marriage question.” The fact that Dipendra was deeply depressed about this, and in an increasingly unstable frame of mind, was known even in England. Early in May 2001 his former guardian, Lord Camoys, faxed a private letter of warning to King Birendra about the crown prince’s mental state generally, and in

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particular his unhappiness at being denied both a meaningful role in life and the right to marry. Whether the king took notice of this letter is unknown.

Dipendra's mood swings subsequently grew still more erratic. As spring turned to summer he at first seemed to be in a much more buoyant frame of mind. He seemed convinced that there were signs that his father was finally coming around to the idea of his marrying Devyani. Around the middle of May the king said as much to one of his former prime ministers and closest of confidants, Kirthinidi Bista. For the first time in years Dipendra believed he might finally have gained his father's blessing. With the king's support, all the other family members would eventually fall into line. In the meantime, he dutifully kept calling on the queen mother, although her views on the matter remained as inscrutable as ever.

At least for a short while, Dipendra believed that he had almost prevailed. He felt confident enough about there definitely being a wedding to advise some of his closest friends in England to keep their diaries free for December 2001. Although an auspicious date still had to be found, he told them that the marriage ceremony would definitely take place during the coming winter season.

But then mysterious wheels inside the palace turned again, this time against Dipendra. That the queen led the counterattack is taken for granted, though precisely how she brought Birendra around to her side is not known. But now there was an added twist. Aishwarya knew her son well enough to realize he would go ahead and marry with or without their permission. So Dipendra was presented with the ultimate deterrent. If he persisted in defying his parents, he would be stripped of both his royal titles and his financial allowance.

Dipendra had always been kept on a tight budget by his father. He was not extravagant, but for the money to dry up completely

would be a disaster. Unless he was carrying out official duties, the twenty-nine-year-old crown prince would effectively be confined to his bungalow inside the royal palace.

The threat was a testament to Aishwarya's strength of will and determination—and also to her insensitivity. Having come so close to his goal, Dipendra felt utterly betrayed by his father. He also found himself boxed into an untenable position. He had made a semi-public commitment to Devyani that he could not reverse. His closest friends had practically been invited to the wedding. If it was canceled, his credibility, his reputation, his unusually developed sense of personal honor—all would lie in tatters. There was only one honorable course of action open to him: He would marry Devyani anyway, even if by doing so he lost his royal birthright.

There are various reports on how Devyani responded to Dipendra's proposed solution to his predicament. Some say that when Dipendra told her he would give up his royal titles—that they would be happy together anyway, that between them there would be enough money to get by on—Devyani went “white with rage.” Her own family denies this strenuously, and understandably so. The clear implication is that Devyani was determined to be queen of Nepal and that she would not accept Dipendra's throwing away that future simply because he was having a monumental fit of pique.

A more generous interpretation is that she was angry about the way in which he was being treated by his family. For, despite entrenched differences over the “marriage question,” Dipendra had always spoken respectfully of his parents and remained loyal to them. Yet, however understanding Devyani was of the crown prince's problems, he was still trapped in a corner from which there seemed no acceptable way out.

When the results of Dipendra's medical checkup were returned, his blood pressure was found to be abnormally high, as was his cholesterol count. These were hereditary ailments, but in Dipendra they

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were present much earlier than might normally have been expected. The diagnosis was yet another reason for the crown prince to be profoundly depressed.

Of all his official engagements, the one that Dipendra looked forward to least was in his diary for the afternoon of June 1, 2001. He had to accompany his parents to the house of the royal guru, Nayan Raj Pandey, and congratulate him on his seventieth wedding anniversary. The crown prince would be obliged to offer his felicitations, despite the fact that the old priest had double-crossed him over his and Devyani's horoscopes. Worse still, such an occasion would allow his mother to put on her religious airs and be quietly triumphant. Dipendra initially tried to avoid the entire affair.

His sister, Shruti, had been excused because she was busy with her two little daughters. Nirajan was allowed to stay at home because he was tired out after his final examinations. Dipendra's day included a full morning at the office, then lunch with his parents, followed by an inspection tour of the sports facilities for the upcoming National Games—the swimming complex, the new squash courts, the shooting ranges. He would have to be full of encouragement and at the same time satisfy himself that all was ready for the grand opening in two days' time. Then, in the evening, he was hosting the family's regular Friday night reunion. There was not room in this schedule to spend even a few minutes with Devyani. Yet it was Devyani who finally persuaded him that he really should accompany his parents. His failure to join them would otherwise provide another opportunity for criticism.

So Dipendra dutifully followed behind his parents in their armor-plated Mercedes as the royal motorcade made its way through Kathmandu's narrow streets toward the priest's plain-fronted, three-story house in Dilli Bazaar. The usual security

arrangements required he travel in a separate vehicle. They were greeted in the front yard by the old priest, who performed a welcoming ceremony, throwing silver coins on the ground as an offering to Birendra as an incarnation of Vishnu. The king left them untouched, for he could never accept an offering from his own guru. Then, as Pandey's family and neighbors showered rice flakes and flower petals from the balconies above, the royal party climbed the narrow stairs and were ushered into a sitting room.

Tea was served, and four generations of Pandeys filed into the room and made their respectful greetings. There were many of them, for this line of royal priests had prospered in the seven decades since the twelve-year-old Nayan Raj had been married to a little girl called Jeev Kumari. Though it had only been a simple ceremony, King Tribhuvan had graced that occasion with his presence. Now his grandson Birendra and great-grandson had come to celebrate his anniversary. It was a touching scene.

Dipendra sat apart from his parents and scarcely uttered a single word throughout. When food was served, Queen Aishwarya tucked into the homemade black lentils and potatoes, the fried breads and pickles, and especially the sweet rice pudding flavored with saffron. She was obviously in good spirits. The king ate sparingly, explaining that because of his heart condition he had to keep to a strict diet. Dipendra did not touch a thing, not even the Coke he had been served. He just sat there, unsmiling, as the priest recited a religious poem and then entered into an involved conversation with his monarch.

For the best part of an hour the crown prince was surrounded by people enthusing about tradition, religion, and families, and he might as well not have been there at all. His eyes remained expressionless; his mind obviously somewhere else.

Toward the end of the visit, Aishwarya went into the family shrine room and offered a prayer to the assembled Hindu gods. The royal party then took its leave. The crown prince remained

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silent and impassive. Only when he was back in his car did his lips break into a smile. The motorcade drove down to Durbar Marg and then turned right toward Narayanhiti's main entrance. The massive steel-barred gates opened and then closed behind them. The whole route had been covered in less than five minutes. But for Nepal's royal family, it was their last journey through the outside world.

TWELVE

THE FAMILY REUNION

The invitations to the usual Friday soir ee at Tribhuvan Sadan had been sent out by the Palace Secretariat, as usual. Only members of the royal family and their in-laws were on the list. It was to be an informal family gathering: first drinks, and then a late buffet dinner at which everyone helped themselves. No ADCs or bodyguards would need to be present, since this was a strictly private occasion held in the safest cordon of the palace. Servants came only to bring in the food or refresh the ice as required. The king and queen, their three adult children, and some twenty other royal relations were expected.

There was nothing unusual. Such informal family reunions had been going on for nearly thirty years. The tradition was started by King Birendra himself, shortly after he ascended the throne. It was a good way, he thought, to keep the extended royal family together. The gatherings were usually held on the third

Friday of the Nepalese month. In the Nepalese lunar calendar, the date fell on June 1.

The venue for the family gathering shifted around the palace complex according to who was host that evening. Sometimes it was held at Sri Sadan, the private apartments of the king and queen. At other times it was at the queen mother's residence. On June 1 it was the turn of the crown prince to play host, so the guests were invited to his private residence at Tribhuvan Sadan, the cluster of buildings that had grown around the hall where the king's grandfather used to receive guests.

Now the original hall was used mainly as a billiards room, though it had been enlarged into an L-shaped room with a bar area, a music center, and an adjacent sitting room. It opened up onto a veranda and gardens on one side. The crown prince's private apartments and bedchamber were just to the north, across a little bridge that spanned a stream leading to an ornamental pond. Other additions had been made to Tribhuvan Sadan over the years, obscuring the building's original plan but making it a comfortable enough spot for a family get-together.

For this evening, the six sofas in the billiards room had thoughtfully been arranged in two semicircles—one at each end, so the elderly royals could sit and chat together apart from the more boisterous younger members of the family. When dinner was served, usually quite late in the evening, they would move to the dining room next door, where the food was already laid out. It was very informal. For the immediate members of the royal family, who as part of their "jobs" had to attend endless banquets and receptions, such cozy informality was a welcome relief. It was good to be able to talk without always having the servants around.

The only slight deviation from routine practice was that the invited guests had all been phoned personally by the crown prince's ADC to confirm they were attending. Usually, if anyone were to trouble to check on this, it would have been the queen's

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ADC and not the crown prince's. It was only a minor alteration to the customary form, not the kind of thing to think about twice.

The evening light was fading as the crown prince crossed the bridge from his personal apartments to the main part of Tribhuvan Sadan. He had showered and changed since returning from the tea party with the royal guru, and seemed to be in a much better mood. As host for the evening, it was incumbent upon him to be there well before any of the guests arrived. He was accompanied by his usual ADC, Major Gajendra Bohara. He went to the bar and poured himself a stiff whiskey. From the generous choice available he selected his favorite brand, The Famous Grouse.

Dipendra told his ADC to stay with him while he was waiting for the first guests to arrive. He moved down to the billiards table and had Major Bohara feed him balls so that he could practice some shots. Servants were setting the dinner places next door. The clock ticked on toward 7:30 P.M., when the guests were supposed to arrive.

The first to appear was Maheshwar Kumar Singh. It was his habit to arrive early. Maheshwar had been born into an Indian princely family and had married one of King Birendra's aunts. He had lived in Kathmandu for more than forty years and was a regular at the Friday night gatherings. A dapper figure in his Nepali cap and tight-fitting trousers, he bowed respectfully to the crown prince upon entering the room. Dipendra asked him what he would have to drink and poured out a whiskey with ice and water. At this point, the crown prince appeared to be "completely normal," smiling and making small talk.

Next to arrive was another of the king's uncles by marriage and a member of a great Nepali dynasty, the seventy-four-year-old Rabi Shamsher Rana. A retired general of the Royal Nepal Army, he too was a regular guest, though since his wife's death

four years previously he had attended the family reunions alone. As acting bartender for the evening, the crown prince served him a large scotch. Rabi toyed with it as other guests arrived, for the tumbler had been filled to the brim, and he could no longer drink as he had in the old days. Dipendra asked Rabi whether he would like a game of billiards, to which the old general replied that he could not play properly because he had hurt his hand in an accident.

The queen appeared, wearing a red sari, just as the king's three sisters, Princesses Shanti, Sharada, and Shobha, arrived. Then Prince Nirajan wandered in with a CD in his hand. Princess Shruti was accompanied by her husband, Kumar Gorakh, but was without their two young daughters. There had been another party for the youngsters the previous week; this was for adult royals only. Besides, it was only a short distance to the palace from their family house in Kesar Mahal.

By now a stream of vehicles with assorted royal cousins and aunts aboard was entering by the palace's West Gate. Smartly uniformed guards snapped to attention and saluted as they drove first up a tree-lined avenue toward the main palace before turning left, past the back of the Secretariat buildings, to Tribhuvan Sadan. The royal guests were dropped off outside the ADC's office, from which it is but a short walk through a flower-filled garden to the veranda entrance to the billiards room. Cousin Paras arrived with his mother, Princess Komal, his sister Prerana, and his elegant Indian-born wife, Himani. He was escorting all the ladies this evening since his father, Prince Gyanendra, was out of town.

The king's other brother, Dhirendra, arrived along with his three daughters and his son-in-law, Captain Rajiv Shahi. Following his divorce, Dhirendra had lost his royal title and all the privileges that go with it. But plain Mr. Dhirendra Shah was back in favor with the king, who still considered his youngest brother very much a part of the royal family. Moreover, recently he had been on better

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terms with his former wife, Princess Prekshya, who had also been on the invitation list for that evening. But she was unable to attend.

Another royal divorcée, Mrs. Ketaki Chester, arrived, as did her mother, Princess Helen, and her physically tiny, immensely sharp-witted sister, Princess Jayanti. Princess Helen was there mainly to talk to her sister-in-law, the queen mother, and they were to spend almost the entire evening closeted together in a separate room.

The crown prince busied himself welcoming guests and dispensing drinks. The younger crowd sat at the end of the room farthest from the billiards table, where they could smoke without being noticed. Dipendra was a heavy smoker, but even though he was nearly thirty he dared not light up in the presence of the king or queen mother. It was contrary to protocol. If he was smoking when his father appeared he would immediately stub out the cigarette and have someone carry it away surreptitiously.

Dipendra joined the young set and started talking with Cousin Paras. As ever, the "marriage question" was in the air, and Dipendra told Paras he had been called in by his parents to discuss it. Paras did not mention it for the time being because it seemed obvious to him that the crown prince had been drinking. "What will you have?" asked Dipendra, still acting the host. Paras said he was thinking of just having a Coke, to which Dipendra replied, "You just want a Coke? I've been drinking whiskey."

Others present had begun to notice oddities in the crown prince's behavior. Dipendra was a hardened drinker, capable of downing a dozen whiskeys without his composure becoming ruffled. "He certainly wasn't drunk," commented Ketaki Chester. "Normally when he'd been drinking he just went quiet. This time he was putting on an act, bumping into tables and so on." Something abnormal was going on.

Paras asked the crown prince what had happened during the talk with his parents. "Oh, nothing," he replied. "We've been talking about the marriage. I talked with my mother and grand-

mother, and they both said no. I will talk about it to His Majesty on Sunday.”

Dipendra was closer to his cousin than to most of his immediate family. He admired Paras’s recklessness and envied his “bad boy” reputation, while he had to play the “model prince.” Paras had backed him in his decision to marry Devyani and remained Dipendra’s closest confidant for discussions about his troubled marriage prospects.

