

A fragile 'secular' Nepal is India's biggest enemy. It's time to bring Hindu monarchy back

Rabindra Mishra - -



Whether 'secular republic' Nepal should revert to being a 'constitutional Hindu kingdom' is a raging debate in the country at present. It is understood that some sections of the RSS, BJP, and the Indian bureaucracy seem keen on a 'Hindu republic' rather than a 'monarchical Hindu Nepal'. Given the unique relations between Nepal and India, the significant changes in international geopolitics, and the increasing focus on South Asia, the restoration of a Hindu constitutional monarchy is not only in the interest of Nepal but also of India.

As a journalist-turned-politician, this author has met several senior leaders from across political parties in recent weeks. They admit Nepal is becoming increasingly unmanageable, and have no idea how to handle it. A majority of them, however, agree that India's support for the restoration of the Hindu kingdom in Nepal will be crucial.

King Gyanendra is better than the rest

After unabated political turmoil and increasing Maoist violence, King Gyanendra took over direct power on 1 February 2005. He pledged to transfer authority to political parties within three years, once peace was established in Nepal. However, the act triggered a sharp political realignment the following year: India brought the Seven Parties Alliance and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) together under a 12-point agreement with the objective of bringing the Maoists to a democratic process and ending 'absolute' monarchy.

The king's direct rule ended in April 2006 after he agreed to restore the dissolved Nepali parliament. However, after sidelining the king, the top leaders, driven by their vested interests, "conspiratorially" breached the mandate of the 12-point agreement along with an understanding they had with the king to maintain the institution of monarchy. Also, no one thought they would turn Nepal into a secular republic. The current mess has only proved that neither Indian nor Nepali actors could gauge the extent of deviation Nepal's political change could bring along.

Fifteen years down the line, King Gyanendra is no longer seen as a villain, and draws massive crowds wherever he goes. During my recent meeting with him, the king reiterated that he "belonged to every Nepali, and [that] he could not discriminate [against] people on the basis of who supported or opposed him." Clearly, he is also far more informed about and sensitive to changing geopolitics than any other top leader of the country. If the situation is so congenial, what stops the major parties from coming out openly in favour of the Hindu kingdom agenda?

Most top leaders privately agree that things are not going in the right direction. However, as it happens in many cases, they hesitate to introspect on and rectify their past mistakes. They suffer from 'sunk cost fallacy', a phenomenon where people refuse to abandon failing endeavours solely because of their heavy investment in them. The fact that India mediated the 12-point agreement makes it natural for Nepali actors to look up to it for a review signal.

Nepal is aware that India's security has to be given utmost priority, and there have hardly been any occasions during the monarchy-era for India to complain on that ground. Given the anti-US and anti-India views that the Maoists and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) generally uphold, establishing a culturally vibrant institution that is deeply rooted in social and traditional values and is sensitive to its neighbouring country's security interests will best guarantee Nepal's peace and stability, as India has stated several times. In fact, it is singularly crucial for the peace, stability and long-term interest of India in particular and the entire South Asia region in general to have a credible, stable, unifying head of State in Nepal.

India is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its traditional clout in Nepal, which was once considered its sole sphere of influence. After the US, the EU, and the UN entered Nepal's flawed peace process, China marched in too, and more aggressively. Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, seems concerned about regaining its global visibility and is also making efforts to establish its presence in Nepal.

Nepal's instability will affect all players

The world is poised to witness greater competition between India and China for global superpower status. The region is likely to get extremely sensitive in the coming years. Consequently, Nepal will emerge as a zone of influence. Therefore, its fragility and instability will not be in anyone's interest, particularly India's. While other equations may keep changing, India and Nepal must be extra cautious about protecting their shared destiny and huge potential.

Nepal has witnessed seven governments come and go after Narendra Modi took over as the Indian prime minister in May 2014. Nepal's judiciary, bureaucracy, president's office, police, civil society, and all the State's organs (except, perhaps, the Nepal Army) are visibly partisan. Worst of all, Nepal has witnessed large-scale conversion to Christianity, from none in 1951 to 'officially' 512,000 in 2021. However, there are indications that the real figure is much greater, with churches and missionaries exploiting people's lack of education and poverty, converting them freely.

