

## NEPAL AND THE INDIAN NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

KANCHANMOY MOJUMDAR

The Indian Nationalist Movement had an important bearing on Anglo-Nepalese relations in the first half of the present century. The autocratic Rana rulers in Nepal<sup>1</sup> and the British in India, each had heavy stakes in the maintenance of the other's rule when the movement posed a threat to both. British support was indispensable for the Ranas as a source of strength to meet internal challenges. The British, for their part, valued the strong and obliging Rana regime as essential for the security of the most populous and the richest regions of India and, militarily, its most exposed frontier.

Besides, the Rana rule, in ensuring the supply of Gurkhas, the "*nulli secundus*" of the Indian army, constituted a vital element in the Indian military structure.<sup>2</sup> Reports of some Punjabi elements in the Indian army having been tainted with anti-British feelings<sup>3</sup> reinforced the British conviction that the Gurkhas were the only insurance against any uprising in other ranks of the Indian army.<sup>4</sup> The Ranas, for their part, regarded Gurkha recruitment as essential for the sustenance of the Nepalese economy<sup>5</sup> and valued it as a lever to wring concessions and personal favours from the British. Naturally, then, both the British and the Ranas were determined to prevent the exposure of the Gurkhas to anti-British feelings in India.

In 1907 the Government of India banned the circulation of *Gorkha Sathi*, a Nepali newspaper published from Calcutta, in which articles

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<sup>1</sup> The Rana rule in Nepal was established by Jang Bahadur Rana in 1846. The head of the Rana administration was the Prime Minister. The Kings of Nepal were *rois fainéant*, virtual prisoners in the hands of the Rana Prime Ministers. The Rana rule was an absolute autocracy. See Satish Kumar, *Rana Polity in Nepal, Origin and Growth* (New Delhi, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> The Gurkhas were first enlisted in the Indian army in 1815-16. See my article, "The Recruitment of Gurkhas in the Indian army, 1814-77," *The Journal of the United Service Institution of India* (April-June, 1963), pp. 143-53.

<sup>3</sup> Minto Papers (M.P.), National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, M995: Minto to Earl Roberts, 6 June 1907, Minto to Prince of Wales, 29 August 1907.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, M836: Record of Lord Kitchener's Administration of the Army in India, 1902-09, pp. 269-74.

<sup>5</sup> There were several thousand retired Gurkha soldiers in Nepal to whom the Government paid, in 1927-28, a sum of Rupees twenty five lakhs. There were more than 20,000 Gurkha soldiers in the Indian army. The annual revenue of Nepal was only fifteen million rupees. H. Wilkinson-Guillemard, "Nepal and her relation to the British Government," *The Asiatic Review* (April 1934), p. 214. *Census of India*, Vol. I, Pt. 1, 1931, p. 76. W. Brook Northey and C.J. Morris, *The Gurkhas, their Manners, Customs and Country* (London, 1928), pp. 82-3.

strongly critical of the Rana regime were written. The paper also urged the Nepalese to support the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal.<sup>6</sup> Between 1908 and 1910 several Indian newspapers critical of the British rule were banned in Nepal and Bengali doctors, engineers and teachers in the — Nepalese State service were warned against having any relations with the terrorists in Bengal. The entry of aliens to Nepal without the permission of the Rana Government was declared a punishable offence.<sup>7</sup>

The many military and political problems during and after World War I created by intensified nationalist agitations in India drew the British and Rana Governments closer. The expansion of Gurkha Corps from twenty to thirty three regiments and the garrisoning of the North-West frontier by Nepalese troops lent by the Rana Prime Minister, Chandra Shamsher, during the war were precautionary measures against any sudden uprising by Indian troops, in some of whom anti-British feelings were reported to have been working.<sup>8</sup> The British Government were particularly anxious over the likely effect of the third Afghan War and the Khilafat movement on the large Muslim elements in the army. The Government's feeling of "grave uncertainty" regarding their military strength was clear from their admission that:

the recent internal troubles have . . . emphasized that Nepal is next to the British garrison our sheet anchor in time of great trouble in India.<sup>9</sup>