Around eight o’clock Dipendra left his guests to drive around the other side of the main palace to Mahendra Manzil, the queen mother’s residence. As host, it was his duty to greet his grandmother and escort her to the party. Whether anything was said between them concerning the marriage situation is not known, for Queen Mother Ratna has remained resolutely silent on the subject to this day. What was clear to everyone present was that when the crown prince returned to the party his mood had changed for the worse.

The queen mother went straight to the smaller room, known as Baitho Bathak, where she was accustomed to receive visitors. The older royals all trooped in to perform the ritual welcome on entering the queen mother’s presence and then to pay their respects. Dipendra stayed behind in the billards room, pulled out his mobile phone, and called Devyani.

They talked for a little over a minute. The contents of their conversation remain Devyani’s secret. It could well have been no more than small talk. They were in love, after all, and because they often could not see each other the two of them were in the habit of constantly chatting on their mobile phones. Devyani was preparing to go out to a party hosted by some wealthy Indian friends, Sanjay and Shilpa Dugar. If the crown prince could get away early after the family dinner party ended, it had been tentatively agreed they should meet afterward. But something said during their conversation appears to have upset Dipendra. His next call after

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Devyani was to his ADC, Gajendra Bohara. "Fetch my cigarettes," he commanded brusquely.

Similar orders had been received many times before, and Bohara asked a royal orderly called Ram Krishna KC to make up a packet of five of the prince's "specials," containing the usual hashish plus some mysterious black substance. ADC Bohara then proceeded to walk over to the billiards room. Rather than enter a room full of royals, he stopped at the east door and entrusted the cigarettes to Prince Paras. It seemed the right thing to do, since Paras was all too aware of the crown prince's smoking habits.

Only six minutes passed between Dipendra's ordering up the drugs and the next call. It was incoming, and it was from Devyani's personal landline. Dipendra did not accept the call, so it was transferred automatically to his ADC. Devyani said she was worried about the crown prince. His voice had sounded slurred. Could Bohara check out the situation? Curiously, she asked the ADC to look for him in his private rooms because he might not be feeling well.

Devyani was obviously very anxious about something. Once she had spoken to Bohara, she phoned another of Dipendra's regular ADCs, Raju Karki, on his home number. He was off duty and preparing to fly out on a trip to the United States for further military training. Devyani insisted he go immediately to the palace. Whatever she told him, it must have been persuasive. He dressed in his ADC's uniform and drove over to Narayanhiti at once.

Maybe she knew more than she was letting on. She was familiar with Dipendra's sudden mood swings and what he was like on drugs. But why ask the ADCs to look in his rooms? After all, he had just called her from the party.

At precisely the same time that Devyani was talking to Raju

Karki, the atmosphere within the billiards room became unsettlingly bizarre. The crown prince began to fall about as though he were roaring drunk. He then slumped to the floor and appeared to have passed out. It was as out of character as it was embarrassing. Fortunately, most of the older family members were with the queen mother in her separate chamber. The king had not yet arrived but was expected at any minute. For the crown prince to be found unconscious would be a catastrophic breach of protocol, made worse by the fact that he was supposed to be hosting the evening.

Paras tried to revive Dipendra. "Not here, it's inappropriate," he tried to tell him. "The king has arrived." But it was no use. The crown prince appeared to be out cold. So four of the younger generation decided the best thing was to get him out of the billiards room immediately. They staggered under the weight of his unwieldy body, brother Nirajan and Captain Shahi taking an arm each while Cousin Paras held up his feet. Princess Shruti's husband, Kumar Gorakh, followed behind as this bizarre cortege lurched over the little bridge and up the steps leading to the crown prince's private apartments. They hauled him to his bedchamber and placed him on a low divan. Switching off the lights, they left Dipendra to sleep it off and returned to the party in time to be present for the king's arrival, as was only proper.

King Birendra had been working late, as usual. This particular evening he had been closeted with his principal press secretary, Mohan Bahadur Panday, going over the details of a rare interview with a magazine editor. After years of self-imposed seclusion, Birendra was becoming more open with the press. As the discussion drew to a close, Panday asked and was granted permission to leave at about half past eight.

Rather than be driven around to Tribhuvan Sadan, Birendra

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chose to walk. Since his heart attack two and a half years earlier, the king had been advised to take more exercise. It was only five minutes' walk from his office, but even so he was accompanied by one of his ADCs, Colonel Sundar Pratap Rana. When he reached Tribhuvan Sadan, the king went straight to the small chamber where the queen mother was holding court, so that he could immediately pay his respects. Colonel Rana left him at the entrance, knowing, like the other ADCs, that this was a "family only" evening, then walked on to the ADCs' office. It was less than a minute away. Both he and the other officers on duty could easily be called, if needed.

The queen mother was surrounded by royal relations when the king walked in. They hurried to greet him, then everyone raised a toast to Queen Mother Ratna's health. She responded by suggesting that they replenish their glasses. In the world of palace etiquette, where things are said indirectly, this was a clear hint that she wanted a private conference. So most of the royal uncles and aunts departed, leaving only King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya, and Princess Helen with the queen mother. The four of them remained closeted in the private chamber for twenty minutes. What precisely they discussed is not known, though with three senior royal ladies present the subject of marriages—and not just Dipendra's, but plans for his brother, Nirajan, to marry a suitable Rana girl—may well have received their attention.

There are many reasons why Dipendra, intoxicated or not, should have wanted to absent himself while this kind of conference was going on. It was humiliating to be talked about in such a manner. Besides, he knew that all three royal ladies did not support his plans to marry Devyani. He did not need to hear echoes of their disapproval. It was preferable to absent himself entirely, even if it meant acting the drunken idiot.

The opinion of many who saw him falling about—that he was only acting rather than physically intoxicated—seems to be borne

out by what happened next. He had been left in his bedroom, apparently fast asleep on the divan, at a little after half past eight. He must have roused himself almost immediately, for just a few minutes later two servants sent by ADC Gajendra Bohara after he received the telephone call from Devyani found the crown prince trying to undress himself on the bedroom floor. Together they helped him, after which Dipendra went to the bathroom and apparently threw up. One of the servants believes he heard retching noises through the bathroom door. The crown prince then returned to his bedchamber and ordered the two servants out.

The next thing he did—just seven minutes after being deposited apparently unconscious on the divan—was to call Devyani again. Vomiting may have helped to clear his head, but it seemed to have been a remarkably swift recovery. She took the call on her mobile phone. Her memories of what was said are confused: “He said he’d call tomorrow; then he said good night.” Next, according to Devyani, he asked again about something he had already mentioned earlier, but then hung up before she could reply. She says she then called back, and Dipendra told her: “I am about to sleep. I’ll call again in the morning.”

Strangely, there is no record of that second call in the otherwise meticulous log kept by Nepal Telecom, only of an attempt to reach him from the land line of Devyani’s friend, Debina Malla, which was automatically transferred to the palace switchboard, as is customary. Whoever was calling in hung up after one second. Obviously they wanted to talk to Dipendra and no one else.

In his last conversation with Devyani, the crown prince seems clearly to have intended to return to bed. In fact, he did the opposite. He dressed himself again, this time in military fatigues: camouflage vest, black socks, ill-matching camouflage combat jacket and trousers, his army boots, and a pair of black leather gloves. His next move was still more sinister. He assembled and checked his weaponry: the favorite 9 mm Glock pistol; a stubby MP5K

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submachine gun; his preferred assault rifle, the Colt M-16; and a SPAS twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun, along with magazine pouches and webbing for carrying spare ammunition.

As Dipendra was about to leave his rooms, his faithful orderly, Ram Krishna, called out: “Shall the emergency bag be brought, sir?” The emergency bag contained weatherproof clothing, insect spray, a flashlight, spare batteries, and other items that might come in handy when the crown prince went trekking. Seeing his master dressed up in military gear and carrying guns, Ram Krishna quite reasonably assumed he was going on some overnight sortie outside the palace. “It’s not necessary now,” was Dipendra’s curt response.

Once the king had ended his private conversation with his stepmother he rejoined the rest of the guests in the billiards room. The talk among the older men was about the army and whether it might be deployed against the Maoist guerrillas—all in a guarded, indirect manner, of course. The king, eschewing alcohol, was drinking a Coke on his doctor’s advice, but he nonetheless sent for a cigar. It was one of the pleasures he still allowed himself occasionally.

One of the royal uncles, Rabi Shamsher Rana, engaged him in small talk. Another uncle, Maheshwar Kumar Singh, came up and apologized for his wife being unable to attend the party because of her arthritis. Birendra commented that many family members suffered from gout, uric acid, and high cholesterol.

He was still holding forth about the family’s tendency to high cholesterol when something moved just beyond the French doors. At first, nobody noticed the “dark figure” dressed in camouflage fatigues, a peaked cap, black combat boots, and black leather gloves.

General Rabi claims he first recognized the crown prince and realized he was carrying at least two guns. “I thought he looked at me,” the old general recalls, “and I think he smiled.” Others

describe Dipendra's face as expressionless throughout. Everyone present agrees that he never spoke a word.

"The king was standing by the billiards table," Ketaki remembers. "I was nearer the door than the others and saw Dipendra walk in." At first she thought he was playing some kind of practical joke. "Isn't he too old to be dressing up like this?" she asked her sister, Princess Jayanti.

Most of the people in the room thought Dipendra had come to show his father something. General Rabi saw the little MP5K submachine gun and assumed it was a replica or toy gun. At first King Birendra just stood motionless beside the billiards table, the glass of Coke still in his hand. Then he took a step toward his son. Without uttering a single word, Dipendra advanced with a gun in each hand and released three rounds at the king.

The retort of the submachine gun in such a confined space was deafening. Maheshwar, who was standing near the king, at first thought it had come from the TV. "It was very near my ears, and I thought my eardrums had burst. I blinked. I turned to see what was happening."

Others were better placed to observe as events moved rapidly on. "The gun rode up and some bullets went into the ceiling," says Ketaki. "It didn't seem that dramatic. There wasn't lots of ceiling coming down on us or anything."

"There was a burst of three shots," specified General Rabi Rana. He knew his firing drill: Bursts came in fives, in threes, or just single shots. But he had no idea how to react to the situation unfolding before his eyes. "I just stood there watching. I knew he was a happy-go-lucky person, but this was no way to fool around. Then I saw the blood rushing out of the king's side. I screamed for an ambulance, but it seems no one heard."

During that first attack King Birendra was struck by two 9 mm bullets from the stubby German-made submachine gun. For a few moments he remained standing, long enough to put

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down his glass very slowly. Looking toward his son, he said very quietly: “*Kay gardeko?*”—“What have you done?”

According to General Rabi, who was standing beside him, King Birendra started to collapse toward the left. Blood was already seeping out of a wound to his neck. The crown prince meanwhile retreated through the garden doors and out onto the veranda.

Still no one in the room moved. They could not believe what had just happened. “We did not think that he intended to kill,” said the king’s youngest sister, Princess Shobha. “We thought the gun had gone off by mistake.”

Once Dipendra had returned outside, the wave of stunned silence that had engulfed the room evaporated. General Rabi and others rushed to assist the king. Dhirendra’s son-in-law, Captain Ravi Shahi, was a trained army doctor. “His back!” he cried out, calling for assistance to support the king, who by then had collapsed on the floor and was bleeding profusely.

Suddenly there was total confusion. “People were in a complete panic about who or what was going on,” Maheshwar testified. “I felt the queen had left. Perhaps she went outside? Maybe to the back? But she left. Then Princess Shanti began waving both her hands, wanting to know what had happened, and immediately went outside. Probably to call for help, what else? And as I recall, Princess Sharada also followed her.”

Although King Birendra lay stricken, having taken two heavy-caliber bullets fired at point-blank range, he was still alive. Captain Shahi tried to staunch the flow of blood from the neck wound. “I am also hit in the stomach,” murmured the king.

At that moment Dipendra strode back into the billiards room. Outside, on the veranda, he had swiftly rearmed. The Italian-made pump-action shotgun had been discarded. This time he carried the M-16 in his right hand, the machine pistol in his left.

He must have seen the group trying to help the king, heard his father’s voice, and knew his mission was not accomplished yet. “If

the crown prince had not returned at that precise moment,” a palace secretary said later, “he might have thought the king was dead. Then things would have turned out very differently.”

The crown prince had thrown down the submachine gun he had fired at the king. Possibly it had jammed, though later it was found to be in perfect working order. More probably he wanted someone else in the room to pick it up. That way their fingerprints would be left on the weapon used against the king, not his, since he taken care to wear gloves throughout. Or maybe through some twisted sense of personal honor, he wanted to give his victims a chance to strike back, to justify what was coming.

It was the wounded king who made a move to pick up the fallen submachine gun. But as he reached toward it, Princess Shobha stopped him. “I said, ‘Leave this,’ and snatched it. The magazine came out and I threw it away.” It was a snap decision, no doubt based on her desire to prevent any more bloodshed. But it was one she has lived to regret. She had mistakenly thought that she was disposing of the only weapon in the room. As the magazine fell free and clattered to the floor, the last realistic chance of stopping the killing was thrown away.

Ketaki recalls how careful Dipendra was not to allow anyone to come around behind him. With hindsight, she sees the way in which this first phase of attack was executed as being “coldly calculated.”

Dipendra had, after all, selected his prime target: his father, the king. With him out of the way, the crown prince would by the Royal Constitution of Nepal automatically be proclaimed king, whether he was a murderer or not. “The king is dead; long live the king” still applies in such cases, for the throne can never be left vacant. And if Dipendra had been declared king, then someone else could have been made a scapegoat for the royal murder. All the other family members, placed under house arrest, would be cowed into agreeing to the official version of events. And Dipendra would finally be in charge.

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Certainly Dipendra's subsequent actions show he needed to be certain he had killed the king. Now armed with the M-16 assault rifle, he fired off a burst at his father, again at point-blank range.

