

Book Reviews

Matrika Prasad Koirala. 2008. *A Role in a Revolution*. Lalitpur: Jagadamba Prakashan.

Matrika Prasad Koirala (M.P.) was an outstanding personality of Nepal, who dominated Nepali politics for a full eight years from 1947 to 1955. During the first four years he was supreme leader of the anti-Rana movement, and during the last four years he was the Prime Minister (in two terms for more than two and half years). His first four years were a story of success, whereas his last four years were a record of failure, though he was a powerful head of the government and enjoyed the confidence of the King throughout most of those years. He led the successful anti-Rana movement as its supreme commander, but his activities as Prime Minister were controversial and a sign of failure. After 1955, his political career virtually ended, though King Mahendra nominated him as a member of the upper house of parliament in 1959, only to encounter the absolute majority of Nepali Congress. In the 1980s M.P. once again tried to come back in politics through election to the national legislature but he did not succeed.

M.P. died in 1997, but now he is with us through his memoir entitled *A Role in a Revolution*. I myself (along with some of my friends in the History Department at Tribhuvan University) was fortunate enough to have carried out a tape-recorded interview with M.P. for the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) in the 1980s. This interview covered some crucial issues which he faced and tackled during the anti-Rana movement and during his tenure of office as a Prime Minister. While taking his interview, we were quite impressed by his sharp memory as when he narrated the story of his father's activities, and also described his own role during the anti-Rana movement and as Prime Minister. We requested him to write a memoir to provide first-hand information about this crucial period of the history of Nepal from 1947 to 1955. He smiled and said, "Well, if the government puts me in jail for six months, my memoir will be complete." We are glad to know that he wrote this memoir, but, as mentioned in the preface of the book, a reputed (I would like to say irresponsible) publisher from New Delhi lost his original manuscript (p. vii). M.P.'s courage must be highly applauded because he

took great pains to rewrite his memoir, which has now been published in book form.

Prior to reviewing the contents of the book, we must congratulate and thank Ganesh Raj Sharma for his painstaking efforts to produce this volume, along with his ten-page preface which includes his own analyses of one or two political issues. One, on the basis of his conversation with M.P. Sharma, which has also been entrusted with this responsibility by M.P.'s wife, as he had already produced a significant volume on the autobiography of B.P. Koirala (M.P.'s younger half brother) and on the basis of his interview with B.P. himself. In a way, Sharma has become a unique person by producing two volumes on two brothers, two Prime Ministers and two big personalities of modern Nepal.

M.P.'s memoir is not complete. As the name of the book suggests, it contains M.P.'s experiences as a leader of the democratic movement against the Ranas from 1947 to 1951, along with his own family background and a critical overview of the Rana regime. A large number of documents, ninety two in total, have been attached as an appendix in part two of the book, from which we can extract a rough picture of the political history of Nepal from 1951 to 1955, especially on issues in which M.P. was involved. But for that to be useful, one must have a detailed knowledge of the events of those fateful years.

Divided into nine sections, the first part of the memoir focuses on three main aspects of Nepali history. They are M.P.'s childhood and youth along with his father's exiled life in India and afterwards; the positive and negative aspects of Rana rule; and finally the democratic movement starting with the formation of the NNC (Nepali National Congress) and ending with the Delhi Compromise.

M.P. admits that his father (Krishna Prasad Koirala) was very sophisticated and lavish in his habits, but later on became very austere. He would not smoke, though he was the sole distributor of all brands of imported cigarettes in Nepal; he would never even touch a dice, shells or cards, even though gambling was officially and openly permitted for several days a year. But the irony of history is that such a man in just one stake "gambled away his whole life's earnings" (p. 5), and chose to live an exiled life in India. M.P. describes his father's miserable condition in India and also his younger brother's (Hari) death of cholera at Bettia "for want of proper treatment" (pp. 6–8). He appreciates his father's decision to give up all facilities, including a house provided by the Maharaja of Kolhapur, since he was fighting against the atrocities of a Maharaja (of Nepal) (pp. 8–10). M.P. recalls how, upon the death of Chandra

Shamsher, the new Prime Minister immediately summoned his father to Nepal, but tells us how he (Krishna Prasad) again suffered at the hands of the next Prime Minister resulting in his painful death inside the jail. M.P. writes, “Albeit, the policemen surrounded even the dead body and stood guard until his mortal remains were consumed by the funeral pyre and his body was reduced to ashes” (pp. 68–69).

