

IN DEFENSE OF MAHESH CHANDRA REGMI

In his letter published in your newspaper Prem Basnyat writes that the late historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1929-2003) "is said to have been paid by Westerners to vilify Shah kings" (**Debating history, Readers Respond**, August 15). This is an absurd and unacceptable accusation against one of the best historians of modern Nepal. Where exactly and how did Regmi "vilify" Shah kings? I cannot recall a single line from Regmi's prodigious writings where he has abusively disparaged (which is the meaning of the word "vilify") the Shah kings.

Sure, based on his extensive research and analysis, Regmi offered us many critical arguments against the so-called nationalist interpretations of the work of King Prithvīnarayan Shah and his successors. For instance, in one of his last monographs, *Kings and Political Leaders of the Gorkhali Empire, 1768-1814* (1995), Regmi concluded that it was "the relative poverty of the king and political leaders of the hill state of Gorkha" that led to their decision "to territorial expansion and the building up of an empire as a means to improve their economic condition." This is a conclusion that has been reached by virtually every critical historian of modern Nepal. Only hagiographers do not criticize their rulers and their leadership. Regmi was certainly not a hagiographer of Shah kings.

With respect to being "paid by Westerners," in a country which has little or no means to financially support research by independent scholars, accepting grants for one's research while retaining full editorial control over its outcome is absolutely fine. It is well-known that Regmi financed some of his research and writing with funding support from outside of Nepal. As I wrote in my 2003 obituary, in the beginning of his career, Regmi's work was financially supported by the University of California at Berkeley through a grant facilitated by the scholar Leo E Rose.

The university's grant to Regmi in 1960 was processed through its Institute of International Studies and it allowed him to work on the magisterial four-volume study of land-tenure and taxation. These volumes were published by the institute between 1963 and 1968. However this connection



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also brought some controversy for Regmi when it was revealed that the Institute's Himalayan Border Country Research Project through which Rose had channeled funds to Regmi was funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Defense Department. This sinister university-government connection was discovered in India in 1968.

Regmi defended his editorial independence in connection with this grant when the German anthropologist Martin Gaenzle asked him about it in an interview published in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* (No 4, 1992; full text available online): "I said: look, I don't know, I get paid for doing research on Nepal, I don't care where the

money comes from... They gave me a grant, they never told me what to do. They said: You (can) do what you want to do. And I said I want to do land tenure and taxation in Nepal. It started with a one volume project, one became two, two became three, three became four. So they financed all that." The institute's grant for Regmi was discontinued in 1969 when the Himalayan borders project was scrapped.

In 1977 Regmi was awarded the prestigious Magsaysay Award for "Journalism, Literature and Creative Communications Arts". Apart from the international recognition which, as Regmi has acknowledged, "bolstered both his self-confidence and his credibility", the

Award carried a grant of US \$20,000. This gave him enough economic security to continue with his research and publications, including his 1979 book *Readings in Nepali Economic History* and some of his periodicals. As Regmi told me in the 1990s, if it was not for the Magsaysay Award, the monthly periodical *Regmi Research Series* which he edited would have been discontinued even earlier than 1989.

Basnyat also adds that "it was westerners who gave him [Regmi] the title of 'best historian'". Unless he cannot read Regmi's original works himself, I don't understand why Basnyat needs to throw such potshots at one of the most brilliant analysts of modern Nepal. Instead he can choose to engage analytically with Regmi's enormous corpus and research methods. For instance, historian Yogesh Raj has commented on Regmi's interpretive tactics in an important 2014 article ("Loss of Epistemic Diversity: Academic Historiography in Post-1990 Nepal") published in *Studies in Nepali History and Society*.

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