The king's youngest brother, Dhirendra, was the first to make a move toward the crown prince. "Baba, you have done enough damage," he said. When his appeal to reason failed, Dhirendra tried to restrain his nephew physically. Dhirendra was a powerfully built man and had been trained in karate, but he was unarmed. Before he could get near enough he too was cut down by a burst of automatic fire through the chest.

Any warped logic or planning that might have explained Dipendra's actions so far seems to have been abandoned completely at this stage. Two others were caught in the fusillade that killed the King's brother. Kumar Khadga went down with bullet wounds to the chest that were to prove fatal. Princess Shruti's husband, Kumar Gorakh, was shot in the neck but survived. He recalls being targeted by the light on the M-16's telescopic sight. "When he held up the gun there was a flash. I thought, 'This is the end.' That was when I was hit."

Princess Shruti was rushing to her father's aid when she heard her husband mutter, "I also have been hit." She changed directions and tried to comfort her husband, cradling him in her arms. Sadly, that was enough to attract the gunman's attention. He fired again. Princess Shruti was wounded through the elbow and sustained internal injuries that would prove fatal.

Kumar Khadga had also fallen out in the open. His wife, Princess Sharada, went to him and lay over his body, sobbing, "What has happened to you, what has happened to you?" Blood spread across the floor.

A second time Dipendra retreated through the doors to the veranda. He was only outside a few seconds before advancing

once more. Now he let off long bursts of gunfire, spraying the room indiscriminately. Three of his aunts, princesses Shanti, Sharada, and Jayanti, went down in the hail of bullets. Princess Sharada was trying to shield her husband with her own body. Princess Jayanti was trying to retrieve a mobile phone so that she could call the ADCs. That may have inflamed the gunman even further. He fired another burst into the fallen bodies. All of them sustained fatal injuries.

Ketaki was luckier, in some respects. She took one bullet through the lower arm and another that blew away the top of her shoulder, but she lived. "I didn't realize it at the time," she said, "but the blood had spurted all over my face and head. It must have looked like I had taken a bullet in the head, which is probably why I am still alive." Another of Dipendra's aunts, Princess Komal, had a bullet pass through her left lung. It missed her heart by centimeters; she was extremely fortunate to survive. As the wife of King Gyanendra, she is now Queen Komal of Nepal.

Most of those hit had been standing or lying out in the middle of the main hall, where there was no furniture to hide behind and any movement would immediately draw the gunman's attention. Another group had taken cover behind tables and a sofa at the far end of the sitting room. It was Paras who had urged them to take cover there, shouting to others still out in the open to duck and stay out of the line of fire.

Meanwhile, the killer was moving about the room. He approached the body of the king and kicked it around with his army boot, to make absolutely sure his father was dead. He did the same to his younger sister. Her wounded husband, Gorakh, recalls how methodically Dipendra "returned and picked out those who had been hurt, took aim and shot, took aim and shot." It was chilling. Ketaki saw him "swing the gun so casually and just shoot them again. It was deliberate. You could tell by the look in his eyes."

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Then Dipendra walked over toward where most of the survivors lay huddling. Cousin Paras saw him standing by a tall chair right in front of them. “We fell in his direct gaze,” says Paras, who began pleading for their lives. “What have you done, sir? . . . Please leave . . . What are you doing? . . . Only we are here . . . just us . . . Please go.”

“Well, if he had hit all of us . . .” Paras left the ensuing blood-bath to the imagination. Besides himself, there were Maheshwar Kumar and General Rabi; his sister, Prerana; his wife, Himani; and three of Dhirendra’s daughters. One of them, Princess Sitasma, was hiding behind the sofa. She had recently returned from being a student in Scotland, and only seconds before had narrowly escaped a bullet that went past her forehead. From her place of hiding she looked up to see her gun-toting cousin looming over them all. “Dipendra came, looked at us, and left,” is how she put it.

For the gunman it was a bizarre exercise in absolute power, holding the lives of these people in his hands. But with a flick of the head, as though to signify, “You may live,” he left the room. If he had decided to fire again at that group the eventual death count would have been doubled.

The king and twelve other family members lay dead or wounded inside the billiards room. But so far Queen Aishwarya and her younger son, Prince Nirajan, had been spared. Shortly after the firing started they had both gone outside. Ketaki remembers seeing the queen “marching out of the door” in pursuit of Dipendra. At the same time, the badly wounded Dhirendra said, “Either she’ll disarm him or she’ll get shot too.” It was an all too accurate assessment.

“I called out to her twice,” Ketaki recalls. “I said, ‘No, don’t go.’” She also saw Nirajan running after his mother. “It was the last I saw of them. Then I heard some shrieks.” What exactly happened out-

side is not at all clear. None of the main protagonists lived to tell what really happened. Other witnesses saw or heard things only from a distance, and their accounts are confused and at times contradict each other.

The king's ADC on duty that night says he "heard gunshots and Her Majesty's, a woman's voice, saying 'Call the doctor.'" The Queen's ADC, who should have recognized her voice, is not so certain. "It could have been Shruti's or Her Majesty's voice," he testified. Neither of these senior ADCs moved from their office to investigate the firing. Instead, they both say they immediately tried to call the doctor. One used the ADC's office line; the other was on his mobile. Neither of them was successful.

The shooting inside the ballroom was all over in three to four minutes. During that critical period not one of the ADCs, whose office was less than 150 yards away, made it to the scene of the slaughter quickly enough to intervene. The junior ADC to the king, Captain Pawan Khatri, called up the military police on his radio set and then "ran forward." By the time he reached Tribhuvan Sadan the firing had stopped. He did see "a man in combat fatigues leave from the back door, on the garden side, with a gun whose light was still on."

Several palace servants, including kitchen boy Santa Bahadur Khadka, saw a "lady in a red sari" running through the garden. Queen Aishwarya was wearing a red sari that evening. He also saw the crown prince moving backward with guns in two hands. As he was moving backward, the woman in red was confronting him. "The two were not talking; they were running, shouting, screaming. I cannot say who was speaking. The women in the billiards room were [also] screaming."

Santa Bahadur Khadka may not recall what was said, but others within the palace that night apparently can. For besides the public report on the "palace incident," two other secret reports were drawn up on what actually happened that night—one for the

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king's principal secretary and the other for the head of palace security. Neither has been made public. Their contents are, however, known to senior palace officials.

It appears that after the shooting inside the billiards room had stopped, the gunman retreated across the gardens toward the crown prince's private apartments. Queen Aishwarya pursued him, followed by Prince Nirajan. She always had been a tough-minded woman, and now she was furious enough to confront the armed man in camouflage fatigues even if he had a loaded weapon in each hand. She just kept screaming at him—words including a Nepali phrase equivalent to “you filthy bastard.” It was the ultimate act of confrontation. Perhaps she felt she was invulnerable, that her own son would never dare to touch her. If so, it was a serious misjudgment.

Two bursts of automatic fire were subsequently heard coming from the garden. It seems that Prince Nirajan was shot first. That view is supported from the position in which his body was discovered and the location of the spent cartridges, since no eyewitness to his death has come forward.

Nirajan may have been trying to protect his mother against his elder brother's fury. If so, it was a supremely brave thing to do, since Nirajan was unarmed. His own pistol, the same model 9 mm Glock that his elder brother used, was later found inside the billiards room. It had not been fired once that night.

The twenty-two-year-old prince was shot nearly a dozen times and must have died instantly. He had two gaping bullet wounds to the head. He collapsed on the lawn in a pool of his own blood. His body was so riddled with bullets that when rescuers finally arrived they could scarcely lift it intact.

Only the queen still faced Dipendra. By now his father, sister, and brother all lay dead or dying. Only his mother lived on to challenge him.

Even now, in this eye of the storm, and after all the violence

unleashed on those around her, Queen Aishwarya displayed a degree of self-confidence or recklessness that is hard to fathom. Rather than flee for her life into the surrounding darkness, the queen again approached the gunman. She ran across the garden and up the marbled steps leading to Dipendra's bedchamber, screaming as she went. The crown prince seems to have been backing off, or at least walking backward. Maybe her hunch was that he could not bring himself to shoot his own mother. Or maybe she was heading for Dipendra's rooms so that she could seize one of the other weapons he kept there, either to defend herself or kill the man who had murdered her husband and her two other children.

While the gunman continued to withdraw up the stairs that led to the his bedchamber, she confronted him face to face. The queen had climbed seven steps when she must have realized what would happen next, for suddenly she turned around as though to flee. The gunman fired a long burst, hitting her from behind. Her skull was blown apart and most of her brains scattered over a wide area. Fragments of brain tissue, jawbone, and teeth, the red *tika* she had placed on her forehead, her ear-pins and broken red glass bangles were found in different places around where she fell. As with Nirajan, her body was also pumped full of bullets. Expert opinion confirms that she was shot from behind.

No one witnessed the crown prince killing his own mother. Nor did anyone actually see the final act of this tragedy. For this, Dipendra must have walked back toward the billiards room, crossing the small bridge over a stream feeding into the ornamental pond. Around this time somebody claims to have heard him shriek out "like a madman." The next thing they heard was a single shot. Having murdered all his immediate family, Dipendra apparently turned his gun on himself.

At that very last moment, maybe even he was scared. For the clinical efficiency displayed in the shooting of so many relatives was markedly absent in this attempted suicide. Did he lose his

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nerve? Or was it because, for some reason, he held the pistol in his left hand? That should not have made a great difference because, although Dipendra was right-handed, when it came to firing guns he was effectively ambidextrous.

A single bullet entered just behind his left ear and went right through the brain, leaving a massive exit wound slightly higher on the right side of his head. But it was not enough to kill Dipendra outright. He was found lying on the grass, groaning loudly, near the edge of the ornamental pond. There was a Buddha statue nearby.

Only slowly did the full extent of the carnage inside the billiards room become apparent. The bodies of the dead and wounded lay muddled together on the blood-soaked carpet, while those lucky enough to come through unscathed were still cowering in shock. The floor was a mess of scattered articles of clothing, much of it blood-smeared, along with broken spectacles and slippers and hastily discarded whiskey glasses. After all the noise of gunfire, there now followed an eerie silence.

“King Birendra was the only one who moved at all, making signals with his hands. All the others were quiet,” said Ketaki, who by then had already lost a lot of blood. “Nobody was crying out for help,” she explained, “because we knew help would come from somewhere. Then I heard Paras’s voice.”

The younger cousin with a bad reputation seems to have been the only person capable of doing anything. Ketaki says “Paras was very, very controlled. If anyone came out alive in that room, it is due to him.”

After Dipendra had walked away into the gardens, in pursuit of or pursued by his mother and brother, Paras got up from behind the sofas and began moving around the scene of devastation. He remembers, “There were people on the floor. I approached

Dhirendra to find out what happened. He said, ‘Paras, my feet don’t move, I can’t move my feet, please move them.’ I moved them a little, but he couldn’t feel it.” The badly wounded Dhirendra then said, “I can’t see straight, look after your Aunt Ketaki.” Paras says, “Then he told me to look for the children.”

At that point Paras was still unaware that his own mother, Princess Komal, had fallen too. Then he saw her try to raise herself up and slump back down again because the dead Princess Shanti had collapsed on top of her. He helped his mother into an upright position, and she said, “I’m not well, I’m not well,” all the while holding her bloodied forehead. “At first I thought she’d been shot in the forehead,” he confessed. But on closer inspection there was no wound there. He soon ascertained that the blood was from Princess Shanti’s wounds and not his mother’s.

After that Paras ran to the queen mother, who had remained in her separate room throughout the massacre. He had heard more gunfire outside the billiards room and initially thought it came from the queen mother’s private chamber. “I ran over there,” he said, “but nothing had happened.” So he briefly explained to his grandmother and Princess Helen that the king and many others had been shot, though sparing such elderly ladies all the details.

He next ran outside to find the ADCs, who had finally arrived. He explained to them, “There are dead people as well as wounded ones. Ignore the dead, but immediately rush the wounded to hospital.” He ordered them to break down the glass panes in the French doors to permit easier evacuation.

In the event, the king was carried out first, although in Ketaki’s opinion he was by then “definitely dead.” But from there on Paras insisted that the rescuers evacuate the living wounded first, helping to get them into whatever vehicles were available and dispatching them to the hospital. Some, like Ketaki, were completely disoriented. She was losing blood fast from her shoulder

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wound, but still she insisted on finding her shoes because she was worried about cutting her feet on all the broken glass.

With the evacuation under way and more help arriving, Paras moved on to those still unaccounted for. “I told three people to go and look for the crown prince, the queen, and Nirajan,” he says. The crown prince’s ADC soon came running back to report that Dipendra had shot himself but was still alive. Both the queen and Nirajan were beyond hope. So Paras and ADC Gajendra Bohara loaded the two royal princes, Dipendra and Nirajan, into the same vehicle and drove them to hospital. It was a macabre load, killer and victim both propped up in the backseat together.

THIRTEEN

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

The trauma room at Chhauni Military Hospital was already crowded when they arrived. Doctors and nurses were still trying to resuscitate the king, though there was evidently no hope. He probably died on the way to the hospital, in the backseat of a Jaguar that got stuck behind a truck and somehow managed to take a full fifteen minutes to cover less than five miles. The body of the queen had been placed on a gurney. It was left unattended because, with half the skull blown off, it was obvious nothing more could be done for her. Princess Shruti and her husband, Kumar Gorakh, lay side by side. She was very pale, her pulse almost imperceptible, while Gorakh had walked in unassisted, yet the woman doctor on duty saw to him first before moving on to Shruti, who was hemorrhaging badly and died within the hour. By the time that Dipendra and Nirajan were brought in on stretchers there were no trolleys left unoccupied, so their stretchers were

laid down on the trauma room floor. Dipendra was breathing noisily. His brother was declared dead on arrival.

The duty staff were overwhelmed as more casualties arrived. The dead were laid down beside the dying and those still struggling for life. Ventilators were strapped on, intravenous drips inserted, pressure bandages applied, adrenaline injected. But for many of the arrivals there was nothing that could be done.