Writing about himself, M.P. describes his school life in India including his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru as a school boy. He gives a brief account of the national education of India initiated by Gandhi and Tagore (pp. 47–48), and a glimpse of the civil disobedience movement of 1930 in which he himself was involved (pp. 51–58). His employment under the Rana regime, first as an apprentice and then as translator, is discussed in detail, and an interesting incident that took place on the day of his appointment is narrated in an attractive way (pp. 63–64). He tells us how he was relieved from his job two months after his father’s arrest in 1942 and how the Prime Minister subsequently reacted when the Director General, upon the advice of M.P.’s English boss, requested reconsideration of his sacking, by saying “Tell your Angrej (Englishman) it is our Nepali politics which he is incapable of understanding” (p. 67).

Giving a brief picture of the Rana regime, M.P. rightly calls it a time of “plots, assassinations, and fights for power within the family,” and says that the ruling family looted the entire property of the nation, seeing it as their own estate (p. 19). He gives the example of Padma Shamsher, who was Prime Minister for less than three years and took more than six million rupees in cash when he left for India (p. 21). But his mention of a Rana having two million acres of land in *birta* holdings must be an exaggeration (p. 21).

M.P. is judicious in making a critical appreciation of the Rana Prime Ministers. He gives credit to Jang Bahadur for granting political asylum to Chand Kuwar and Hazrat Mahal, and taking back the *Naya Muluk* lands in the Tarai from the British. He considers this as “permanent achievements for the nation” (p. 24). He also has words of praise for other Prime Ministers who undertook certain reform-oriented activities for the country. So much so that he even appreciates the attempt of Mohan Shamsher Rana in getting Nepal admitted to the United Nations in 1955 (p. 28). Not to forget that it was against Mohan that the Nepali Congress launched the movement and ended Rana rule.

Coming to the socio-political aspects of the Rana rule, M.P. narrates some of his personal experiences with the Rana government, and

mentions how people (including high officials) lived in a state of terror. When Krishna Prasad Koirala told Juddha Shamsheer that the Ranas were interested only in “three B’s,” namely Bank, *Birta* and Building, his elder brother (possibly Kali Dass Koirala), who was just promoted to *Sardar* was very afraid that he might lose his job (pp. 33–34).

M.P. gives credit to the *Prachanda Gorkha* and *Praja Parishad* organizations who revolted against the Rana regime before Nepali Congress. Most historians argue that King Tribhuvan had a secret connection with Praja Parishad and donated some money to it. But M.P. writes that King Tribhuvan “flatly denied (his) participation and knowledge of it. The money he gave to Mr. Bhakta (Dharma Bhakta Mathema – a leader of Praja Parishad) which was found during the searches was for the specific purpose of Mr. Bhakta’s marriage” (p. 37). However, he admits that “King Tribhuvan had moral sympathy with any effort against the Ranas to set up a popular representation in the governance of the country” (p. 37).

To close his narration about the Rana rule, M.P. argues that the “tallest claim the Rana clan has made is the preservation of independence of the country” (p. 38). In reality, and ironically, “they kept the country locked in, including its independence” (p. 41).

The last four sections of the book form the most significant part of the memoir as they are the most relevant to the title of the book. In over one hundred pages, M.P. analyzes the history of the democratic movement, especially focusing on his role in it. M.P. also mentions certain events beyond his role in order to maintain coherence in the memoir. Although these events have been discussed on the basis of secondary sources, readers will still find new information in them (though this should still be verified by primary sources).

M.P. starts his analysis of the Nepali democratic movement with B.P. Koirala’s press statement of October 1946 and the formation of the Nepali National Congress (NNC) in January 1947. He, however, does not mention the foundation of All India Nepali National Congress, which was established on the last day of October 1946. M.P. gives great importance to the Biratnagar Jute Mill Strike (1947). He claims that it was due to his active role in the strike that he was made working president of NNC without being a primary member of the party (p. 84). Most writers believe that he was forced to resign just three months after his appointment, because of opposition from members representing Kathmandu. But M.P. insists here that he voluntarily resigned. However, he admits that D.R. Regmi was made president to represent Kathmandu (p. 95). M.P. also

argues that Shri Prakash Gupta prepared four different drafts of the 1948 Constitution (p. 94). This is new information and should be verified by other sources.

