

NEPAL: LAND OF ETERNAL SNOWS

BY BOBBY H. FREEMAN

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I worked in the American Embassy in Kathmandu during 1982 where I served as the Defense Attache to Nepal. This was my most fascinating assignment during 27 years of Army service.

The 17th Century Kingdom of Nepal is located in Central Asia along the southern slopes of the Himalayan Mountains. A landlocked country about 965 kilometers (500 mi.) long and 161 kilometers (100 mi.) wide, it is bordered by India and the Tibetan region of China.

Nepal has three distinct topographical regions, each running laterally the length of the kingdom. In the south, a flat, fertile strip of territory called the Terai is part of the Ganges Basin plain. Central Nepal, known as the "hill country," is crisscrossed by the lower ranges of the Himalayas and by swiftly flowing mountain rivers. The high Himalayas form the border with Tibet in the north. Eight of the world's 10 highest peaks are in this area. The highest, Mt. Everest, is 8,847 meters (29,028 ft.) above sea level. Kathmandu, the capital, is in a broad valley at 1,310 meters (4,300 ft.) in the middle hill region.

Nepal's climate ranges from subtropical in the south to cool summers and severe winters in the northern mountains. At Kathmandu, the average high temperature is 30° C (86°F) in May and the average low is 1.6°C (33°F) in December. The monsoon season is from June through September and brings from 75 to 150 centimeters (30-60 in.) of rain. Showers occur almost every day and sometimes continue for several days. From October through March, sunny days and cool nights prevail.

While in Nepal I traveled throughout the country by 4 wheel drive, by elephant, and on foot. I did white water rafting on the Mountain Rivers; trekked over ancient trading trails to almost 18,000 feet; viewed wildlife from the back of an elephant; and worked on Nepal's Tiger Project where I saved a tigers life and then had to kill another one.

The Nepalese are descendants of three major migrations from India, Tibet, and Central Asia. Among the earliest inhabitants were the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley and aboriginal Tharus in the southern Terai region. The ancestors of the Brahman and Chetri caste groups came from India, while other ethnic groups trace their origins to Central Asia and Tibet, including the Gurungs and Magars in the east, and Sherpas and Bhotias in the north.

In the Terai, a part of the Ganges Basin plain, much of the population is physically and culturally similar to the Indo-Aryan people of northern India. In the hill region, people of Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid stock can be found, and many are a mixture of the two.

About one-third of Nepal's population lives in the Terai-about 20% of the land area-while two thirds live in the central or hilly region. The mountainous highlands are sparsely populated. Kathmandu Valley, in the central region, constitutes a small fraction of the nation's area but is the most densely populated, with almost 5% of the total population.

Religion plays an important role in Nepal. Kathmandu Valley has more than 2,700 religious shrines. Temples, stupas, and parodas vary in size and shape; some are austere in their simplicity, while others are ornate.

Officially, Nepal is a Hindu kingdom, with about 90% of the population professing that faith, however, Hinduism has been influenced by, and has had an influence on, a large Buddhist minority. The result is a unique synthesis of the two religions. Because of this relationship, Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines are mutually respected, and Buddhist and Hindu festivals are occasions for common worship and celebration. In addition, Nepal has small Muslim and Christian Minorities. Certain animistic practices of old indigenous religions also exist.

Nepali is the official language, although a dozen different languages and about 30 major dialects are spoken throughout the country. Derived from Sanskrit, Nepali is related to the Indian language, Hindi, and is spoken by about 90% of the population. Many Nepalese in government and business also speak English.

Modern Nepal was created in the latter half of the 18th century when Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler of the small principality of Gorkha, formed a unified country from a number of independent hill states. The country was frequently called the Gorkha Kingdom, the source of the term "Gurkha" by which the Nepalese soldiers world-renowned for their bravery, are known. This reputation caused the Argentine Army to surrender when a British Battalion of Gurkhas landed in the Falklands. After 1800, the heirs of Prithvi Narayan Shah proved unable to maintain firm political control over Nepal. A period of internal turmoil followed, heightened by Nepal's defeat in a war with the British between 1814 and 1816. Stability was restored after 1846 when the Rana family gained power, entrenched itself through hereditary prime ministers, and reduced the monarch to a figurehead.