Three royal princesses, Shanti, Sharada and Jayanti, were declared dead on arrival, all of them from head wounds. Kumar Khadga, the king's brother-in-law, died from chest injuries as hospital staff tried to resuscitate him. The king's youngest brother, Dharendra, was still conscious despite multiple chest wounds sustained when he had tried to stop the killing. He was given suction and oxygen before being operated on—to no avail, for he died the following day. Princess Komal had a bullet through one lung and multiple rib fractures. Although the bullet had passed so close to her heart, chest tubes were inserted, and she was operated on successfully.

Meanwhile, the hospital switchboard had been desperately calling in specialists from all over Kathmandu. Cardiologists, plastic surgeons, radiologists, and neurosurgeons were summoned from their homes or Friday-night parties. The royal physician, Dr. Khagendra Bahadur Shrestha, had been alerted directly by the palace and was among the first to arrive. He immediately went to the king and, after a brief examination, declared his condition hopeless. Even then efforts to resuscitate him continued. The queen mother arrived and gave directions. Nobody wanted to be the one to declare Nepal's god-king dead.

Some of the civilian specialists were hard to track down. A royal ADC was dispatched to bring in the country's top neurosurgeon, Dr. Upendra Devkota. He was needed for a very special patient: the man blamed for the killings, but who might technically now be king of Nepal. The ADC drove fast toward the pri-

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vate hospital where he was told he would find Devkota, smashing into two vehicles on the way. When he arrived he marched straight in and demanded to see the doctor, who had just completed an operation. "The crown prince has bullet injuries," he announced. The doctor immediately knew these must be head wounds. They set off for Chhauni Military Hospital at terrifying speed.

What neither he nor any of the civilian specialists were yet told was what had happened earlier that night in Narayanhiti. His immediate supposition was that there must have been a single assassination attempt. Then, on entering the trauma room, it became obvious that something far worse had occurred. The place was so full of badly wounded bodies it seemed a full-scale attack by Maoist insurgents must have taken place—either that or a military coup.

Devkota stopped beside a trolley where an army doctor was attempting resuscitation on a patient wearing bloodstained national dress. There was a locket strung from his neck bearing the image of Sai Baba, the Indian guru who had been especially revered by Birendra in recent years. Dr. Devkota felt for any sign of a pulse and then moved on, leaving the dead king to the junior medic's useless ministrations. Although he had met Birendra before, this time he had not been able to recognize him. Only when the royal physician took him aside and explained that practically the entire royal family had been massacred did the gravity of the situation sink in. His immediate responsibility was to operate on the crown prince.

Trying not to imagine the circumstances that had led to such carnage, Devkota changed into his surgical gown and went straight into the operating theater. There was blood and brain tissue oozing out from the entry and exit wounds on either side of Dipendra's head. The army medics had already inserted an intravenous line and put a tube down his throat. Heart rate and blood

pressure were satisfactory, his breathing was being assisted, and although the pupils were fixed and dilated, he still responded to pinching. Dipendra was not brain-dead.

The neurosurgeon's assessment was that on the Glasgow Coma Scale—on which fifteen is normal and three equates to a vegetative state—the Crown Prince scored four. Only a miracle would restore him to consciousness, but the operating team went ahead nonetheless. They enlarged the entry wound and removed dead brain tissue and bone fragments, cauterizing and leaving an opening in case of future infection. The plastic surgeon on the team then provided skin cover.

Only after the operation was completed did Devkota learn that the person he had just performed surgery on was responsible for the massacre. A brain scan showed there was continued bleeding between the ventricles, but the body was resilient. Crown Prince Dipendra, eleventh in direct line of succession from Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great, was still clinging to life.

Nobody at the military hospital was sure what to do next. Should postmortems be carried out? This posed a tricky constitutional problem, since the incident had occurred within Narayanhiti Palace. They knew the normal medical procedures, but it was not clear whether these should be followed when members of the royal family were involved. So there were no postmortems, no screening for drugs and other substances. Instead, the royal physician ordered that a list of injuries sustained be drawn up.

By now, dawn was breaking over Kathmandu. Prince Gyanendra, now the senior male member of the devastated royal family, was said to be arriving at any moment. Somebody needed to take charge.

Army personnel had gone to find Gyanendra at the royal family's retreat in Pokhara, just forty minutes' flying time west of the capital and at least five hours by road. They took him to the airport

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under armed guard. He was told that he must return immediately to Kathmandu, with no further explanation. A helicopter had been sent for him.

At first he too thought there must have been a military coup. When he contacted a close friend and business colleague, Prabhakar Rana, he was still ignorant of what had happened inside the royal palace. Only when his son Paras finally spoke to him by telephone was he made aware of the true situation.

The helicopter was forced to turn back because of bad weather, so Gyanendra set off for Kathmandu by car, traveling through the night under heavy armed escort. By dawn the convoy had covered only half the distance. Another helicopter was dispatched to rendezvous with the motorcade and fly the dead king's brother to the capital. The Kingdom of Nepal was without a king. Every minute counted.

News that something terrible had happened inside Narayanhiti was spreading fast. Through the small hours of the night, telephone calls and e-mails had been going out notifying family relations and friends as well as public officials. Amazingly, Prime Minister G. P. Koirala was not informed until after nearly two hours had elapsed. He was taken first to Narayanhiti to be briefed by palace officials on what had happened there and the immediate security implications. Only then did he continue to the hospital. The army chief was already present, as were the head of the Royal Privy Council, the country's chief justice, and the speaker of Parliament.

Urgent discussions were held in the relative calm of the hospital's library. Should the death certificates be completed? That was normal procedure. But if King Birendra's death was officially recorded and no successor announced, that would imply that the throne of Nepal was vacant for the first time in two and a half centuries. According to the Royal Constitution, this was an impossibility. "The King is dead; long live the king" was enshrined practice for royal successions.

But who was king? Should the crown prince now be declared king of Nepal, even though he had apparently killed his own father and was in a comatose state? No precedents could be found, not even in the bloodiest episodes of Nepal's turbulent history. Since any decision would have the gravest constitutional implications, it was thought best to wait until after Prince Gyanendra's arrival.

On being helicoptered into Kathmandu, the oldest surviving royal prince went straight to Chhauni Military Hospital, where he was shown around the intensive care units. There were more dead than living, and among those clinging to life was his own wife, Princess Komal. So it was an ashen-faced Gyanendra who then called a series of brief meetings in the hospital's library. First he saw the royal physician and Dr. Devkota, to be informed first hand of Crown Prince Dipendra's condition. He was told that although the prince was still alive, the prognosis was extremely poor. The royal physician asked if standard procedures to assess whether the patient was brain-dead or not should continue. Prince Gyanendra told them to proceed with the tests and let him know the results.

Next into the library went the prime minister and other officials to discuss the thorny question of the royal succession. The head of the Privy Council was to summon all 125 members to an emergency meeting within two hours. By then the tests on the crown prince would be completed. The possibility of Gyanendra becoming regent was raised for the first time. But it was up to the members of the Raj Parishad, the royal privy councillors, to decide on matters of succession. They duly met and, on being told that medical tests showed the crown prince was technically not brain-dead, they decided that the unconscious body being kept alive on a ventilator be solemnly declared His Majesty King Dipendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev of Nepal. He was the eleventh successor to Prithvi Narayan Shah, though Dipendra can never have been conscious of the fact.

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That the same person who had cold-bloodedly shot his own father should be declared his heir, that a serial killer should assume the semi-divine status of Nepalese kingship, may seem bizarre if not grotesque. The members of the Raj Parishad were fully aware of this, but according to the laws and ancient customs of Nepal they had little choice in the matter. King Birendra was dead; his appointed successor still lived; therefore Dipendra had to be named as the new king. They did add the provision that he was “physically and mentally unfit to rule.” His uncle, Prince Gyanendra, should therefore exercise all the new king’s authority and act in his place as Regent.

Their decision had other, equally far-reaching implications. The king stands above the law of the land, so whatever he does—no matter how heinous the crime—he cannot be prosecuted. In fact, so long as Dipendra was king of Nepal there could not be any investigation of what he had allegedly perpetrated inside the royal palace. No one had the authority to order such an investigation apart from the king himself. In the interests of being constitutionally correct, time itself was put on hold.

But outside, in the real world, news of the massacre was traveling fast. By the time Dipendra was proclaimed king of Nepal, nearly sixteen hours had elapsed since the slaughter. Most people in Nepal already knew their beloved King Birendra and most of the royal family had been killed. But they burned to know *who* had done the shooting. And outside those circles with access to palace information, there were few who were ready to accept that the crown prince could have murdered his own father.

Normal broadcasts on Nepal’s state-run radio and television channels were replaced by mournful music and the reciting of religious verses. Most newspapers that appeared the next morning failed to mention that anything unusual had happened. But this atavistic attempt at imposing a total news blackout could not suc-

ceed in the twenty-first century—not with the BBC, CNN, and Indian TV and radio stations all reporting a terrible massacre in the palace.

People with access to a television just switched to one of many satellite channels. Reports from India had by far the greatest impact, since most Nepalis can understand at least some Hindi. In thousands of isolated villages where there is no electricity, people simply tuned their battery-powered radios to shortwave frequencies and picked up the news from foreign broadcasts. The fact that panicking officials in Kathmandu tried to prevent ordinary Nepalis from learning about the catastrophe suggests a staggering ignorance of how news travels in the real world.

The royal funerals had to be arranged in a hurry. It is Hindu custom to cremate the body as soon as possible after death, and for the eldest son to light the pyre. Since Dipendra was incapable, another male relative, Deepak Bikram, stood in for him.

The trappings of royal ceremony accompanied the funeral procession as it passed through Kathmandu on its way from the military hospital to the *ghats* at Pashupatinath, the stone-clad steps leading down to the sacred Bagmati River, where the royal dead would be cremated. Bandsmen played solemn music; the cavalry escort's hooves clattered on the city's broken pavements; the Gurkha infantry marched in slow time.

King Birendra's flower-covered body was carried on an open bier by white-clad Brahman priests. Queen Aishwarya's was placed in the same palanquin in which she had once been taken to her wedding ceremony. Her head was held together by a doll's mask and wrapped in cloth to conceal the terrible injuries. The bodies of Prince Nirajan and Princess Shruti followed.

An estimated half million people came into the streets to pay their last respects. They clung to every rooftop and building along

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the route, many of them throwing flowers as the dead king passed by. There was sadness but also anger in the air.

That anger erupted when the crowds spotted Prime Minister G. P. Koirala's armored Mercedes. Some suspected he was behind the massacre. If not a perpetrator, as head of government he was still held responsible for allowing the dreadful tragedy to happen. Angry young men began chanting slogans. They demanded that the king's murderers be hanged. Stones were thrown at the Prime minister's car. Its windows were broken, and Koirala had to escape under armed guard, continuing his journey in a military vehicle. Soldiers started firing into the air to prevent the rioting from spreading further.

The procession made its way to the Pashupatinath Temple, set in a green park on the banks of the Bagmati River. The pagoda-roofed temple is Nepal's holiest site and is dedicated to the Hindu god of both creative and destructive energy, Lord Shiva, in his manifestation as Lord of the Beasts.

Darkness had fallen by the time the king's body was brought to Aryaghat, the riverside cremation ground that is reserved for high dignitaries, and placed next to where sacred waters from within the temple flow into the river. The bodies of his wife, his two younger children, and four other close relatives were set on separate pyres stretching down the ghats. They were first sprinkled with water drained from Shiva's *linga*, the phallic-shaped stone symbolizing his power. Then the great piles of logs were lit and the flames fed with clarified butter until all was consumed. The ashes were committed to the waters of the Bagmati, which flows down into India and eventually joins the sacred Ganges. A few drops of rain fell, heralding the coming of the monsoon. To those watching from the Bagmati's far bank it seemed that an entire era had passed away before their eyes.

* * *

Half of Kathmandu had witnessed the funeral procession, but still there was no official statement from the palace. When it finally came on Sunday morning, the wording was so obtuse that it only rendered listeners more doubtful than before. An official spokesman was reported to have said that the killings were caused by “an accidental discharge of an automatic weapon.” In fact, this was a mistranslation. What had really been said was “a sudden discharge of an automatic weapon.” The effect on Nepalis grieving the loss of their royal family was to make them angry that such a tragedy could be dismissed as an accident. Moreover, they felt insulted by such transparent misinformation. Modern automatic weapons do not go off “accidentally” or even “suddenly” all by themselves. They sensed that they were being fed doublespeak, and thereafter conspiracy theories as to what really happened spread like wildfire.

Palace officials admit that they were not particularly happy with this half-cocked explanation, but protocol forbade them from naming the culprit because that man was now, in name at least, the king of Nepal. To label him a mass murderer was technically treasonable. At the same time they were under immense pressure to say something. Many hoped that a fuller explanation would follow shortly, since the condition of their comatose monarch was apparently deteriorating. By the evening of June 3, the specialists’ opinion was that Dipendra’s brain was dying and that his chances of survival were zero.

Dr. Devkota was asked to explain the prognosis in a private meeting with Prince Gyanendra. There remained only two alternatives. The life-support machines could be switched off, but only with the full consent of the family. Alternatively, nature could be allowed to take its course, and King Dipendra would be declared dead only after his heart stopped beating. The regent replied that he would discuss the matter with the queen mother. Together they decided to let nature take its course. Treatment was contin-

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ued through the night until the heart stopped around 3:40 A.M. on June 4. An attempt at resuscitation apparently failed, and King Dipendra was declared dead after a reign lasting just over two days.

A new round of urgent consultations was held early the next morning. The doubts and fears rising across the nation had to be addressed. It was decided to proclaim Gyanendra king of Nepal and then immediately afterward announce an official inquiry into the “incident” at the palace. The long official silence about events on the night of June 1 could be broken now that the constitutional restraints had been removed.