On the clash between B.P. Koirala and D.R. Regmi, the author writes, “while B.P. Koirala was insistent D.R. Regmi was no less a stickler. There was no honourable way out” (p. 98). However, M.P. joined the Koirala group “finding the juridical side in B.P.’s favour and in consideration that Mr. Regmi was more of an academic politician than a man of action” (p. 99). Later on, after the NNC split into two factions, M.P. tried to make a compromise with Regmi but it failed because “Regmi was adamant” (p. 103). We have read in books that after NNC was banned, a few youths from Kathmandu founded the *Praja Panchayat* to fight against the Rana regime through constitutional means. M.P. claims that this organization was founded on his advice (p. 100). Similarly, our history books only mention that M.P. was elected president of NNC in the Daravanga Convention of March 1949, but M.P. claims that B.P. Koirala and Gopal Prasad Bhattarai were also candidates for the post. The election was held by secret ballot, and M.P. won with an overwhelming majority (p. 102). At about the same time, M.P. had talks with a trusted Mir Subba from Mohan Shamsher for a compromise between the Congress and the Ranas (pp. 102–103). This attempt failed because of the negative attitude of the Rana premier.

The merger of NNC and the Nepal Democratic Congress (NDC) that took place in April 1950 is described in detail. M.P. has his own arguments for his being chosen as the president of the new party – Nepali Congress (NC) as against the claim of B.P. Koirala (pp. 106–112). The new party replaced the words “Constitutional and peaceful means” by “all possible means” in their objectives (p. 110). M.P. reveals how NDC leaders made a false claim that they had the royal seal by King Tribhuvan to form a provisional parallel government (p. 112).

M.P. admits that even before the Bairgania Conference (in September 1950), NC had collected sufficient quantity of arms, but he stood for violence only “as a last recourse” and that also only in the form of mass insurrections (p. 112). He presents K.I. Singh as an opponent of B.P. Koirala from the beginning: He also mentions how Singh opposed the idea of empowering a single man to launch the movement under the assumption that B.P. would be that man (pp. 118–119). M.P. expresses the difficulty he had in maintaining the secrecy of party decisions, because of the presence of an undercover Rana agent in disguised form. However he refuses to mention his name as he says “I cannot furnish

specific proof or evidence for the same” (p. 118). M.P. also emphasizes two incidents – getting the contact and commitment of Rudra Shamsher at Palpa, which B.P. Koirala successfully conducted (p. 124), and a mission to create a feeling of terror among the Rana authorities in the capital led by Ganesh Man and Sunder Raj, which, however, failed because of a betrayal by a driver (p. 126). King Tribhuvan’s refusal to give royal assent to punish the culprits is also narrated (p. 127).

When describing the royal flight to the Indian Embassy in November 1950, M.P. confirms the rumor, through King Tribhuvan, that leaving Gyanendra in the palace was intentional and not accidental (p. 128). He also mentions a rumor that Mohan consulted the British envoy after the royal flight, and when the latter assured him that the new king will be recognized, Gyanendra was proclaimed the new ruler (p. 129). However M.P. is not correct to say that Gyanendra remained King from 7 November 1950 to 14 February 1951 (p. 132), because after Mohan’s declaration of 8 January 1951 he remained Tribhuvan’s representative only. The author has presented Tribhuvan’s side of the story regarding the mistake committed by Mohan after the royal flight (p. 129), but in my opinion his version is difficult to accept as at that time the King was a prisoner at Indian Embassy, if not at the royal palace.

In the chapter titled “Revolution” M.P. has analyzed in detail the story of the 1950 Movement after the royal flight to Indian Embassy. The reader is grateful for his ability to recollect day-to-day events. In the beginning, the revolutionary force was unable to gain permanent control of any major district, but later on it succeeded in capturing important areas from government forces. M.P. is correct to say that “The close of November was not very hopeful for us” (p. 152), but “the month of December definitely brought us brighter beams of hope” (p. 161). Especially significant in this regard was the capture of Biratnagar in the east and Nepalgunj in the west. M.P. also describes the surrender of government forces at Palpa as “a great event in the history of the insurrectionary upsurge led by the NC...the fall of Palpa shook the Ranas to the roots” (p. 167). At that time, when revolutionary forces were losing battles against the Rana army, the NC leaders wanted to meet the King at New Delhi to get a press statement from him in support of the movement. NC leaders also wanted to meet Indian leaders to ask for their support in logistics. “Both of our purposes were badly defeated,” writes M.P. (p. 144). He indirectly questions the so-called favourable attitude of the Indian government towards the NC, and writes, “we were in a deep pit from where there was no escape. There certainly was a feeling amongst us

that we had been brusquely let down, if not betrayed” (p. 144). Despite the indifferent attitude of the then Indian government, the revolutionaries were firmly committed to their duties. M.P. has duly acknowledged the valuable contribution of a number of revolutionaries in the two month armed struggle against Rana rule, including the commanders of the *Mukti Sena* such as Puran Singh, G.B. Yakthumba and others.