During the war, the Germans tried to incite Nepal against the British, the German Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, having personally written to Chandra Shamsher and the King of Nepal. Raja Mahendra Pratap, the Head of the Provisional Government of Independent India and an accomplice to the German scheme, sent the letter to Kathmandu, promising Chandra Shamsher territorial rewards and the premiership of the independent Indian Republic. However, the scheme fell through; Chandra Shamsher remained steadfast in his loyalty to the British.<sup>10</sup>

The increasing interest of Soviet Russia and Japan in Tibet and Nepal appeared to the British as a sinister bid to weaken British influence in the two frontier states. The Pan-Asiatic League formed of Rashbehari Bose and other Indian political emigres in Japan and several Japanese

<sup>6</sup> The *Swadeshi* movement or the movement for the boycott of foreign goods, was launched after 1905, when Bengal was partitioned by Lord Curzon.

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Political Proceedings, External, B (National Archives of India), September 1907, Nos. 101-09. Political and Secret Letters from India to Secretary of State (P.S.L.I., India Office Library, London), Vol. 205, Register No. 1651/1907; Vol. 242, Reg. No. 1203/1910; Vol. 231, Reg. No. 1372/1909.

<sup>8</sup> Kitchener Papers (Public Record Office, London), PRO 30/57, No. 70: H. Butler to Kitchener, 20 October 1915. Political and Secret Library, Vol. D. 187: *Memorandum on Nepal and Leading Personages in that Country* (Calcutta, 1922), pp. 5-6 (India Office Library).

<sup>9</sup> Chelmsford Papers (I.O.L.), Vol. 10: Viceroy to Secretary of State, Telg. 9 May 1919.

<sup>10</sup> Political and Secret External (Subject) Files (P.E.F.-I.O.L.), No. 3443/1914, Pt. 6: Reg. Nos. 2854, 5051, 2750, 3769.

intellectuals criticised the British policy towards Tibet and Nepal. Raja Mahendra Pratap urged the Nepalese to emulate the Afghans in freeing themselves from British domination and establishing relations with Bhutan, Tibet, Afghanistan, Japan and Soviet Russia. Mahendra Pratap was reported to have raised funds in the United States for effecting a revolution in Nepal to overthrow the Anglophile Rana regime. Exclusion of all foreign influence from Nepal being the basic British policy, the Rana Government was urged to introduce a passport system to prevent the entry into Nepal of aliens and Indian seditionists having close links with the Russians and Japanese.<sup>11</sup>

All these post-war problems convinced the British of "the supreme importance of a friendly and contented Nepal." The British feared that if Nepal were disaffected, she could give encouragement to the Indian nationalists;<sup>12</sup> Nepal could even be a political Alsatia as the French settlements in India had been. The Ranas were therefore kept in good humour by British honours and titles, which they coveted. In 1920 an annual subsidy of ten lakhs of rupees was given to the Nepalese Government.<sup>13</sup> In 1923 a treaty was concluded, recognising Nepal's internal and external independence and her right to procure freely arms and ammunition. The treaty also provided for commercial concessions which enabled the Ranas to obtain luxury items from abroad.<sup>14</sup>

The war and the post-war years saw in a section of the Nepalese the beginnings of political, social and economic consciousness which the Ranas sought to suppress, often with the help of the British in India. In the post-war years large scale migration of the Nepalese to India for jobs worried the Rana Government.<sup>15</sup> This was not only indicative of deep-seated economic discontent but one which boded political danger for the Rana regime. Education in Nepal, so long deliberately discouraged by the Ranas, spread in the Nepalese community in India, creating gradually in them, a desire for political, economic and social changes in Nepal. These Nepalese drew inspiration from the Indian national movement and imbibed the current Indian social and political ideas. Institutional changes in Nepal became their ultimate objective and in these Nepalese the Rana Government saw their greatest enemy.

<sup>11</sup> P.E.F. 3764/1913; 4353/1920, Pts. 1-2. Political and Secret External Files (P.F.-I.O.L.), 1919, Vol. 5: Reg. Nos. 1362, 3713, 388.

<sup>12</sup> P.F., 1920, Vol. 7: Reg. No. 3426, Departmental Note.

<sup>13</sup> P.E.F. 3085/1912, Pt. 1: Reg. No. 2612, Viceroy to Secretary of State, Telg. 8 May 1919, Secretary of State to Viceroy, Telg. 11 June 1919; Reg. No. 5596, Resident to Gov't., 30 June 1919.