Preparations for Gyanendra’s enthronement ceremony got under way at Hanuman Dhoka Palace, but by mid-morning the mood on the streets was turning ugly. The citizens of Kathmandu, still awaiting an official account to explain the loss of their royal family, came out by the tens of thousands. Many were still dazed by recent events; others were angrily joining in organized protests and shouting anti-Gyanendra slogans.

In the absence of any credible explanation, they had come up with their own ideas about who was responsible for the killings. At first, most people had feared it was either the Maoists or the army. Now a different rumor began to circulate: The new king, Gyanendra, and his “evil” son Paras were behind the slaughter. They appeared to have emerged with the spoils, after all. After every previous massacre in Nepal’s long history, some group of conspirators had always benefited from the bloodshed.

Of course, they must have had willing accomplices. The chief suspect was the country’s prime minister, G. P. Koirala, who was already under investigation for gross corruption. Foreign agents who wanted to destabilize Nepal were also blamed: the CIA and the Research and Analysis Wing of Indian Intelligence. Their involvement at least made more sense than a gun going off “accidentally” and killing the entire royal family.

Some of these versions of events were deliberately promoted by the Maoists and other left-wing groups, who believed that they stood to gain from the rioting and the collapse of law and order in Kathmandu. The specter of a vast conspiracy involving anti-communist “hard-liners”—the new king, the prime minister, and foreign intelligence agencies—suited their purposes admirably. They anticipated that even committed royalists and nationalists would join demonstrations against that kind of threat, swelling the numbers of hard-core protesters being bussed in from outside the city.

Many of the protestors had shaved their heads, as required by Hindu custom of sons mourning a dead parent. And that is precisely how most Nepalis felt about the deaths of their king and queen. They grieved as though they had lost their own father and mother. If they joined in demonstrations it was because their grief had turned to anger, and not necessarily because they agreed with the hard core of anti-monarchist organizers.

As the day wore on, the streets of Kathmandu were flooded with a volatile mix of emotion and politics. The proclamation of Gyanendra as the third king of Nepal within three days sparked another bout of rioting. His enthronement ceremony could scarcely have taken place in less favorable conditions.

The time had come for a show of strength against the oppressive elite. As soon as the crowds looked like they were getting out of hand, the armed police moved in to clear the streets with tear gas and baton charges. The army was out in force to maintain order in the streets. Those citizens who had come out to see their new king were unusually silent. There was none of the cheering and clapping that normally accompany a royal coronation. King Gyanendra himself looked extremely solemn, his head shaved beneath a black topi, a light checked jacket over a pale cotton tunic and tight-fitting trousers. The ceremonial enthronement was performed in the open air at Nasal Chowk, the main courtyard of

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the early Shah kings' palace of Hanuman Dhoka, and followed ancient rites that date back to Vedic times.

A fine drizzle descended on the assembled dignitaries, the prime minister and commander in chief of the army among them. Seated on the golden, serpent-headed throne of Nepal, his head now bared, King Gyanendra remained motionless as the royal priest ascended the dais and placed the glittering crown with its plume of bird-of-paradise feathers on his head. Officials and generals then advanced to convey their felicitations and, as is customary, to offer the new king a silver coin as a solemn token of their allegiance.

The ceremony over, King Gyanendra rode through the narrow streets of Kathmandu's Old City in an open carriage drawn by six gray horses. Beside him was the Commander in Chief. Normally the prime minister would also ride in the carriage, but because of the death threats he had received it was thought best for security that he travel separately.

The mood among the watching crowds was sullen. There was little cheering, and many did not even press their palms together in the traditional Nepali greeting. As the procession moved into New Road, groups of shaven-headed protestors ran out from side alleys and shouted, "Death to Gyanendra." Even after the royal carriage had disappeared into Narayanhiti Palace, crowds gathered repeatedly outside the gates crying, "Death to Gyanendra" and "Hang the murderer." Angry young men threw stones and set tires on fire as police tried to contain the situation. At first they fired tear gas into the crowds. But as rioting broke out across the capital the order was given to use live ammunition. Two people died. A blanket curfew was declared to clear the streets until the following morning. Anyone who refused to disperse after one warning would be shot.

There were many fearful citizens that night who thought the Kingdom of Nepal was coming to an end.

* * *

Another royal funeral—of the late and still widely lamented Dipendra—needed to be performed. It was so low-key as to be almost invisible. The body was carried to Pashupatinath on an open army truck. To avoid further demonstrations, the truck was routed not through central Kathmandu itself but around the Ring Road. With a curfew declared and security forces clearing the streets, Dipendra's white-draped corpse was taken without ceremony to the Aryaghat and swiftly cremated. It was scarcely the most honorable of ends. Even as this was going on, another royal victim, the king's brother Dharendra, finally succumbed to his wounds in hospital. He too needed to be cremated. In less than a week, Kathmandu had witnessed ten funerals and an enthronement.

The new king addressed the Nepalese nation on the evening of June 4. He announced the death of King Dipendra and explained that this now removed those legal and constitutional impediments—namely the impossibility of saying the ruling monarch was a mass murderer—that had previously prevented any explanation of what had actually transpired. He also appointed a three-man commission of inquiry comprising the chief justice and the speaker and the leader of the opposition of Nepal's parliament, and granted them wide-ranging powers to investigate the events surrounding the palace massacre.

Only the king could empower this commission, since the entire incident took place within the royal palace and there was no provision under the constitution for civilians to intervene within its walls. But King Gyanendra was all too aware that the people of Nepal were owed a detailed explanation. And so, for the first time, the veil of secrecy surrounding Nepal's royal family was pulled aside and civilian investigators were allowed into Narayanhiti Palace. They were given three days to report their findings.

The announcement was meant to clear the air. It tacitly acknowledged what people had already heard from foreign broadcasts.

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Dipendra was responsible for the killings. But the air was already so troubled with alternative explanations and conspiracy theories that most Nepalis simply could not accept the official version of events. For a son to kill his own father and mother was an unimaginable crime, especially in Nepal, where filial duty and obedience to one's elders are so deeply ingrained. Even as it became increasingly apparent that the palace massacre was strictly "a family affair," many still could not bring themselves to blame the crown prince. To them he was just a scapegoat, a victim along with the others.

Of course, other kings have been killed in the past. Entire royal families have been massacred, as when the Russian Czar Nicholas II, the Empress Alexandra, and their five children were first shot and then stabbed to death at Yekaterinburg during the night of July 16, 1918. The scale of that massacre was comparable, but it had been a state-inspired killing carried out by Bolsheviki committed to overthrowing the entire monarchical system. It was very different from what was supposed to have happened inside Narayanhiti Palace.

So too were the deaths of King Charles I of England, and of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette of France. They had been judicial executions following a trial of some sort in which the accused had been found guilty and condemned to death. None of them equated with Nepal's still largely unexplained elimination of the entire royal family.

The histories of the Mughal emperors, the Ottoman Turks, and most of the Muslim sultanates are replete with intra-familial slayings, though usually these involved brother against brother in a race for the throne. Several of England's medieval kings were murdered or disappeared—Edward II, Richard II, the young princes in the Tower. But again, these were politically motivated assassinations. A lust for power underpinned them all.

For Nepalis with some knowledge of their own history, the murder of Bahadur Shah by his half-brother some 200 years earlier was a clear parallel. This too had been an intra-family affair, apparently carried out in a suicidal fit of rage. Comparisons were also drawn with the infamous Kot Massacre of 1846.

But there are important differences. No member of the immediate royal family was killed during the Kot Massacre. At Narayanhiti, it was *only* royals who were shot. In the aftermath of the Kot Massacre a clear victor emerged in the form of Jung Bahadur Rana. What seemed so inexplicable about the massacre in Narayanhiti Palace was that it seemed to profit no one—unless, as many still suspected, the new King Gyanendra and his son were behind it all.

Some Nepalis were quick to point the finger at this “new royal family.” One of the first to do so was the chief ideologue of the Maoists’ political wing, Baburam Bhattarai. He wrote that the massacre was in fact part of a broader political conspiracy including both “feudal” and “foreign” elements. The first term signified the new royal family and their allies, while the second was taken to mean India. He also drew direct comparisons between the recent killings and the Kot Massacre.

The Maoist leader praised the late King Birendra, both for his liberalism and for being a true nationalist. He warned, however, that there now existed an unholy alliance between a pro-business king, a corrupt prime minister, the army generals, Indian intelligence and business interests, and, of course, the CIA. The time was ripe to proclaim a People’s Republic. To round things off, he called on ordinary soldiers in the Royal Nepal Army to rise up in mutiny.

The signed article appeared in a leading Nepali-language newspaper two days after Gyanendra had been proclaimed king. It was deliberately inflammatory, but the government’s response to this challenge was heavy-handed. In arresting the newspaper’s editor and two directors, the authorities flouted the freedom of

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the press as enshrined in the Constitution. They also revealed just how far panic had set in at the highest levels.

For many Nepalis, the arrests served only to confirm the abundant conspiracy theories. Democratic rights were being taken away by a high-handed and secretive regime. The government responded by rounding up Maoist sympathizers and imposing further night curfews throughout the Kathmandu Valley.

Although Dipendra had now been named as responsible for the palace killings, no further details emerged as to what had really happened inside Narayanhiti that night.

The facts would come out only when the official commission of inquiry had completed its work. Hopes that it would report within three days were dashed when one of its members, the leader of the opposition, was forced to resign by the rank and file of his United Marxist-Leninist Party. The two remaining commissioners continued with their investigations, but the report was delayed indefinitely.

The result was an information vacuum inside which the wildest rumors were able to flourish. Some claimed that, quite apart from the ten members of the royal family slain, an unspecified number of ordinary commoners—waiters, kitchen boys, palace guards—had also been killed. Why? Because these commoners were eyewitnesses to what had really gone on, and their testimony might not tie in with the official version of events. Smoke had been seen coming out of a chimney at Chhauni Military Hospital, where the civilians' bodies had supposedly been taken for incineration. Such reports might be unconfirmed, but they made more sense than having to believe that not a single person had been killed apart from the royal family.

Nothing could be done to redress this situation as long as the commission of inquiry continued with its work. The chief justice

and speaker were taking statements from survivors of the massacre, though otherwise they and other material witnesses were not allowed to speak out. But it did not take long for one of the key witnesses to break rank.

The army doctor who had rushed to assist King Birendra only seconds after he had been shot, Captain Rajiv Shahi, decided to give his version of events. An unauthorized press conference was held at the military hospital, with Captain Shahi in T-shirt and jeans taking it upon himself to explain the palace massacre. He had an outline drawing of the billiards room in Tribhuvan Sadan to help him run through the sequence of events. He confirmed the official line by blaming Dipendra for the killings. Then he left suddenly, refusing to take any questions.

Rajiv Shahi was only a peripheral member of the royal family. He was married to the daughter of Prince Dhirendra, the late king's youngest brother, and it was as a royal in-law that he attended the doomed Friday-night gathering. Precisely why he chose to call an impromptu press conference is unclear, though it may well have had something to do with his personal conduct once the bullets started flying in earnest. A trained doctor in the armed forces, Shahi abandoned his monarch and other wounded relatives at a critical moment in order to make good his own escape. He jumped through a window and ran out into the palace grounds. Rather than raise the alert or try to organize emergency services, apparently he just kept on running right through the West Gate, where he jumped into a taxi that took him to the military hospital.

Of course, none of this was raised when he gave the first eyewitness account of the massacre. But others knew about his movements that night. The unfortunate guard who had allowed him to escape from the palace that night was dismissed. Shahi knew he was in trouble, and his main reason for going public first was to save his reputation, if not his skin. That same evening he faced an

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official board of inquiry, and Captain Shahi was subsequently expelled from the Royal Nepal Army.

But in the rumor factory that is Kathmandu, some of the things he had said provided new grist for the mill. Dipendra's face, he said, had remained expressionless throughout. He had not spoken a word. Given the reluctance of most Nepalis to blame the crown prince, these details were seized upon to construct a new and altogether more convincing explanation.

The gunman who did the killing had worn a mask to look like Dipendra. It was not the crown prince who had done it, but a professional assassin who had already killed Dipendra in his private apartments before massacring the rest of the royal family. To back up this version of events, the manufacture and origin of the "Dipendra Mask" were given in detail. It had been specially made in China and smuggled over the border. Another version of the story insisted there had been several masked men who came into the billiards room in turn. How else could one explain so many people being killed or wounded? It appeared that a number of different weapons had been used. How could one man have carried them all? No, there must have been a whole team of professional killers, their faces covered by the ingenious Dipendra masks. And to organize all of that there must have been a far-reaching conspiracy. This, at least, was among the chatter that filled Kathmandu's bazaars during ten long days of official silence.

In the absence of hard facts, rumor has a habit of taking on a life of its own, and nowhere more so than in Nepal, whose citizens have long suspected they are fed only half-truths by those in authority. For them, truth is a variable and often negotiable commodity. There are religious truths, as when a statue of the deity Bhimsen oozes sweat, which may seem more credible than empirical truth. There are surface truths, but behind them may lurk the

most complex machinations. In a country whose history is so littered with real conspiracies, it is second nature to be extremely reluctant to accept anything at face value. The result is an admixture of credulity and distrust that permits no truth to be set in stone. Rather, it encourages the multiplication of different versions of an event to the point where it seems there are as many “true” variants as there are gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon.

As soon as it was rumored that Dipendra had been driven mad by thwarted love, different localities in this far-flung kingdom came up with their own versions of who had been the “true love” in his life. In the remote northeast of the country, in a market town populated largely by those same Sherpas who provide guides and porters for mountaineering expeditions, the answer seemed obvious. All the talk about the crown prince being in love with Devyani was nonsense. His real love was for a Sherpa girl. Other regions came up with equally self-satisfying variants. Some had a grain of truth behind them, such as the rumor that Dipendra had fallen in love with a check-out girl at a supermarket called Bhat-Bhateni in Kathmandu. In fact, Dipendra had occasionally used this supermarket for his secret meetings with Devyani.

