The Bloodstained Throne: Struggles for power in Nepal, 1775–1914, by Baburam Acharya. Translated by Madhav Acharya

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Baburam Acharya, better known as Itihas Siromani, wrote extensively about the various facets of Nepali history. Acharya’s proximity to and patronage of Rana and Shah rulers especially allowed him access to several rare oral and written records about their important family histories. However, except for a few translations made by the late Mahesh C. Regmi in his Regmi Research Series, the majority of Acharya’s works were hitherto inaccessible to non-Nepali-speaking audiences. The Bloodstained Throne is the English translation of Acharya’s Aba Yesto Kahile Nahos (2004), a collection of his published and unpublished essays on eighteen and nineteenth century Nepali political history. It is edited and translated by Baburam Acharya’s son Shreekrishna Acharya and his grandson Madhav Acharya respectively. In the editorial note, Shreekrishna Acharya stresses that The Bloodstained Throne is the beginning of a long-term endeavour to render the unpublished works of Baburam Acharya accessible to a wider audience with an interest in Nepali history.

The Bloodstained Throne narrates in eleven chapters the tumultuous dynastic-familial struggles for power that were central to the creation of the modern Nepali state. Unlike Aba Yesto Kahile Nahos, the chapters of which are named after key moments in Nepali history, The Bloodstained Throne organises its chapters around influential historical actors from those epochs, presenting them in various roles as victims and perpetrators of mind-numbing bloody feuds. The first chapter asserts that the assassination of one of the most influential Gorkhali courtiers, Sarbajit Rana, by Bahadur Shah, Prithvi Narayan’s young son, in the midst of a tussle for power with his sister-in-law, Rajendralaxmi

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1 For a brief description of Acharya’s intellectual history, see Pant (1972).
marked the beginning of the despicable practice of assassination and massacre of nobles and courtiers in Nepali Durbar ... [and] pushed the kingdom towards a century-long era of darkness’ (p. 6). The book then closely follows the rise and fall of Bahadur Shah parallel to the territorial expansion of the Shah state which, towards the last decades of the eighteenth century, started to be at variance with the English East India Company and the armies of the Qing Empire. King Rana Bahadur Shah and Queen mother Rajendralaxmi are frequently chastised for not fulfilling Prithvi Narayan’s dream of creating a unified Nepal and of spending their lives in ‘luxuries and pleasures’, and are thus held responsible for Nepal’s diminished territory (p. 12).

Chapter two and three narrate the ever-changing political alliances in Kathmandu Durbar, leading to the downfall of the Pandey family and the rise of the Thapa family. Chapter three, in particular, traces the emergence of Bhimsen Thapa and his almost three-decade long uncontested rule (1806-1837). Thapa is held responsible for the Nepali defeat during the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-1816). The next three chapters discuss in chronological order the fall of Bhimsen Thapa, the swift rise and the subsequent end of Mathbar Singh Thapa’s rule, including the eventual emergence of a new Rana family in the Nepali political landscape. These developments that took place in the context of intense three-way competition for control of the nascent Nepali state between the senior Samrajyalaxmi, junior Queen Rajyalaxmi and King Rajendra culminated in the Kot Massacre of 1846, heralding the arrival of a new Rana family at centre stage of Nepali politics. The successive entrenchment of the Rana family’s power at Kathmandu Durbar following the Bhandarkhal and Alou episodes are narrated in chapter six, seven and eight. The Bhandarkhal massacre witnessed a purging of the Basnet family (one of the most influential political families in Kathmandu Durbar) and the banishment of Queen Rajyalaxmi to Varanasi. In 1847 the monarch Rajendra, who had initially followed his wife to India, gathered his loyal followers in Alou (a village in southern Nepal) to recover the throne from his eldest son Surendra. Rajendra and his followers were rapidly overwhelmed by Jung Bahadur’s troops in what is known as the Alou Massacre. Rajendra was then brought to Kathmandu and imprisoned for life. The three remaining chapters offer glimpses into the series of inter-family assassinations that beset
the ruling Rana clan following the death of the family’s patriarch, Jung Bahadur in 1877 and the subsequent emergence of the Shumsher line of the family in Nepali state politics.

*The Bloodstained Throne*, with a more fitting title than the Nepali version, offers fascinating accounts and details of the violent and transformative episodes that undergirded the foundations of the Nepali state. It is essentially a story of the familial nature of state formation. History students may find the book useful for looking at the imbrication between family feuds and the development of sovereignty in Nepal. Though these ideas are not conceptually developed in the book, reviewing them may help us reconsider kingship beyond an individually embodied institution to one embedded in a network of competing familial relations constantly in flux. An individual ruler’s ascension to the throne in the context of the political reality of the era was rarely a peaceful process anywhere on the subcontinent. In Nepal, as in Mughal India, only those who built broader alliances succeeded in becoming king. At the same time, the Shah-Rana model of familial rule bears many similarities to political systems like the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Dahomey, and many Inner Asian polities. As such, it was not an exception, as may otherwise appear in the book.

Shreekrishna Acharya stresses that the book ‘does not aim to criticise or level charges’: nor is it ‘directed towards any underserved eulogy or encomium’ (p. ix). This claim to neutrality, however, falters barely a few pages into the first chapter. Rajendralaxmi’s failure to ‘unify’ Nepal is blamed on ‘suspicion, jealousy and fickleness of mind’—traits which the historian and the editor believe—are attributable to womanhood (p. 13). While one may overlook Baburam Acharya’s implied misogyny given the era in which the original work was written, the editor’s unwillingness to problematise it in 2013 is inexcusable. All influential women who have taken action to assert their power and authority in Nepal’s fluid political landscape are reproved in the book for acting out of selfishness, as if the political realm were an exclusively male prerogative. Yet not all male political actors are treated impartially in the book. The book’s narrative arc explicitly makes clear whom it thinks should be revered as a hero and whom should be ostracised as villains of Nepal. Bhimsen Thapa and Jung Bahadur are held responsible for most of the misery that befalls
Nepal. The vilification of individuals and the glorification of territorial conquests do not allow for a nuanced evaluation of the complex Nepali past. The total absence of footnotes and citations, both in the original and the translated version, seems to suggest that the work primarily addresses a large readership. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, *The Bloodstained Throne* is a significant work and a valuable resource, especially for the non-Nepali speaking audience seeking to understand key events in modern Nepali history.

**References**

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