<sup>14</sup> P.E.F., 3085/1912, Pt. 2. See my article, "Background to Anglo-Nepalese Treaty, 1923," *Journal of Indian History* (December 1970), pp. 599-655.

<sup>15</sup> Nepalese immigrants to India in 1901 numbered 243,037 and in 1931, 327,028. Nearly two-thirds of the people of Sikkim were born in Nepal. *Census of India*, Vol. 1, Pt. 1 (1921), pp. 95-6; Vol. 1, Pt. 1 (1931), p. 76.

By the 1920's, then, the British concern over the Indian unrest was matched by the Rana anxiety over the influence of Indian nationalists on the Nepalese in India and through the latter on the Nepalese at Kathmandu. The Rana and the British Governments, therefore, committed themselves to the maintenance of each other's security against subversive elements, and the Treaty of 1923 had an article to this effect.<sup>16</sup> Already in 1922 the British Government had banned the circulation of *Gorkhali*, a Nepali weekly from Benaras for publishing articles critical of the Rana regime.<sup>17</sup>

The progressive realisation of self-government by the Indians following the Montford reforms made the Rana Government anxious over the likely discontinuance of both the annual subsidy and recruitment of Gurkhas by a future nationalist Government in India, thereby gravely damaging the Nepalese economy. In the Indian press and legislative assemblies, the subsidy had already come in for strong criticisms. The British had to dispel the Rana government's fear by an assurance that constitutional changes in India would not be allowed to affect the existing relations between the Indian and Nepalese governments.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1920's several associations were formed by the Nepalese in India of which the All India Gurkha League was the most important. The League, under the dynamic leadership of Thakur Chandan Singh, claimed a large membership, mostly in Gurkha ex-servicemen. The League urged the Rana government to lift their ban on foreign travel by the Nepalese and to introduce reforms to modernise Nepal. In its weekly journal, *Tarun Gurkha*, later renamed *Gorkha Sansar*, the League strongly urged for education and the dissemination of scientific knowledge among the Nepalese.<sup>19</sup>

The League presented a memorandum to the India Office in 1931-32, demanding representation of the Nepalese community in India in the Round Table Conference and the provision for the security of their rights and interests in the future Constitution of India by either granting them special representation or by reserving seats for them in the Central and Provincial legislatures in the same proportion as the Sikhs had claimed for themselves.

The memorandum drew the Government's attention to the economic backwardness of the Nepalese and blamed the Rana government for "its sheer inaction, indifference and apathy, sometimes bordering an

<sup>16</sup> See Article Four of the Treaty.

<sup>17</sup> P.F., 1920, Vol. 7, Reg. No. 3119 filed with 8149/1920.

<sup>18</sup> Political and Secret External Collections (E.C.-I.O.L.), 21/10: Reg. Nos. 6337, 1607, 4029, 6733, 1969, 2600, 3358, 3185. Halifax Papers (I.O.L.), Mss. Eur. C. 152, Vol. 4: Halifax to Birkenhead, 9 Feb. 1928. Foreign Political Proceedings—Secret External, File Nos. 21/1928, 373/1925. *Modern Review*, Calcutta (July 1925), p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Home Department Proceedings—Political (National Archives), File No. 258/1931. E.C., 21/18, Reg. Nos. 8124; 21/2, Reg. No. 489/1932.

open hostility" to any progressive ideas among the Nepalese in India. The League expressed its "strongest support" to the "patriotic aspirations and legitimate demands" of the Indians for dominion status, while disclaiming any sympathy for any movement disruptive of law and order. It condemned the Civil Disobedience Movement launched by Gandhi and expressed its loyalty to both the Rana and British governments. The President of the League, Thir Shamsher Rana, wrote to the Private Secretary to the Viceroy urging the Government's desistance from the use of Gurkha troops to quell nationalist agitations and warning that the promotion of political and economic interests of the Nepalese in India could alone ensure their immunity from the influence of the Civil Disobedience Movement.<sup>20</sup>