Other rumors had far more explosive potential. It was said that Dipendra and Devyani were secretly married, that they had gone to a certain temple in Patan frequented by those seeking that their intimate wishes be fulfilled, and that a renegade Brahman had placed vermilion on both their heads to signify their marriage.

It was also strongly rumored that Devyani was pregnant. That would explain why Dipendra could not wait to marry her and as a result was forced to have a showdown with his parents. If there was any truth in this there might be an alternative claimant to the throne of Nepal—the direct descendant of kings as opposed to the junior or cadet line as represented by Gyanendra and Paras. Hardly surprising, then, that this was dismissed by both the

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palace and members of Devyani's family, though each had their own and very different reasons for doing so.

In truth, there is another reason why Dipendra had to try and sort things out with his parents on June 1. They were both due to leave Nepal during June for an extended visit abroad, stopping first in London for further medical tests on the king's heart condition, then continuing to Morocco on a state visit. If the plans he had already announced for a December wedding were to go ahead, the Crown Prince absolutely had to win his parents' consent before they departed.

Whatever version of the "truth" they subscribed to, the Nepali people were united in disbelieving that Dipendra had first murdered his entire family and then committed suicide. It was just too monstrous, too unnatural an act.

Even westernized Nepalis could not accept what was supposed to have happened. Instead, they shaved their heads and entered a state of deep mourning. Portraits of their dead king and queen were strung with garlands; incense and butter lamps were burned before them. Many refrained from taking any salt with their food throughout the thirteen-day mourning period.

Long after the night curfew was lifted, the streets of Kathmandu remained deserted once darkness had fallen. Areas that would normally have been crowded—the Old City, Dilli Bazaar, even the tourist enclave of Thamel—were emptied of life. No one ventured out because they believed they no longer had a king, and without the king there was no security, no law.

From early morning, however, they lined up by the thousands outside Narayanhiti's main gate, to sign the book of condolences and pay their last respects. Some waited for hours, the men and women in separate lines, all clutching their meager sprays of gladioli or garlands of marigolds. There was no weeping or outward

display of emotion—this in striking contrast to the scenes in London outside Kensington Palace after Princess Diana died in 1997. That may be because her death provided an emotional outlet, a moment of catharsis for the normally tight-lipped British. When faced with a far greater loss, the Nepalese contained their grief tightly within themselves.

Similar crowds gathered to pay their respects in towns and villages across the nation. Portraits of the royal family placed at crossroads were heaped with garlands of flowers and swathed in burning incense. In many places separate shrines were erected to Dipendra, and these attracted almost as many mourners as those dedicated to the rest of the royal family. The thousands of sportsmen who had come to take part in the now canceled National Games marched in orderly lines from the National Stadium past Tundikhel toward the royal palace. Many of them—especially members of the Nepal Karate Federation—were determined to pay their respects to their former patron, the late King Dipendra. Like most of their fellow countrymen, they were in a state of denial.

FOURTEEN

L Aid TO REST?

On the eleventh day of mourning for King Birendra, a very unusual ceremony was held at Kalmochan Ghat, beside the Bagmati River. The Katto Ceremony is performed only when a Nepalese monarch has died in tragic circumstances. Its purpose is to ensure the dead king's eternal freedom from the hindrances of this world.

For this Katto Ceremony, it was necessary to find a Brahman who was prepared to lose his caste forever by eating what any orthodox and therefore strictly vegetarian Hindu would consider an unclean meal. The ceremonial requirement was for the food to be laced with bone marrow and animal fat. After consuming this meal the Brahman would become an outcaste, unable to practice his priestly duties or even to live in the same community as before. Instead, he would put on articles of the dead king's clothing, his spectacles and his shoes, along with an imitation crown and cere-

monial robes. Thus arrayed, carried by an elephant, he would travel in a procession out of the Kathmandu Valley, never to return again. The Brahman was amply rewarded for accepting so heavy a burden, with money, supplies of food, and other gifts. By tradition he was also allowed to keep the elephant.

The ceremony began against a background of inauspicious preparations. The elephant had to be brought up from the Terai. As it passed through one of the villages on the way, a woman tried to run between its legs in the belief that this act of daring would guarantee her a boy-child. Her sudden dash frightened the elephant, which picked the woman up with its trunk and dashed her fatally against the ground. Otherwise King Birendra's ceremony went off without a hitch. The elephant carried the former Brahman across the Bagmati River and then out of the Kathmandu Valley.

Since Dipendra had also briefly been proclaimed king of Nepal, another Katto Ceremony was held for him three days later. This time there were difficulties in finding a Brahman willing to undergo ritual pollution for Dipendra's sake. The first Brahman chosen declined, and only at the last minute was a substitute found in the person of the sixty-five-year-old Devi Prasad Acharya.

The canopied enclosure in which he waited to consume the polluting meal was divided into four areas—a prayer room with its *puja* materials for worship; a living room furnished with a sofa, two chairs, a framed photograph of the dead prince, and an electric fan; a sleeping area with a camp bed and a wardrobe full of Dipendra's old clothes and personal effects; and finally a store-room piled high with foodstuffs that the former Brahman could take with him. There were sacks of rice and lentils, root ginger and spices, baskets of fruits and fresh vegetables, bowls of curd and plates piled with the fried bread known as *puri*. Mixed in among these were polluting foods, eighty-four ritually prescribed delicacies in all, including a fly-ridden leg of goat.

Even as the prime minister and other dignitaries arrived there

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was some unseemly haggling. Devi Prasad Acharya wanted more money and a house for his family if he was going to eat the meal ahead of him and lose his caste. A bargain was rapidly struck. The Brahman hurriedly ate a few morsels of each dish and then dressed himself in another set of imitation regalia together with certain of Dipendra's personal belongings—his wristwatch, dark glasses, and running shoes. Then it was time for him to climb onto the waiting elephant for his final journey out of the Valley.

As the elephant approached the rain-swollen waters of the Bagmati it trumpeted loudly and, ignoring the commands of its mahout, abruptly reversed, forcing crowds of officials and dignitaries to scamper out of its path. The elephant then made a dash back toward the ceremonial enclosure before a second mahout leaped up and regained control. The unhappy former Brahman very nearly slid off its back, along with his scarlet umbrella, and it was only after much coaxing that the elephant could be persuaded to ford the river.

Those present said that this did not augur well for the peace of the late King Dipendra's soul. The king-killer's spirit seemed troubled still, which is why it was unable to make its final exit with anything approaching royal dignity. For all the elephant's splendid trappings, the ceremony ended up being an unseemly spectacle.

Much the same could be said of the way in which the results of the official inquiry into the palace massacre were announced the following day. The local press attempted to storm the building because they knew there would not be enough room inside for all the TV crews and reporters, resulting in much undignified scuffling.

Responsibility for reading out the findings was given to the speaker of Parliament, Taranath Ranabhat, one of the two investigators. Ordinary Nepalese were stunned at the revelations and the material evidence on display. The habitual veil of secrecy had not

been daintily lifted but completely shredded. There were photographs and diagrams of where the “incident” had taken place. The five lethal weapons retrieved from the site were laid out on a table along with specimens of ammunition. The clothes Dipendra had worn, the army boots and camouflage fatigues, were then pulled out of a tin trunk by an orderly and held up for inspection.

Given the magnitude of what had happened, this should have been a solemn occasion. But somehow the speaker managed to reduce proceedings to the level of farce. Embarrassed laughter accompanied his holding up of the M-16 assault rifle and going *rat-tat-tat-tat* towards the cameras. Even the choice of trunk used to store Dipendra’s clothing was unfortunate, given that he was supposed to have been intoxicated when he pulled the trigger. The tin box was covered with stickers indicating that it had previously been used to carry liquor bottles for a Nepalese parliamentary delegation’s visit to Lhasa.

Most Nepalese were dismayed by the levity with which details of their royal family’s murder were made public. The content of the 264-page report showed the investigating committee to have done a thorough enough piece of work within the limited terms of their inquiry. Their charge had been to uncover only *what* had happened inside Narayanhiti on that fateful night. There was no attempt at explaining *why* the massacre took place, or *how* it could have been allowed to happen.

What was made plain from the testimonies of thirteen surviving members of the royal family and many other eyewitnesses is that Dipendra was the lone assassin. The language of their depositions rang true. There are some variations among the accounts, but these are mainly over the precise sequence of events. Amid all the noise and confusion of those dreadful three minutes, it would be unnatural for the surviving onlookers, many of whom were wounded, to have perfect recall. Crucially, everyone identified the killer as Dipendra, and since most were close family members, it is

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unlikely they would have mistaken him for another man or someone in a mask. Nor is it credible that they could all have been coerced into telling the same version of events. Their evidence should have laid all the lurid conspiracy theories to rest, once and forever.

But this is not what happened in Nepal. Rather, some of the shortcomings of the report gave rise to as many new questions as settled ones. Why, for instance, had no postmortems or forensic drug tests been carried out before the bodies were taken away for cremation? Some of the doctors at Chhauni Military Hospital had asked this same question at the time. They had avoided making any decision that might subsequently land them in trouble, but the absence of properly conducted postmortem reports left a glaring gap in the evidence.

There were other instances of the investigators' drawing back in the face of authority. Thirteen of the royal survivors gave evidence. But the fourteenth and most senior member of the royal family, the queen mother, did not testify before the investigative committee. This might be explained by the fact that she was not, strictly speaking, an "eyewitness," since she had been in a separate room while the shooting was going on. But she had been close to the crown prince. In fact, she was one of the last people to talk privately with Dipendra, when he had driven her from her private residence, Mahendra Manzil, to the doomed family gathering. Shortly after arriving, the queen mother had been closeted with the king and queen for twenty minutes, and whatever was said between them might well have had a bearing on subsequent events. Yet the queen mother gave no testimony.

The same applied to the chief of palace security. Not only was he not required to give evidence, he remained in his job despite the manifest failure of security arrangements at Narayanhiti. The

palace subsequently ordered that two internal reports be drawn up, neither of which was made public. Disciplinary action was limited to firing four junior ADCs held most responsible for allowing the disaster to happen. There were many in Kathmandu, including those in the highest echelons of the army, who felt these junior officers had been made scapegoats to cover up a systematic failure in the palace's security arrangements.

Certainly, the accounts given by ADCs on duty that night point to confusion and incompetence, if not the deliberate dereliction of duty. The ADCs were highly trained bodyguards, and the moment they heard gunfire they should have rushed to save the imperiled royal family. The distance from their office to where the shooting occurred was less than 150 yards. They could have been there, ready and armed, in a matter of seconds. Instead, the first reaction of the senior ADC on duty, Colonel Sundar Pratap Rana, was to pick up a telephone and try to get through to the royal physician. The queen's ADC did the same, warning the military hospital to be ready to receive casualties from the palace. Orders went out to the Fighting Force, the crack squad that provided an inner ring of defense. Fixed procedures were followed. But the ADCs themselves did not go to their sovereign's assistance until it was too late.

The crown prince's ADC, Major Gajendra Bohara, was the first to reach Tribhuvan Sadan, but he approached the billiards room from the wrong side, could not see anything, and turned back. He says he then saw the crown prince, armed and in battle fatigues, and heard the queen shouting for a doctor. His immediate duty was to protect the crown prince, but he did not rush forward. Instead, he backtracked and approached cautiously from the garden side along with some of the other ADCs. Precious time was lost. It seems there had been no concerted plan of action.

What did not emerge in the official report is that the gunman could have been "taken out" before he had finished his gruesome business. According to those with access to the palace's secret

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internal reports, one of the ADCs was about to shoot the gunman when his arm was pushed aside by a colleague. That was before the final shoot-out in which Queen Aishwarya and Prince Nirajan died. If that ADC had wounded the crown prince then and there, at least three lives might have been saved.

But it is an awful responsibility to shoot the heir to the throne, even if he did appear to be massacring the rest of the royal family. Those ADCs whose primary duty was to protect the crown prince would instinctively prevent anyone from trying to gun him down. There were mixed signals and conflicting loyalties as the ADCs advanced through the night's shadows toward Tribhuvan Sadan. Because nobody made a decision, nothing was done to save what remained of the royal family. Only when the crown prince lay mortally wounded on the grass did the ADCs finally arrive and start evacuating the wounded.

Even then, the decision to transfer them all to Chhauni military hospital rather than the nearby and much better equipped Bir Hospital caused further unnecessary delays. Standard procedure was to use the military hospital, for security reasons. But King Birendra was apparently still alive, if only just, when he was bundled into the royal Jaguar. By the time it reached Chhauni it was already too late, and the king was declared dead on arrival.

The failure of palace security to react in anything like an effective manner encouraged the belief that there was a broader conspiracy behind the massacre. Confusion, panic, and the inability to make any decisions in a crisis situation are more likely to blame. One of the first things the new King Gyanendra did was to reorganize his own security arrangements. There were many reasons why he preferred to remain at his private residence in Maharajganj rather than move into Narayanhiti Palace, and security was undoubtedly one of them.

* * *

One key witness whom the investigating committee was determined to question was Devyani Rana. The day after the palace massacre she had been spirited out of the country, taking the first flight available to New Delhi. There she stayed with her mother's family, the powerful Scindias of Gwalior. Completely traumatized by recent events, she was kept at a secret location and placed under sedation. Her health deteriorated, with her blood pressure dropping far below normal. She also suffered occasional fainting spells. According to a close relation, Devyani's previous good looks were "completely gone."

Her Indian relatives were aware that it was impossible for her to return to Nepal, where she was already blamed for being the underlying cause of the royal massacre. Hostile crowds had gathered outside her father's house in Kathmandu. Death threats had been issued. However, when telephone records revealed she had been the last person to have spoken to Dipendra, the investigating team insisted that she give evidence. An arrangement was made. They empowered the Nepalese ambassador in Delhi, Dr. Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, to interview her in the presence of her physician, Dr. S. K. Jain.