M.P. has also written a translation of a revolutionary song which was often played on Democratic Radio, established in Biratnagar (p. 162). But his translation does capture the actual wording of the song. In my opinion, the translation of the song should be as follows:-

O Nepalis! March forward! Waving the flag of revolution!
 Waving the flag of revolution
 Come on elder and younger sisters
 Come on elder and younger brothers
 Let us work together for the salvation of our Nepal
 Let all of us be united for the progress of our homeland

The NC started armed struggle against the Ranas with the support and cooperation of the Indian government, but M.P. argues that Indian support was half-hearted from the very beginning. When the Rana government, realizing its helplessness, opened negotiations with the Indian government, the attitude of India towards the NC completely changed. M.P. has portrayed this episode beautifully in the chapter entitled “The Delhi Parley.” He points out the change in attitude of the Indian Prime Minister after he met two Rana generals, sent by the Rana Prime Minister to negotiate at Delhi. He also gives Nehru’s statement in the Indian parliament as evidence that the Indian leader “held the view that complete old order was not possible but a completely new order also was not in his mind” (p. 172). M.P. mentions NC helplessness in these words, “In Delhi, we never sat across the table to iron out our differences and the so-called tripartite conference as such never took place. The representatives of the Government of India would convey to us the views of the Ranas and of course the King was out of the picture till the finalisation of the parley” (p. 176). But, even at this critical juncture, the NC, under M.P., successfully solved the question of political prisoners, ensured the party’s right to nominate all the popular representations in the interim cabinet, and got significant portfolios of home and finance (pp. 178–179).

Humiliated by the Indian government, M.P. was also defied by his own partymen when they refused to accept him as their leader in the interim cabinet. But M.P. rejects this allegation and writes, “In order to

keep the prestige of the Nepali Congress aloft and to keep the ranks closed up and to pave an easier path for the inner political struggle now to begin inside Nepal I had preferred to place myself out of power, and exert my energy to the organisational wing only” (p. 182). He was further disappointed, when his proposal to include either M.B. Shah or Surya Prasad Upadhaya in the Cabinet was opposed by B.P. Koirala and Subarna Shamsher (p. 182). In name, M.P. was the supreme commander of the revolution, but in practice his younger brother (B.P.) emerged as the real hero. At this humiliating point, M.P. ends his memoir-cum-autobiography.

The author has given a list of events that occurred after the royal flight (pp. 168–169). However the list contains some mistakes. Gyanendra was installed as King on 7 November (not on 8 November); M.P. gives the impression that the insurrection started even before Tribhuvan reached Delhi, when it was not so. Mohan Shamsher’s first statement came on 24 December, (not on 24 November) and the first batch of prisoners were released on 17 January 1951 (not on 13–14 January). Moreover, M.P. fails to mention that more than 50 percent of released prisoners refused to come out of jail until the political settlement was finalized. In addition, there is a major pen error on p. 130, where the author writes “Padma” instead of “Mohan” (31st line).

Part two of the book consists of ninety-two documents which are given as appendices. All of them, except the first and the last, are related to the history of Nepal from 1951 to 1955 – a period when M.P. became Prime Minister three times. This part of the book may be read as a supplement to the memoir sections dealing with the later part of M.P.’s political career.

These documents clearly show the Indian government’s influence and interference on Nepali affairs during the reign of King Tribhuvan. Three documents are produced in original form. They are the cabinet proceeding of April 1951 (pp. 194–195), Tribhuvan’s letter to M.P. in August 1952 (p. 260) and Mahendra’s letter to M.P. as a crown prince in March 1955 (p. 370). The first two letters are in English, prepared by Indian personnel, and the third is in Nepali, to demonstrate Mahendra’s attempt to end Indian involvement in Nepal’s administration. Again there are some letters written by Nehru to Tribhuvan (pp. 200–202, 229–230, 231–232), addressing the latter as “My dear friend” forgetting formal protocol to address the head of the state. Similarly, M.P. had sought permission of the Indian advisor to Nepal, quoting provisions of the Indian Constitution, to remove a minister from the cabinet (p. 241).

A number of letters had been exchanged between M.P. and Nehru on different aspects of Nepali politics, which include (a) resolution of a dispute between M.P. and B.P. Koirala (pp. 208–210), (b) Tanka Prasad's demand for a coalition cabinet (p. 210), (c) Nehru's dissatisfaction on the delay of Constituent Assembly election (p. 244), (d) M.P.'s detailed information about the reorganization of administration in Nepal (pp. 211–217) and (e) the discourtesy shown by an INA (Indian National Army?) crew to the prime minister and ministers of Nepal (pp. 249–250). Many voices were raised against the Indian Ambassador, Chandeshwar Prasad Narayan Singh, by Nepali leaders, including B.P. Koirala, for his active interference in Nepali affairs. However King Tribhuvan and M.P. repeatedly requested the Indian Prime Minister for his renewal, which is new information for readers (pp. 258–259).