The Rana administration, a tightly centralized autocracy, pursued a policy of isolating Nepal from external influences. This policy helped Nepal maintain its national independence during the colonial era, but it also impeded the country's economic development.

In 1950, King Tribhuvan, a direct descendant of Prithvi Narayan Shah, fled from his "palace prison" to newly independent India, thereby touching off an armed revolt against the Rana administration. This paved the way for the restoration of the Shah family to power and eventually the appointment of a non-Rana as prime minister. The 1950's was a period of quasiconstitutional rule during which the monarch, assisted by the leaders of the fledgling political parties, governed the country.

At times, the government was led by prime ministers from these parties who represented a spectrum of views; during other periods the monarch ruled directly. King Tribhuvan was succeeded after his death in 1955 by his son, King Mahendra.

Throughout the 1950's, efforts were made to frame a constitution for Nepal that would establish a representative form of government, patterned on a modified British model. In early 1959, such a constitution was issued by King Mahendra, and shortly thereafter, the first democratic elections were held for a national assembly.

The Nepali Congress Party, a moderate socialist group, gained a substantial victory in the election. Its leader, B.P. Koirala, was called upon to form a government and serve as prime minister.

After little more than 18 months, however, King Mahendra declared the experiment in parliamentary democracy a failure, dismissed the Koirala government, suspended the constitution, and again ruled directly from the palace. The King charged the Nepali Congress Party's government with corruption, misuse of power, and inability to maintain law and order. He declared that Nepal needed a democratic political system closer to Nepalese traditions. To meet this need, the King promulgated a new constitution on December 16, 1962, establishing a partyless system of panchayats (councils). This system, originally a complicated pyramid progressing by stages from village to national councils, draws its theoretical inspiration from the traditional local government institution found in parts of Nepal-the village panchayat.

With the panchayat system firmly established by 1967, King Mahendra began working out an accommodation with the former political party members, and participation in the government by former political leaders was encouraged. This resulted in the granting of a quasilegitimacy to the parties despite their official nonexistence-a situation that has persisted to this day.

In January 1972 King Mahendra died of a heart attack and was succeeded by his 27-year old son, King Birendra. In the spring of 1979, student demonstration and antiregime activities led to a call by King Birendra for a national referendum to decide on the nature of Nepal's government-either the continuation of the panchayat system or the establishment of a multiparty system. In a December 1979 speech, the King promised to amend the constitution, in the event the panchayat system was retained, to further democratize it.

The referendum was held in May 1980 and the partyless panchayat system won a narrow victory. As he had promised, the King reformed the panchayat system, providing for election to the National Panchayat on the basis of universal suffrage. The amendments also granted to the National Panchayat greater power than it had previously.

A second round of voting was held in the spring of 1981 to elect a new National Panchayat. The election was boycotted by most of the major political groups, which had expressed unhappiness with the King's political reforms. Nevertheless, the election attracted a broad array of candidates and a respectable turnout at the polls. Surya Bahadur Thapa, prime minister from the time of the student unrising in 1979 until the election, was renominated to that post by an overwhelming majority of the National Panchayat members when that government was removed following a no confidence motion in the National Panchayat in 1983. He was replaced by Lokendra B. Chand, who continued as prime minister until announcement of the 1986 National Panchayat elections.

I was able to gain access to the Palace and eventually King Birendra through the use of Post Exchange movies. There was absolutely no modern entertainment in Nepal, so I shared 16mm movies with the King and His family.

Each Friday morning I delivered selected movies to the Palace for their weekend entertainment, often, my Ambassador would call me to His office on Thursday afternoon for a briefing. He would ask me to clarify something the Foreign Minister had said or deliver a message directly to the King and by pass the Foreign Minister. I soon became known as the messenger to the King.