Prominent Congress leaders had for some time been trying to draw the Nepalese into the movement and to sow anti-British feelings in the Gurkha regiments. One Kharag Bahadur was "the chief anti-British propagandist among Gurkhas." In June 1930 he, together with one Dhanapati Singh and thirteen other Gurkha volunteers of the Congress were arrested while going to Dharsana to meet Sardar Vallabhai Patel. After serving a three-month sentence in the Sabarmati jail, Kharag Bahadur was rearrested in November 1930 on the Delhi Railway station for carrying with him seditious pamphlets and letters. These letters clearly established the involvement of Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhai Patel, Desbandhu Gupta and other Congress leaders in anti-British intrigues in the Gurkha regiments. Kharag Bahadur had earlier met Motilal at Benaras and was encouraged to enrol Gurkha volunteers for the Civil Disobedience Movement on payment of a monthly allowance of a sum of ten rupees to each volunteer. In one of his letters to Kharag Bahadur, Motilal informed him that Jawaharlal had agreed to issue on behalf of the Congress an authoritative declaration that Gurkhas were an integral section of the Indian people. Dhanapati, too, had known Vallabhai Patel, Abbas Tyabji and Gandhi's sons in the Sabarmati jail, and had, at their instance, written many articles in Nepali, encouraging Gurkha soldiers to join the Congress movement.<sup>21</sup>

Kharag Bahadur and Dhanapati were sent to jail, but the Government, in view of the recently concluded Gandhi-Irwin Pact, calling off the Civil Disobedience Movement, thought it prudent to take no action against the Congress. Any thorough search of Congress offices for incriminating materials and arrest of Motilal, Jawaharlal and other top Congress leaders would, so the Government feared, stir up popular unrest, apart from giving undesirable publicity to the Congress' attempts

<sup>20</sup> E.C. 21/2, Reg. No. 489/1932.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Reg. Nos. 938/1931, 5371/1935, 1410/1931.

at sowing sedition in Gurkha ranks.<sup>22</sup> Chandra Shamsher had, in the meanwhile, received many reports of such attempts.<sup>23</sup>

The death of Chandra Shamsher in 1929 aggravated the dissensions in the Rana family caused by jealousy and itch for power. Several abortive attempts were made on the life of Bhim Shamsher and Yuddha Shamsher, the two succeeding Prime Ministers, by disgruntled members of the Rana family. The latter, fearing reprisals, fled to India and established close connexion with the local anti-Rana elements. Meanwhile, at Kathmandu there were growing signs of opposition to the Rana regime. In 1931 a group of young men were involved in a conspiracy to replace the Rana regime by a parliamentary government. In 1933 a similar conspiracy was nipped in the bud. In the following year a number of educated Nepalese were punished by heavy fines and imprisonment for attempting to set up a public library at Kathmandu. In 1935 a political party, named the *Praja Parishad*, was formed at Kathmandu, the members of which also suffered similar punishment.<sup>24</sup>

The Rana government's agents in India warned the local Nepalese settlers against any anti-Rana activity on pain of confiscation of their property at home and social ostracism. Belated realisation that economic reforms could assuage the people's discontent drove Bhim and Yuddha Shamsher to attempts at some economic development of the country. A few cooperative credit societies and a bank were established, followed by a match and a sugar factory and a jute mill in the Terai. Swampy pestilential lands in the Terai were reclaimed for the settlement of not only pensioned Gurkha soldiers but for all the:

Nepalese flotsam and jetsam thrown up by worldwide economic blizzard which might otherwise be sucked into the whirlpool by revolutionary movements in India.<sup>25</sup>

Land laws were revised and house building loans given. Duties on salt and cotton were abolished. A provident fund scheme for army personnel was implemented. With these reforms the Rana government expected "to some extent to combat the activities of the Gurkha League," which had been using Nepal's economic backwardness under the Rana regime as grist for its propaganda mill.<sup>26</sup>

However, these reforms, belated as they were, fell far short of popular expectations. In fact, the Ranas never wanted extensive economic development, for fear that the resultant improvement of the material

<sup>22</sup> Home Political Proceedings, 1931, File No. 14/9.

<sup>23</sup> Foreign Department Proceedings-External, B, Secret (National Archives), Aug. 1921, Nos. 120-37.

<sup>24</sup> E.C., 21/6, Reg. Nos. 4291, 5610, 5831, 80, 5057, 3181; 21/18, Reg. Nos. 2011, 1949, 2765; 21/2, Reg. Nos. 5831, 6012.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Reg. No. 3415/1933.