In January 2023, BBC reported that leading pastors in Nepal admitted "the spread of the gospel can clash with existing religion and culture," and that "culture shock was unavoidable." India, at times, has also expressed concern about the growing number of Madrasas and militant education imparted along its 1,850-km border with Nepal. Considerable amounts of academic work have demonstrated that changes and conflict in one country also have a bearing on neighbouring countries.

Nepal's fragility won't gel with increasingly sensitive external geopolitical factors. Erosion in the authority and credibility of State institutions make it more imperative that Nepal has a credible patron or guardian for times of crisis. Nepal and India need to learn from the past. They must stop the former's vulnerability from inviting internal or geopolitical conflict and prevent hostile forces from ganging up against them.

A survey conducted in 2022 by Kathmandu University and the research and consultancy firm Interdisciplinary Analysts inferred that over 90 per cent of the respondents called the Nepal Army "the most trusted institution". The underlying fear in the public mind speaks much more. The integrity, capacity, and competency of the Nepal State have weakened to the extent that it will be unable to deal with any major geopolitical or internal conflict. India, which shares a porous, three-sided border with Nepal and harbours a security perception that dominates its relations with the latter, knows its likely impact better.

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Monarchy is crucial for Nepal - as well as neighbours

Whether one likes it or not, in the 15 years since the declaration of Nepal as a secular, federal, republic, King Gyanendra, despite all his weaknesses and shortcomings - from which he seems to have learnt lessons as well - still holds the power of uniting and stabilising the country. In addition, the monarchy will also act as a bulwark against any threat to the country and its neighbourhood. King Gyanendra is associated with a historical legacy spanning 240 years, connected with Nepal's unification. This means his wisdom will reflect in his role as a constitutional expert. A highly revered constitution expert, the late Ganesh Raj Sharma, used to say: "The constitutional monarchy in Nepal should be taken as a torchlight, only to be lit when there is darkness." Nepal has never been in darkness so thick.

The decision to eliminate the monarchy and the Hindu State was one taken in haste and triggered by anger, resentment, revenge and immaturity. All the concerned sides, including mediated India, must review their position and go for course correction. If we allow the situation to deteriorate further, Nepal won't be the only country bearing consequences.

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Smash And Grab

By Sunanda Datta Ray

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The cause of this enmity was never revealed. The Chogyal confessed bewilderment. Kazini herself talked righteously of democracy and human rights. Sonam Tshering thought that she had expected a senior position in Sikkim's education department. Others felt that she had married Kazi in hopes of dazzling the simple Sikkimese with her worldly clan and was bitterly disappointed to discover that not only did her husband not have a grand position at court but that her own talents seemed tawdry in comparison to the cosmopolitan refinement of the Chogyal's stylish sisters. A few sniggered that the Chogyal, with always an eye for a pretty face, had given offence by completely ignoring Kazini's overripe charms.

One of her earliest clashes with the durbar was over a photograph caption in Onlooker (a glossy society magazine in those days) in which she had imaginatively described herself as consort of a liberal ruler who had introduced many reforms in his state. When Sir Tashi's secretary protested, Kazini explained that she had meant estate. On another occasion she told reporters that Kazi was president of Sikkim. After another royal remark, she corrected the description to president of the Sikkim National Congress. Kazini's attitudes reflected her thwarted longings. She had a generous word only for people who could be of use or whom she could patronize. Lhanzila, never quite in the durbar's charmed circle, was therefore the only person she spoke of with kindness. Athing-la's birth and title, both superior to Kazi's, aroused all her jealousy, and when Karma Topden married, his English wife provoked sharp ridicule. The fashionable Coo Coo La was particularly resented; Kazini never referring to the proud princess as anything but "Mrs Phuenkhyang". She was initially ambivalent towards the Chogyal, perhaps still nursing dreams of eventual royal favours, until Hope's advent killed all hope. Kazini's son had just died and since she did not attend many palace ceremonies in any case, the Chogyal rather hoped that mourning would keep her away from the wedding. But he had reckoned without the feminine curiosity and strategic sense of an adversary who would not for anything in the world miss this opportunity to take stock of Sir Kirm's Western first lady and impress her own presence on the important foreign visitors who were expected. Wedding guests say that Kazini strolled among the festive throng, tears of mascara streaming down her heavily powdered face, hysterically pouring out her inconsolable grief to anyone she managed to buttonhole. They woke up next morning to find on their bedside tables a typed verse making fun of "Hope with her Bowery accent." No one in Sikkim had heard of Bowery. But Kazini wiped her tears, slipped on fresh mascara, and returned chuckling to Kaijimping.