King Birenda repaid me for the movies with a great honor. He allowed me to use the royal elephants for three days on trek into the jungles of the Terai. This was a wildlife photographers dream.

Another time the King allowed me to work with his tiger project. Here the government of Nepal, supported by the Smithsonian Institute, did extensive studies on the tiger and its habitat. While trying to save one tiger from an over-dose of a tranquilizer gun I was called upon to shoot an old tiger that had mauled several children. Royal tiger hunts were discontinued several years ago because of international embarrassment to the King by environmentalist. Now the country is over-populated with tigers.

The constitution specifies that the king (chief of staff) is the sole source of authority for all government institutions in Nepal. He exercises broad powers over the country's panchayat system of government.

The Council of Ministers (cabinet) functions as the executive arm of the government and gives policy advice to the king. The National Panchayat selects the prime minister provided a candidate is able to win the support of 60% of the members. If no candidate receives that support, the king chooses the prime minister from a list of three candidates provided by the Panchayat. The Council of Ministers is answerable to both the Panchayat and the king, although a prime minister can be removed only with royal consent.

The king also receives policy advice from the Rai Sabha (Council of State), made up of exofficio members from other government organs and other members appointed by the king.

Nepal has a unitary system of government. The country is divided into 14 zones and 75 districts. Each zone is administered by a commissioner and one or two assistant zonal commissioners. All are appointed by the central government. At the district level, law and order are the responsibility of the Chief District Officer.

While the pyramid shape of the panchayat system has been altered by the direct election of the National Panchayat, the system at the lower levels remains unchanged. Under panchayat democracy, a village or group of villages with a population of 2,000 or more is organized into a village assembly that elects by secret ballot an 11-member executive committee-the village panchayat. Similarly, a town with a population of 10,000 or more has a town panchayat-there are 23. Every Nepalese citizen aged 21 years or older is a member of a village or town assembly. In each of the 75 districts, the members of a district assembly composed of representatives of the village and town panchayats, form an 11-member district panchayat. The National Panchayat, the level above the district panchayat, is composed of 112 members elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage and 28 members appointed by the king.

Although the judiciary is legally independent of the executive and legislative branches, it is generally not assertive in challenging the executive. Appointments to the Supreme Court and the regional courts are made by the king, while appointments to the lower courts are made by the cabinet on the recommendation of the Judicial Service Commission. All lower court decisions, including acquittals, are subject to appeal, and the Supreme Court is the court of last appeal. The king may grant pardons and set aside judgements.



In April 1986, Prime Minister Chand and his cabinet resigned in order to contest the elections for the second 5 year term of the directly elected National Panchayat. An interim cabinet, led by Prime Minister Nagendra Prasad Rijal, was appointed to oversee the May elections. Negotiations to enable political party supporters to contest the election as individuals broke down at the last moment, and the major parties again sat out the election, with the exception of certain leftist groups, which managed to elect about a dozen candidates under the partyless panchayat guidelines. The election resulted in the defeat of a majority of the incumbents seeking re-election, including several veteran panchayats system supporters. Despite allegations in some districts of official interference in the campaign and in the vote counting, the election was generally seen as free and fair. Voter turnout approached 60%.

Following the election, Marich Man Singh Shrestha was named prime minister, the first from Nepal's Newar community, Shrestha outlined a policy aiming at effective administration, focusing on the economic problems of the country while maintaining the political status quo.

Despite the 1980 referendum, which confirmed the partyless panchayat system, the role of the banned parties remains an important political issue. In the local elections of March and April 1987, the Nepali Congress Party agreed to permit individual activists to compete but discouraged participation by the party's leadership. With lesser-known figures as candidates, the party lost in some 85% of the constituencies, including in some areas long considered Congress strongholds. The major exception was Kathmandu, where Congress candidates won both the major and deputy mayor posts. Government-backed candidates won 65% and leftists of various shades captured 20%. Charges of vote rigging and intimidation were more prevalent in the local elections, and violence forced postponement of the polling in at least one constituency.