The results of that interview could have clarified many things that still remain unexplained. But Devyani fobbed off the ambassador with vague and inconsequential replies. She claimed she had come to Delhi for "treatment." She said she had no knowledge of events inside the palace, adding, "I had no idea it could be like this." When asked about her relationship with the crown prince, she replied: "It's personal. I don't want to talk about it." Her recall of the last telephone conversations she had with Dipendra was both confused and abbreviated. Finally, when asked about whether she had found any difference in the crown prince that evening, Devyani replied that his voice had been slurred. This alone had worried her sufficiently to call his off-duty ADC at home and request that he check if Dipendra was all right.

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Devyani was in an extremely upset state of mind and possibly incapable of thinking clearly. But the ambassador's tentative line of questioning hardly amounts to a serious interrogation. If the official transcripts contain all that was said in the Nepalese Embassy, then it was an astonishingly brief interview. The ambassador's apparently ready acceptance that she should not have to answer certain questions because they were "personal," and his failure to seek clarification when she did not give a full and frank reply, were enough to provoke outrage and suspicion in Kathmandu. It was suggested that some secret deal had been worked out between Devyani's extremely influential relations and the Nepalese ambassador. Moreover, it was widely suspected that these were only extracts from a much longer and detailed interview, the contents of which remained under wraps. Also part of the deal was that Devyani should "disappear" for a while. She should not give any interviews and certainly not attempt to rejoin her father and mother in Kathmandu. Only if she abided by these conditions might she one day be allowed to return to Nepal.

Devyani Rana was confronted by the prospect of a life of enforced exile. Shortly after the interview she left Delhi for Dehra Dun, an Indian hill station in the shadows of the Himalayas, where she stayed with a close girlfriend. She later returned to Delhi and then flew to Moscow, to be with her married sister Urvashi Khemka for a while. By September the two sisters were together again, this time at the Khemkas' palatial London residence in Eaton Square.

Devyani enrolled as a student and apparently expected to remain in London for the foreseeable future. But then another tragedy struck her mother's family. Her uncle, Madhavrao Scindia, doyen of one of India's most powerful political dynasties and himself a likely candidate for the prime ministership, died when the small aircraft he was flying in caught fire and crashed. Devyani flew to Delhi to join all the other family mourners,

including a sizable contingent from Kathmandu. She still looked unwell. Her life was in tatters; she had lost first the man she thought she would marry and now her favorite uncle. As for the future, there was little hope that she would ever marry. Nor did she know when—or indeed whether—she would ever be able to return to Nepal.

If Devyani's published testimony was inconclusive, the report's findings on whether drugs had been involved was almost deliberately baffling. Witnesses confirmed that Prince Dipendra had been smoking marijuana and hashish for years. He had ordered that some of his usual mixture be brought to him in the billiards room while he was still chatting amiably with his guests and pouring them drinks. Roughly ten minutes later he was spread-eagled on the floor, apparently unconscious. According to the official report, "A special kind of cigarette [was] prepared with a mixture of hashish and another unnamed black substance." The orderly who usually made up these joints said that Dipendra had himself procured both the hashish and the mysterious black substance, though "it was not known from where it could have come."

A mystery drug, then, and one acquired from a mystery source. That, at least, is how the investigators decided to leave the matter. Apparently no forensic tests had been carried out on the remainder of Dipendra's drug collection to identify the "black substance." Nor when he was in the hospital was any blood sample officially taken and then screened for the presence of either alcohol or drugs. By ignoring these standard procedures, the doctors and the investigating committee effectively closed the door on scientific certainty as to whether the crown prince was on drugs when he pulled the trigger—or whether he was stone-cold sober.

Given that this question is central to any understanding of

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why the massacre happened, it is hard to believe that its omission was an accidental oversight. The investigating committee claimed to have called on narcotics experts and psychologists to give their opinions, but the official report comes to no conclusions on whether drugs were involved. Into this vacuum stepped various outside “experts” who have all suggested various drugs or combinations of drugs that could have induced psychotic symptoms combined with frenetic activity.

Prolonged usage of marijuana and cannabis resin (hashish) alone—as would appear to have been the case with Dipendra—can result in schizophrenic symptoms, though it does not fit with the speed and precision of the killings. The same is true of opium and its derivatives. Methamphetamine is a possibility, as is phencyclidine, also called angel dust or PCP, a drug previously distributed by the military to frontline troops preparing for an attack. When taken in sufficient quantity it can cause vomiting and homicidal behavior. The drug ketamine, widely available in South Asia, can induce psychotic behavior and takes effect very rapidly, but it is demonstrably not a “black substance.” Then there are a number of locally produced compounds, such as those traditionally used by Rajput warriors of Rajasthan to increase their valor in battle; similar combinations of indigenous drugs often play a role in tantric initiation ceremonies of the kind that are reported to have gone on in Devyani’s house. In the absence of forensic tests on physical specimens, however, all these suggestions are no more than informed guesswork.

The question of drugs is important because it determines the degree of responsibility attached to the man who committed so unnatural a crime. At one end of this spectrum, there is the “blameless prince” who was transformed into a psychotic mass murderer because his usual hashish cigarettes had been spiked with an unexpected and far more powerful substance. This would explain his sudden passing out, his retching in the bathroom, his

inability even to get undressed without the help of his orderly and housemaid. But then this same drug, which he may never have taken before, started having a very different effect on him. It made him alert, hyperactive, an uncontrollable serial killer. And who might have arranged the switch? The special cigarettes Dipendra ordered up on his mobile phone passed through three sets of hands: his orderly Ram Krishna KC, his regular ADC Gajendra Bohara, and his cousin, Prince Paras.

There remains the converse view that Dipendra was a cool-headed and calculating killer who imagined he could get away with murder. He targeted the king first because, with his father out of the way, he automatically became king and somebody else could be blamed for the regicide. Most of the other members of the royal family, whom he largely despised, could be coerced into endorsing the official line. No one would dare intervene within Narayanhiti Palace. He would be king of Nepal and nobody could prevent him from marrying Devyani.

If that sounds like an unlikely scenario, it was nonetheless the preferred explanation in palace circles a couple of months after the massacre. Eyewitnesses placed a new emphasis on the crown prince's acting up, his pretending to be intoxicated and deliberately crashing into chairs, so that he had to be carried away to the bedchamber, which also contained his lethal collection of weaponry. His behavior was cunning, the crime premeditated, the timing dictated by the fact that both his parents would soon be going abroad. But his carefully laid plans went astray when he failed to kill the king outright. As other royals rushed to Birendra's assistance or tried to summon help, the crown prince went berserk and sprayed the room indiscriminately. The same man who so longed to be in control of his own destiny had once again lost control of the situation. His attempted suicide was a final note of despair.

There may be some truth in this version of events. It provides

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a rational motive, though it is hard to imagine that a thoroughly Westernized young man like Dipendra really believed that in the twenty-first century he could commit regicide and parricide and still somehow emerge unscathed. Those surviving members of the royal family who have been advancing this interpretation may think they are doing the new king and his family a favor by contributing to the demonization of Dipendra. Besides which, all of them lost close relatives during the shootings, so they have their own reasons for hating the very memory of the former crown prince. Their aim is to portray him as a cold-blooded murderer. The existence of drugs might imply some degree of extenuating circumstances, that the crown prince was not in his right mind, at least.

As is so often the case in Nepal, the truth may never come out. There does exist, however, physical evidence that could settle the question as to whether Crown Prince Dipendra was under the influence of drugs. Somewhere in Scotland, in a medical laboratory, there is a frozen sample of his blood. It was taken by one of the doctors who operated on him and sent abroad for safekeeping. Any traces of alcohol have long since vanished, but with proper screening and analysis, the presence of other substances could still be detected. Whether permission for that routine procedure will ever be forthcoming depends, as always, on a secret decision to be made in Kathmandu.

What else is known by the authorities but not deemed suitable for the public at large? A great deal about the drug habits of other royal family members, for a start. And previous instances of insanity or psychological problems among the intermarried Shah and Rana families. There are many, many skeletons in the royal closet.

Nor did the palace authorities think it necessary to mention

that an offer had been made through the British Foreign Office to provide both technical experts and investigators from Scotland Yard, or that a detective inspector had flown from London to Kathmandu, but that this offer of impartial assistance was turned down.

Perhaps national pride played a part in this, for to accept foreign assistance would imply that Nepalese investigators and forensic experts were not up to the job. Besides, officials at the palace thought they had already bent over backward to meet the need for greater transparency in the wake of the massacre. Enough was enough, it seemed to them.

The investigators' brief was to uncover what had happened, not to speculate on what was going on inside the crown prince's brain as he mowed down his own family. Nor was it to air any more dirty linen than was strictly necessary. Both the chief justice and the speaker had fulfilled their limited brief within a tight time frame. But in no way did their report lay all the suspicions and rumors about the palace massacre to rest.

FIFTEEN

A NEW MODEL MONARCHY

It is unusual for a king to be crowned not once, but twice. True, there have in the past been other monarchs who lost both crown and kingdom, through conspiracy or revolution or civil war, and were later reinstated. But that normally happened after only a brief interlude and was of their own doing. In the case of Nepal's new twice-crowned monarch, King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, there was a gap of more than fifty years between his first and second coronations.

The first time was in November 1950, after his grandfather King Tribhuvan had fled to the Indian Embassy along with his father Mahendra and older brother Birendra. Left behind in Narayanhiti Palace was the three-year-old Prince Gyanendra; and since he was the only male representative of the Shah dynasty still in Nepal, the last of the Rana prime ministers, Mohan Shamsheer, chose to set him up as king and so retain some semblance of legiti-

macy for his government. The young prince was taken by the prime minister to Hanuman Dhoka Palace and there, in the ceremonial courtyard known as Nasal Chowk, the royal priest placed the diamond-and-pearl-studded crown with its fringe of emerald pendants on Gyanendra's head. Or rather he held it just above the head, for the Crown of Nepal was too large in circumference for a three-year-old and if let go would have fallen forward over his eyes.

Gyanendra remained still throughout the elaborate anointing and gift-bearing ceremonies, his eyes full of bewilderment and suspicion. He had "lost" his parents and the rest of his family, and now this grizzled and fierce-looking prime minister had told him that he must be the new king of Nepal. The child-monarch stood erect and played his part, taking the salute from the Rana generals and dignitaries and troops of soldiers as they marched past. As he later confided to a lifelong friend: "I was just a pawn in a big game that I couldn't understand."

Among those present at the ceremony was another boy, Mohan Shamsheer's grandson, Pashupati Rana, whose daughter Devyani was to play such a crucial role in later events. As one courtier put it: "There is a certain irony that after Mohan Shamsheer made Gyanendra king first time round, it was his great-granddaughter who paved the way for it to happen a second time."

Gyanendra's first "reign" lasted just over three months. All memory of it was expunged from the royal annals, since he was never recognized as the legitimate king of Nepal. Instead, Gyanendra's time as king was subsumed within the reign of King Tribhuvan, whose triumphant return to Kathmandu restored the Shah dynasty to real authority. Nobody could blame the young Gyanendra for his part in the proceedings, and he was brought up alongside his two brothers by his stepmother, Queen Ratna.

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Like his brothers, he was sent to the Jesuit fathers at St. Joseph's College in Darjeeling, India, but whereas Birendra went to Eton and Harvard, Gyanendra stayed behind and took his university degree at Kathmandu's new Tribhuvan University.

He was never closer than third in line to the throne, and it was not deemed necessary for him to be groomed to be king. His interests turned instead to wildlife, as head of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation and on a broader stage through the Worldwide Fund for Nature, and to looking after the royal family's business investments.

Shortly after his elder brother and Aishwarya's wedding, Gyanendra was married to her younger sister, Komal Rana, in a quieter and not nearly so extravagant ceremony. Princess Komal, as she now became, may have lacked Aishwarya's glamour and literary aspirations, preferring the more domestic pastimes of shopping and flower arranging, but for those very reasons she has always managed to steer clear of controversy. This suited her husband, whose preference always was to maintain as low a profile as possible. The couple set up house within one of the stately residences in Maharajganj, just off the main road that runs north from Narayanhiti Palace. There they lived together, comfortably though quietly, for nearly thirty years.

There was no reason why Prince Gyanendra should imagine that one day he would be called upon to take up the duties of kingship. Both Crown Prince Dipendra and, if anything happened to him, his brother Prince Nirajan, stood before him in the line of succession, and since they had both reached their twenties unscathed and could, in the normal course of events, be expected to settle down to married life and produce future heirs to the throne, the junior branch of the Shah dynasty, as represented by Gyanendra and his son, Prince Paras, were looked on to play only a supporting role.

Nonetheless, King Birendra always remained on the closest

terms with his younger brother and often asked for his advice, particularly on matters of economics and finance. Gyanendra had stepped in as head of the Royal Privy Council whenever the king and queen went abroad until Dipendra was mature enough to fill the role, and when he himself visited foreign countries he usually scheduled several official engagements at which he represented the Kingdom of Nepal alongside his business meetings. Beyond fulfilling these duties of a “minor royal,” standing in for the king at the weddings and funerals of other royal families, Gyanendra did not seek the limelight.

“I never asked for the job,” he confided to one of his closest business colleagues, “and certainly never expected it.” The immediate danger, when he learned of what had happened at Narayanhiti, was that he would be overwhelmed by so great a loss. Yet in the immediate aftermath of the palace massacre he was kept so busy trying to handle fast-moving events that there was no time to dwell on the personal tragedy that had befallen his family. “Who knew what I was feeling when I was crowned?” he said. “I could not shed one tear.”

Unfamiliar with all the duties of being king, Gyanendra took to working sixteen hours a day—much to the concern of his physicians and closest friends, since he did not quit smoking cigarettes and shared his family’s history of high blood pressure. Other members of the much diminished royal family rallied around and offered their support. “We are now but a few,” he said. “We try to help each other.” Gyanendra and his son were now the only surviving males of the immediate royal family, which left him isolated and lonely. “I do not have anyone to talk to,” he said. “I lost my brothers. We were very close. We discussed everything.