Such games added piquancy to the town's jaded society. Kazini also turned out to be a racy raconteuse, full of scandalous accounts about the royal family. Most of her stories were libellous. All were in bad taste. But they could be funny. They also depicted the Chogyal and Hope as empty, vain, and tyrannical. The tales spread, and people who knew nothing else about Sikkim came to hear witty descriptions of the royal family's idiosyncrasies. As the years passed, Kazini's blonde hair thinned out, whitened, and was stained with henna, the face behind the mask crumpled into a assured field of wrinkles, and the upright figure bulged in its stiff encasing brocade. But the campaign continued, poisoning Indian and foreign opinion. As Satyendra R. Shukla put it in Sikkim: The Story of Integration, "Their house at Kaijimping became the frequent rendezvous of the journalists and politicians looking for facts-or fiction-which she doled out with ease...and pose with every peg of whisky."

Diplomats, civil servants, politicians, and newspapermen were the special targets of her attention. They were regaled with grave allegations of corruption in the durbar, of political machinations and administrative chaos enveloped with spicy anecdotes of the Chogyal's liaisons and the Gyalmo's foolish posturing. Whether quite untrue or grotesquely exaggerated, the stories found a mark, not least in Gangtok where the Chogyal seethed with implicit anger. Eventually, he persuaded the West Bengal authorities to evict her from Kaijimping. It was a short-lived victory, for Kazini soon bounced back venomously vowing revenge. "I was burning with fever," she exclaimed dramatically. "They just seized me and flung me into the aeroplane wrapped in only the old blanket in which I was shivering." In a burst of histrionics, Kazini flung herself across the room to lie huddled on a divan, simulating fever-racked agony. "I went to see Mrs Gandhi whom I had known you know when we were in the same sanatorium in Switzerland" and her voice became soft and pleading as her hands folded in supplication to describe the appeal. " 'Induji' I said, 'what have I done wrong that this tyrant should have me driven out of my home? And why should the West Bengal government abet his nefarious schemes?' 'Whatever Mrs Gandhi, who was not then prime minister, may have replied, Kazini had access to a higher court "Sir Alec Douglas-Home himself wrote to demand 'Why has this woman been separated from her husband?' This delivered in tones of rousing indignation. At this point in the narrative, Kazini brought out an envelope emblazoned with the House of Commons portcullis and waved it in the air. " 'One seeing is worth a thousand hearings' as Chou En-lai always used to tell me." But no one ever saw the name on the envelope or, for that matter, if it had any inscription at all.

But it was not all fun and frolic. Around Kazini gathered a number of educated young Nepalese men who, were intoxicated by her eloquence and convinced that destiny had singled them out for a higher purpose. Lal Bahadur Basnet, who had been an education corps NCO and spoke French passably well, was an early protegee. Krishna Chandra Pradhan came later and so did N.K. Subeidi. But the most favoured was Nar Bahadur Khataiwara, a peasant lad from near Gyalzing whom Kazini adopted and put through school and college in Kalimpong. Khataiwara was by far the most promising of the lot. He brought in several other youths and talked with gusto of the village organization he was building up: "Our Nepalese members are called garam dal while the Bhutiyas-Lepchas are the naram dal. One is, for fighting, the other for agitational propaganda." The unconscious distinction between garam and naram militant and moderate in political terms, also revealed Sikkim's great divide of temperament.

There was no doubt as to where young Khataiwara stood. "I will drink this Chogyal's blood!" he would scream, raising, clenched fists to the heavens. But Kazini was his adored "mama", though publicly he would say of Kazi and Kazini: "They are our rashiya pita and rashiya mata." Kazini preened herself with satisfaction but added: "Actually you know, they call Kazi sahib [the Mahatma Gandhi of Sikkim]." The hint was at once taken, and for a few weeks Kazi basked in the new honorific. Contd....

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