There are hundreds of privately owned newspapers, and they are generally free to expound diverging viewpoints. However, the press is constrained by laws forbidding criticism of the monarchy and of the partyless system, and by regulations requiring registration and fixed publication schedules.

Nepal ranks among the world's poorest countries, with a per capita income of about \$160. It maintained a self-imposed isolation until the middle of this century. When Nepal's modern era began in 1951, the kingdom had virtually no schools, hospitals, roads, telecommunications, electric power, industry, or civil service. Its economic structure was based on subsistence agriculture.

As a result of government efforts and substantial amounts of external assistance, principally from India, China, and the United States, a start has been made toward laying the foundation for economic growth. Nepal has completed six economic development plans. The first four emphasized the development of transportation and communications facilities, agriculture, and industry; improvement in government organization and management; and inauguration of a land reform program. Plans since 1975 have placed greater emphasis on development efforts that will respond more directly to the needs of rural people.

The economic development plans have resulted in some progress, especially in social services and infrastructure. A countrywide education plan is underway, and Tribhuvan University has several dozen campuses. Malaria was brought under control in a large and previously uninhabitable area, although its resurgence is requiring additional control efforts. Kathmandu is linked to India, Tibet, and nearby hill regions by road, and the highway network continues to expand. Other towns are connected to the capital by radio. A start also has been made toward exploiting Nepal's major economic resources—hydroelectric potential and tourism.

Several hydroelectric projects have been completed. A system of internal finance and public administration has been established. Industry, concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley and the southeastern part of the country, is small and generally produces items for local consumption. However, the garment industry, oriented toward exports, has experienced rapid growth in recent years. Efforts also are being made to develop a network of cottage industries specializing in textiles, furniture, and soap.

Agriculture is Nepal's principal economic activity, providing more than one-half of the country's income. More than 90% of the people are engaged in agrarian pursuits. Only about 16% of the total area is cultivable, while another 33% is forested. Rice, wheat, and jute are the main crops. The Terai region produces an agricultural surplus, part of which supplies the food-deficient hill areas: part is exported, primarily to India.

Mineral surveys are still in progress, and the steep mountain terrain makes exploitation difficult; however, small deposits of limestone, magnesite, zinc, copper, iron, mica, and cobalt have been found. Mines are being developed for the first three. Royal Dutch Shell and a U.S. company, Triton, have received a concession to explore for petroleum on southeastern Nepal and will drill several wells within a 4-year work plan.

The swift rivers flowing south through the Himalayas to the plains afford considerable potential for developing hydroelectric power. Joint irrigation-hydroelectric projects have been under taken by India and Nepal on the Kosi, Trisuli, and Gandaki Rivers. A feasibility study is under way on a dam project to tap the enormous potential of the Karnali River in western Nepal. The 60 megawatt hydroelectric project at Kulekhani, funded by the World Bank, Kuwait, and Japan, began operation in 1982. Kulekhani II, adding 32 megawatts, is nearing completion, and work has begun on the 66-megawatt Marsyangdi project. A national distribution grid is mostly in place,

and electricity consumption is increasing at 15%-20% per year. The next stage of planning is focusing on the Arun River in eastern Nepal, where highly economical projects in the 200-400 megawatt range are possible.

Nepal's foreign trade and balance of payments have suffered some sharp set backs in recent years. In FY 1985-1986, Nepal exported \$158.7 million in goods, up from \$156.6 million the year before. Imports totaled \$497.3 million in FY 1985-86, up from \$460.8 million a year earlier. The growing trade gap, particularly with India, forced a 17% devaluation of the Nepali rupee in December 1985. The international Monetary Fund negotiated a standby arrangement tied to economic reforms that ameliorated the balance-of-payments situation during 1986. A mid-term economic recovery program coupled with a World Bank structural adjustment credit shows promise of putting Nepal back on a growth path. A recent positive trend has been the rapid growth in foreign exchange earnings from the export of readymade garments and from tourism.