It is worth mentioning one specific letter written by Nehru to M.P. on 8 May 1954, because it gives a number of instructions to M.P. as the Prime Minister of Nepal, which include (a) Nehru's draft of an aide-memoir for its approval by Nepal, (b) a warning to M.P. not to say anything that would irritate China, (c) the presence of Indian representatives in talks between Nepali and Chinese officials, (d) instructions to the Nepal Government to give up extra-territorial rights in Tibet as well as a 10,000 rupees tribute and (e) a threatening note to remain careful about the U.S. (pp. 294–297). All these points clearly demonstrate Nehru's dictatorial attitude towards Nepal. However, one positive aspect of the letter should be mentioned, and that is Nehru's instruction to Nepali ministers to keep in touch with their people (p. 297).

There are also some letters written by Nepali ambassadors in New Delhi (Vijaya Shamsher and Mahendra Bikram) which focus on proposed diplomatic relations between Nepal and China. One remarkable point of these letters is the desire or condition of China to hold the talks in Kathmandu and in secret, against the instructions of Nehru. These letters also mention some objectionable articles on Nepal published in two newspapers, *Searchlight* and *The Statesman*, as well as the statement of D.R. Regmi (foreign minister) on Tibet, which the Indian government called a "silly" statement. But these documents do not mention the contents of these articles or the statement.

A number of brief letters (more than two dozen) written during the last days of M.P.'s prime ministerial tenure have also been reproduced. They deal with M.P.'s deteriorating relations with the Crown Prince and ministers (Tanka Prasad and Bhadrakali Mishra) (pp. 346–373). However these letters do not give any new information to the reader.

On the whole, the documents produced in part two of the memoir give scattered information on Nepali politics from 1951 to 1955. They may be used by researchers as primary sources.

A review of M.P.'s memoir is not complete until we mention the ten-page preface of Ganesh Raj Sharma, the undeclared editor of the book. Sharma argues that "M.P. was not as regular nor as expressive in his response to ideas and events as B.P. was" (p. viii), but, instead, "was a store house of knowledge about the personalities and events of Nepali politics, which remained unrevealed unlike in the case of B.P. Koirala" (p. ix). In my opinion, the memoir is more regular, if not more expressive, than B.P.'s *Atmabrittanta*, which is quite irregular in chronological terms. Sharma is correct to say that "M.P. was appointed Prime Minister in 1951 on the suggestion of Nehru," but his claim that M.P. was removed from office in 1955 because of India's displeasure, as he along with King Tribhuvan opposed the aide-memoir sent by Nehru, is debatable (p. ix). He has produced a different version of the aide-memoir which reads, "... especially on matters of Nepal's relationship with Tibet and China, special advice will be sought from the Government of India" (p. xi), whereas Nehru's draft of the same speaks only about "consultations" with the Government of India (p. 298).

On the basis of information supplied by M.P. and Rishikesh Shah, Sharma argues that Nehru had given tacit consent to King Mahendra for the royal takeover of December 1960, though it was limited only to the removal of B.P. Koirala and not the dissolution of the parliament (pp. xi–xii). This point also seems to be debatable, in view of Nehru's strong public condemnation of the coup. There is one more debatable point in the preface, and that is the so-called understanding between "King Birendra and B.P. Koirala to bring M.P. Koirala to power as a stop-gap in the transition from the partyless Panchayat system to a multiparty parliamentary democracy" (p. xii). B.P.'s question about the possibility of M.P.'s becoming Prime Minister (p. xii) prevents Sharma from reaching such big conclusions.

However, in the conclusion part of his preface, Sharma seems to have strictly followed the duty (*dharma*) of an editor, when he says "The same period and the leadership roles have been described somewhat differently by his brother, B.P. Koirala. As the person tasked with bringing the memoir of both M.P. and B.P. into publication, I have been careful to ensure that their words are held sacrosanct other than in basic editing, so that both brothers reach out to the readers in their own words and as they wished" (p. xv). Sharma, however, does not elaborate the points of

difference between the two brothers, the narration of which would have greatly benefited readers and researchers.

To point out some technical shortcomings, the documents in part two are not numbered, nor are the sections in part one. This may create difficulties for researchers who wish to acknowledge them as sources. Similarly, readers may have been interested to see some rare photos of those days, but the book contains none. Even so, the memoir is a significant contribution to the study of the 1950 movement and the following four years. It is especially helpful to researchers as a source book.

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