<sup>26</sup> E.C., 21/10, Reg. No. 2903/1941; 21/19, Reg. Nos. 5664/1931, 32/1933; 21/51, Reg. No. 1690/1938; 21/2, Reg. No. 1946/1932.

conditions of the people would lead to demands for political changes.

Nor did the British want any large-scale economic changes in Nepal. All that they wanted was some reforms by the Ranas to take the bite off the criticisms of the Rana regime by the Indian nationalists and the progressive Nepalese. Some economic reforms, the British government realised during, particularly, the Second World War, were the only answer to the growing political problems in Nepal. During the war years, as the British Minister at Kathmandu, Colonel G. Betham, testified, the social and political opposition to the Rana regime was no longer a feeling but had become a force to reckon with. Yuddha Shamsher's lecherous character, which endangered the honour of every comely damsel in Nepal, made him extremely unpopular; even the royal family was reported to be sympathetic towards the anti-Rana forces.<sup>27</sup> In 1940-41 several persons implicated in anti-Rana conspiracies were arrested and executed. The younger generation of Nepalese, who had become politically conscious, wanted a more liberal administration which alone, so it seemed to Betham, could stave off an impending violent political shake-up at Kathmandu. It even seemed to Betham not unlikely that Yuddha Shamsher would abdicate, and then his son's attempts at succession would be resisted by his elder cousins, the sons of Chandra Shamsher, having stronger claims to succession.<sup>28</sup>

Any political disturbance in Nepal during the war years was likely to interfere with the supply of Gurkha recruits, vital for the war, and so the British would prevent any such disturbance. The British had consistently maintained that an obliging family oligarchy heavily dependent on the Government of India suited the British interests most. The British, therefore, took several measures to stem the anti-Rana tide and strengthen Yuddha Shamsher's position. Assistance was rendered to his economic projects and British titles and honours were conferred on him. The Defence of India Rules were enforced to suppress anti-Rana activities in India and the editors of the *Janata* and *Naya Hindustan*, papers condemning the Rana regime, were warned. During the Quit India Movement (August 1942) the Nepalese Terai became a base for anti-Rana and anti-British activities which led the two governments to undertake a joint mopping up operation, resulting in the arrest of many Congressmen.<sup>29</sup>

The anti-Rana movement gathered further strength at the end of the War when the Labour government in Britain decided to grant independence to India and seemed less keen on supporting the Rana regime; so, at any rate, the Ranas alleged. The anti-Rana movement

<sup>27</sup> E.C., 21/6, Reg. Nos. 6664/1939, 1632/1941.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Reg. Nos. 4631, 5895, 6693, 6986, 1630, 540, 1632, 264, 289, 4676, 4384, 4808, 6664.

<sup>29</sup> E.C., 21/12, Reg. Nos. 2677, 1318; 21/6, Reg. Nos. 4862, 6664, 6986, 1699, 4808, 5448, 6191, 640, 7036.

became more closely linked with the anti-British movement in India as evidenced from the resolution of the *Nepali Rashtriya Congress*, a political party formed in Calcutta in January 1947, with B.P. Koirala, later Prime Minister of Nepal, as its principal spokesman.<sup>30</sup> The party resolved that the problems of India and Nepal were "identical and one" and that the end of the British rule in India was the prerequisite to the emancipation of the Nepalese people from the Rana tyranny. The Nepali Congress supported the striking mill workers at Biratnagar in March 1947 which was followed by a student agitation at Kathmandu in May 1947, demanding the end of Rana rule. The Rana government under Padma Shamsher, who had taken over from Yuddha Shamsher after the latter's abdication in 1945, conceded a written constitution in January 1948, providing for a Council of Ministers, a bicameral legislature at the centre and village councils, a judiciary and fundamental rights. Padma Shamsher's liberal policy cost him his position; he was replaced by Mohan Shamsher, whose reactionary and repressive measures reinforced the anti-Rana movement, ultimately involving the new independent Government of India. In November 1950 King Tribhuban escaped to India, and then the *Nepali Rashtriya Congress* launched a liberation struggle in the Terai, which, with the Government of India's intervention, ended in the replacement of the century-old Rana autocracy by a democratic government in Nepal in 1951.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Anirudha Gupta, *Politics in Nepal* (New Delhi, 1964), p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-50.