Population pressure on resources is bound to increase in Nepal. Even with an effective family-planning program, Nepal's population probably will reach 20-22 million by the turn of the century. Overpopulation is already damaging the delicate ecology of the middle hill areas. Forest reserves have been depleted for fuel and fodder, contributing to erosion and monsoon flooding.

The Government of Nepal has enacted changes in the tax structure and the Industrial Enterprises Act, aimed at encouraging domestic and foreign private sector expansion. Nevertheless, in seeking to lay the groundwork for a modern economy, Nepal's task is complicated by the country's rugged terrain and recent emergence from traditional society. Maintaining sufficient economic progress to keep pace with the population's rising aspirations is likely to be a problem for some time to come.

The Nepalese soldier's worldwide reputation as a superior fighter is due largely to the performance of the troops of Nepales origin who have fought as contingents in the British Army since the early 19th century and for the Indian Army since it was formed in 1947. Agreements allowing the British and Indians to recruit in Nepal are still maintained.

Nepal's own military establishment consists of an army of about 30,000 troops organized into one royal guards brigade, seven infantry brigades, one parachute battalion, one artillery battalion, one engineer battalion, one signal battalion, and several separate companies. There is a modest army air wing but no navy. Training assistance is provided by India and the United Kingdom, and by the United States through a \$100,000 international military education and training (Imet) program. This program enabled me to become a close friend of General Shah, the Chief of Staff, who is now the Ambassador to West Germany. In addition to their responsibilities in Nepal, the Royal Nepales Army has served with distinction in three UN peacekeeping missions and currently has a battalion-sized contingent attached to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). In time of war, we want these soldiers beside us.

As a small, landlocked country, wedged between two larger and far stronger powers, Nepal's foreign policy focuses on China and India. Nepal has sought to develop and maintain a policy of close and friendly relations with both.

Because of strong cultural, linguistic, religious, and economic ties, Nepal's associations with India are closer than those with China. Although Nepal has trade and transit agreements with India, its dependence on the Indian market for most of its imports and exports and on the Port of Calcutta for the access to the sea have been a source of periodic friction between the two countries. India provides Nepal with substantial economic assistance currently averaging about \$14 million annually and covering a spectrum of

activities.

Nepal formally established relations with China in 1955. The following year, Nepal relinquished certain extraterritorial rights it had acquired in Tibet as a result of mid-19th century wars. The status of the Sino-Nepalese border was settled by a 1960 treaty. The Chinese have contributed large amounts of economic assistance to Nepal.

Nepal and the United Kingdom have maintained various forms of representation for more than 150 years. For many years, the British were the only foreign power permitted to maintain a mission in Kathmandu. Nepal's relations with the United Kingdom are friendly.

The Soviet Union opened an embassy in Nepal in 1959 and, during the 1960's, provided Nepal with economic assistance, largely in industry and transportation. In recent years, Soviet aid has been inconsequential, limited mainly to training and technical assistance.

On international issues, Nepal has followed a nonaligned policy and often votes with the nonaligned group at the United Nations. Nepal participates in a number of UN specialized agencies.

Since their formal establishment in 1947, U.S.-Nepalese relations have been friendly. A U.S. embassy was opened in Kathmandu in 1959. King Birendra made a state visit to the United States in December 1983.

The United States has provided more than \$300 million in economic assistance to Nepal since 1951. In recent years, bilateral U.S. economic assistance through the Agency for International Development (AID) has averaged some \$15 million per year. AID supports three core projects in health and family planning, environmental protection, and rural development. In addition, the United States contributes to Nepal's development through various, utilateral institutions and private voluntary organizations.

The Peace Corps also has programs in Nepal assisting development in agriculture, education, health, and rural programs generally. The first Peace Corps volunteers came to Nepal in 1962, and currently there are about 140 volunteers posted there.

U.S. policy toward Nepal has three objectives:

Support for peace and stability in South Asia:

Support for Nepalese independence and territorial integrity; and

Support for one of the world's least developed countries in meeting its development needs through selected programs of economic aid and technical assistance.