“I now get solace from my mother,” he added, referring to Queen Mother Ratna. “She is a tower of strength for me.” Indeed, the queen mother—always the eminence grise behind Narayanhiti’s walls—had become the linchpin holding what remained of the royal family

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together. The emotional scars may well take longer to heal than the physical wounds borne by Queen Komal and other survivors. As a sign of respect for his murdered brother, King Gyanendra declined to travel abroad until after the full year of official mourning had elapsed. "The healing process," he observed, "takes time after such tragic happenings."

It will take time for many Nepalese to come around to full and unquestioning acceptance of their new king. For most of them, Gyanendra was an unknown quantity. It was rumored that he had been opposed to the introduction of multi-party democracy back in 1990, and that he held less liberal views than the late King Birendra. Some feared that their new king might be tempted to do away with Nepal's parliamentary system and rule directly, as his forebears had done.

Similarly, Gyanendra's extensive business interests provoked a mixture of suspicion and envy—despite the fact that as soon as he became king he was required by law to resign from all directorships and hand over active control of his and the rest of the royal family's investments. Some Nepalese still felt he was "pro-business" rather than "pro-people."

The new king certainly brought a more businesslike approach to carrying out his inherited duties as a constitutional monarch. The working hours of the Palace Secretariat were changed to fit standard business hours, and while there was no wholesale purge of long-serving royal functionaries, the less effective soon found themselves sidelined.

Initially, Gyanendra was loath to leave his own house and private office in Maharajganj, there being practical as well as emotional reasons for not wanting to move into Narayanhiti. He had to go to the royal palace for official ceremonies, but he preferred to do much of his thinking and to take counsel in his own home,

where he worked on long after most palace functionaries had stopped for the day.

The long hours were necessary because, quite apart from the devastating blow to its monarchy, the country of Nepal was sinking into a state of crisis. The Maoist insurgents sought to exploit their advantage and launched a new wave of attacks on police stations. Prime Minister Koirala's government collapsed after an internal revolt within his own Congress Party. The new king found himself asked to accept the resignation of one government and then swear in its successor, which immediately proclaimed a cease-fire and began a series of dialogues with the Maoists. Their demands included the abolition of the monarchy and replacing the existing parliamentary system with one-party rule, so these talks may have been doomed from the outset. But at least they provided a much-needed breathing space.

The Maoists used the cease-fire to regroup in the hills and to extend their campaign of intimidation and extortion across the country, including the Kathmandu Valley. Protection money was demanded from businesses large and small, from schools and foreign-aid agencies that were trying to assist Nepal. Since the police were unable to guarantee security even in the capital, most people who received threats from the Maoists either paid up or shut up shop. Some of these ill-gotten funds were used to purchase weapons, either on the black market or from extremist groups in India that were sympathetic to the Maoists' cause. Meanwhile, the Royal Nepal Army was making its own preparations for the conflict that lay ahead. King Gyanendra was kept fully informed of these developments, for when the time came to order the army into action, it had to be by his command.

Apart from attending the official mourning ceremonies for their murdered relatives, the new royal family kept a very low profile

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during the months that followed the palace massacre. Queen Komal, still recuperating from her chest wound, did not appear in public until the end of August, when she attended the annual Teej Ceremony at Pashupatinath temple. Like most Hindu women throughout Nepal, the queen donned a red sari and fasted for the sake of her husband, making offerings to Lord Shiva so as to guarantee the well-being and long life of the men in the family. She was accompanied by her daughter, Princess Prerana, and by her glamorous Indian-born daughter-in-law, Princess Himani.

King Gyanendra's only son, Prince Paras, remained completely hidden from the public gaze. Although he now stood next in line to the throne, it had been decided to delay declaring him crown prince of Nepal, partly to calm popular hostility toward Paras, who had previously been blamed for causing two deaths in hit-and-run car accidents. The second of these incidents created an uproar across the nation: The victim was a popular Nepali recording artist named Praveen Gurung, but yet again Prince Paras was shielded by the palace from any police charges or public inquiry into what had occurred. A public petition demanding that King Birendra take some action to discipline his wayward nephew had been signed by nearly a half million Nepalese citizens, but nothing was done about it. Prince Paras retained his royal titles, and despite his reputation of being the most unruly member of the Shah family, he automatically became heir apparent once his father was crowned.

Not since the days of Crown Prince Surendra had there been a future king of Nepal who aroused so much public anger. Paras's unpopularity rebounded on his father, making it harder for many Nepalis to accept King Gyanendra as their rightful monarch. The king was fully aware of his son's shortcomings, but could not exclude him from the royal succession. After the massacre at the palace there were no other princes of the blood royal left alive.

Some Nepalese argued that in a modern world it should be

permissible for women to succeed to the throne, citing as examples the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. That would open the way for one of Princess Shruti's daughters to become the first queen to reign over Nepal in her own right. But the Royal Constitution insists that there be a king, and in such a strongly patriarchal society as Nepal it might still be difficult to gain public acceptance of a female monarch. All of which makes Paras the only person capable of succeeding Gyanendra.

Prince Paras's reputation has improved slightly since the events of June 1. His decisive action on that fateful night undoubtedly saved many lives, and for that he has won praise in some quarters. There have been no further reports of wild behavior. According to close friends of the family, his parents have kept him "on a tight leash," restricting his outings from home to official duties. The gradual process of grooming him to be the next king of Nepal has begun. His first public duty was in late August 2001 when he attended a religious ceremony at Budhanilkantha, near the school that both he and Dipendra had attended, where the statue of the Sleeping Vishnu that future kings must never look upon lies surrounded by flower-strewn waters. It was judged a success.

Palace officials also intimated that, after the traumatic experience he had gone through at Narayanhiti, Prince Paras settled down to a quieter, more reflective life. He took to writing poetry and was now more fully immersed in family life with his wife, Himani, and their young daughter. The unspoken hope among traditionalists is that there would soon be a royal grandson. That, more than anything else, would confirm the future of Nepal's monarchy after the terrible blows it suffered.

The new royal family made their first public appearance together during the Indraajatra Festival, which normally marks the ending of the monsoon rains in September. But it was still raining when they came out on a balcony, flanked by generals and foreign

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ambassadors, to watch as the living goddess of Kathmandu, the Royal Kumari, was dragged past in her gilded chariot. Later, the three-year-old girl was taken into Hanuman Dhoka Palace where, in a ceremony unchanged since King Prithvi Narayan's time, she placed a tika on the king's forehead as a sign of the goddess's blessing.

The next major religious festival, that of Badha Dasain, fell in October. By then all members of the new royal family were regularly seen in public, attending to their religious duties at temples throughout the Kathmandu Valley. This is a time when Nepalese families come together so that the elders can give their blessings to their children and grandchildren. Normally the king performs a similar ritual in front of Narayanhiti Palace, placing the vermilion tika on the foreheads of the thousands of his subjects waiting in line for his blessing. But it was deemed unfitting for King Gyanendra to officiate so soon after the tragedy that had befallen the royal house. For the first time in living memory no royal tika was bestowed.

The festival of Badha Dasain passed off peacefully enough. The cease-fire between government forces and the Maoists held, even though the talks between them were going nowhere. Then, on November 23, 2001, the Maoists unilaterally declared the cease-fire at an end and launched a series of surprise attacks. The fighting was intense, raising the death toll in the six-year conflict to more than 2,000 killed. The prime minister requested that a state of emergency be declared so that the Royal Nepal Army could be sent in against the guerrillas. King Gyanendra gave the royal assent, taking a critical step that his older brother had always avoided when he had been king of Nepal.

Initially, the army's superior firepower and its use of helicopters and specially trained units brought some spectacular successes.

The main formations of Maoist insurgents were surrounded and hemmed into their mountain fastnesses. Provided that the army's morale does not crack under the strains of a civil war, it has sufficient forces to contain the situation militarily. But the conditions that allowed a full-scale Maoist insurgency to take hold in Nepal—the unreformed feudalism of its land ownership, the corruption and shortsightedness of its ruling elite, the unremitting poverty and lack of development in rural areas—all these must change if the Maoists' call to armed struggle is to lose its attraction to those at the very bottom of the ladder.

Within the palace there has been talk of a “hearts and minds” campaign, of bringing tangible benefits to the most impoverished and alienated of royal subjects. This is not entirely altruistic. King Gyanendra has placed the survival of the monarchy in the hands of forces that are beyond his control. He needs ordinary Nepalis to protect the monarchy from the Maoists. If the Maoist insurgency is quashed and there are signs of real progress in Nepal, then its monarchy will endure. If not, then King Gyanendra's willingness to take up the challenge means that Nepal will not be a kingdom for much longer. In its place there will be a new Republic of Nepal, probably a single-party Communist state in which there is no place even for a constitutional monarch. The possibility that the monarchy might co-exist with such a Communist regime, as Prince Sihanouk had shown was possible in Cambodia, has now evaporated. King Birendra had been careful to keep this option open, but by ordering the Royal Nepal Army in against the Maoists, he has effectively closed that escape route.

Not since the time of Prithvi Narayan Shah have decisions by the monarch had such a profound impact on the shape and complexion of Nepal. His royal ancestors played out some extraordinary survival games, but they were about who would inherit the throne, or who would wield real power within the Kingdom of Nepal. The Shahs and Ranas may have resorted to internecine

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bloodletting in the manner of Shakespeare's Montagues and Capulets—indeed, when it came to treachery and intrigue, to surreptitious poisonings and trumped-up charges, the Nepalese royal family and nobility could at times make even the ruthlessness of the Borgias seem pale by comparison—yet, throughout those turbulent times, nobody in Nepal seriously questioned whether there should be a king or not. Only during the last decade of the twentieth century was the very existence of Nepal's monarchy challenged.

By 1990, King Birendra had already surrendered his absolute powers to democratically elected politicians. He kept his side of the bargain and did his utmost to behave like a thoroughly modern constitutional monarch. But elsewhere in Narayanhiti Palace, as the surviving royals are now revealing, the old habits of expecting unquestioning obedience to the royal command were not shed so readily. Most of the royal family, including Crown Prince Dipendra, had been accustomed to a world in which the Palace was the real center of influence and the king exercised absolute power. It had been difficult for the queen and others of the older generation to adjust to the change in their circumstances. Most other royal families have experienced gradual transition from wielding autocratic powers to the powerlessness and mainly ceremonial duties of a constitutional monarchy. In Nepal, the change came later than elsewhere, and was much more sudden.

When monarchies long accustomed to exercising absolute power sense that they are no longer in control, there is often a tendency to extreme and, ultimately, self-destructive action. The last of the Hapsburgs and Romanovs gambled on joining a Great War that put at risk their vast multi-ethnic empires. The Nepalese monarchy abandoned its absolute powers without any real struggle but found it hard to abandon the culture of absolutism that had supported the royal family for long. It created a tension that

proved fatal—the crown prince could only express his fury at the autocratic culture within the confines of his own family.

The royal family's failure to adapt to changed circumstances did not make a bloody showdown inevitable, however. The immediate cause of the palace massacre was the bitter conflict between Queen Aishwarya and the crown prince over whom he should marry. Additionally, there was a long tradition in the family of resorting to violence in order to settle what appeared to be insurmountable differences. But internal relationships among Shah family members had deteriorated during the 1990s, as each came to resent their own powerlessness and tried to compensate by being more stubborn or autocratic within the confines of the palace. A dysfunctional family already existed before the "marriage question" became the focus for the problems of the royal family. Old values, of filial obedience and arranged marriages, came up against more modern ideas about marital relationships and personal fulfillment. Nepal's royal family tried to make the leap from its own outdated traditions toward more contemporary values, but it manifestly fell far short.

In the aftermath of the palace massacre, many Nepalese lamented that "this could only have happened in Kathmandu." To them, the royal family's self-destruction was a symptom of a broader malaise affecting the entire nation. Rather than try to build the economy and disperse its benefits more equitably, elected politicians seemed eager only to fight over the diminishing pool of patronage and money available, just as the noble families of Gorkha had done 200 years before. The same feudal habits of mind, of putting their own interests and those of their extended families before any concept of service to the state, still prevailed. The founding monarch, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, would have recognized these same tendencies among his generals and *bharadars*.

Most Nepalis are conscious of another echo from 500 years ago: The slaughter by Crown Prince Dipendra fulfilled the dread-

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ful prophecy of Gorakhnath. His father, King Birendra, who was of the tenth generation of Prithvi Narayan's heirs, also proved to be the last of the royal family's senior line to rule over Nepal. The monarchy may have survived its greatest crisis, but it has now passed to the cadet line in the person of King Gyanendra.

Although there is still a Shah king on the throne of Nepal, the massacre of the entire senior line of the royal family has left Nepalis bereft and confused. Some have sought solace in religion. The file of pilgrims climbing the stone-clad stairway up to the temple of Gorakhnath that stands beside the Shah's ancestral palace is greater than in previous years. The deity's powers were made plain to all in the graphic completion of the ancient prophecy. The pilgrims come to assuage the often wrathful god and seek his protection, so they make their offerings of rice cakes and flowers to the royal family's tutelary deity as the temple priest looks on with a benign expression. The priest's assistant busily stuffs a stone pipe known as a *chillum* full of freshly harvested marijuana mixed with a brown liquid, this being considered "an aid to meditation."

Once they have completed their offerings, the pilgrims wander around the empty palace from which the ancient Kings of Gorkha ruled. They peer through the latticed window into the room where Prithvi Narayan Shah was born. A light still burns there, a reassuring symbol of continuity in a kingdom that has so recently lost a living link with its past.

Finally, before descending the stone stairway back to the town of Gorkha, some pilgrims look out northward to the main Himalayan range. More often than not, the mountains are wreathed in mist, but a fortunate few are vouchsafed a brief glimpse of Annapurna or Manaslu before they disappear once more behind the clouds.

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