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Baniya's Maharani: Dismantling Maharani Myth

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Abstract

This paper makes a review of Chandra Prakash Baniya's Madan Puraskar winning novel, *Maharani* (2019). Written in local colour, the book is a historical fiction that unveils an untold history of the Parbat Rajya (one of the 24 states before the unification of modern Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah). The main story revolves round the rivalry of two siblings, Bhadribam and Malebam for the ascendancy to the throne. Bhadribam is elder by conception whereas Malebam by birth. As per the prevailing practice, the royal court decides in favour of Malebam. Bhadribam rebels. Vishwaprabha, the princess of Deupur who is engaged with Malebam for marriage, becomes victimized in the rivalry. Despite being engaged with Malebam, she gets ready to marry Bhadribam to save the Parbat Rajya from being divided. Ambitiously, even after having Vishwaprabha, Bhadribam continues to plot against Malebam for the throne. Vishwaprabha spoils his conspiracy and saves the Parbat Rajya. In recognition of this, Malebam awards her with the title of Maharani (Queen Mother). But Vishwaprabha does not enjoy this political title. She rather chooses the life of a recluse and goes missing soon. However, after her disappearance, she remains deeply in the collective memory of the people of Beni and the neighbouring areas. In course of time, mythicizing her as goddess, they begin to worship her. But Baniya defies this myth and simply regards her as a brave and patriotic lady. This review revolves around the question: how and why does the writer dismantle the myth in the novel, *Maharani*?

Keywords: Maharani, myth, Parbat Rajya, rivalry

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Review

When I was in my village for Dashain of 2077 BS, my childhood friend Udaya Chandra Chapai, now an English lecturer at Dhaulagiri Multiple Campus, Baglung, proudly praised Chandra Prakash Baniya's Madan Puraskar winning novel, *Maharani*, exposing his "emotional attachment" to it for its setting of surrounding areas. Udaya later recorded his impressions in the *Dhorpatan News* online under the title "'Maharani' Nabhaeki Maharani" ['Maharani' an Uncoronated Maharani]. Although I had read news on various public media about the selection of *Maharani* for the Madan Puraskar for 2020, it was in fact Udaya's remark that triggered my curiosity to go through the book as soon as possible. The curiosity was even more stirred by the review of Din Bahadur Thapa, professor of Nepali at Dhaulagiri Multiple Campus, published in the *Setopati* online on Magh 2, 2077 BS. But despite a deep curiosity, I could spare time to read the book only recently. Interestingly, as I flipped over a few pages, I could not put my eyes away until the end. Indeed, Baniya has produced a quality writing that unfolds the unwritten history of the Parbat Rajya depicting a myriad of issues—from political history and myth of Maharani [Queen Mother] to the contemporary social and cultural life of the people.

Baniya, born in Beni, Myagdi district of Gandaki province on 25 Chaitra 2007 BS (7 April 1991) is an educator, columnist, writer, and politician. As an educator, he taught at different schools in Myagdi. As a columnist, he wrote articles for *Dhaulagiri Weekly* newspaper. As a writer, before *Maharani*, he published *Aitihāsik Parbat Rajya* (Historical Parbat Kingdom) (2008); *Khas Jati ra Kul Puja* [Khasa people and ancestors worshipping practice] (2011); and *Mrityu Sanskar Manthan: Itihas, Manyata ra Bastabikta* [Contemplation on Death Rites: History, Myth and Reality] (2018). After *Maharani*, he has also produced *Bhaujyaha* [Aggressive]; *Makurako Punarjanma* [Rebirth of Zpider]; and *Chaubise Rajya Parbat* [Twenty 24 State Parbat]. As a politician, he joined in Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) in 1978. He got elected as a member of the parliament from the Myagdi district in the general election of 1991. But after a couple of years, brain tumour put a break to his political career forcing him to take a long rest. After recovery, he inclined towards literary writing residing in Pokhara.

Baniya composes *Maharani* in 53 sections covering 368 pages. It is a historical fiction that portrays the history of the Parbat Rajya of three centuries ago. It begins with a background information about the Maharani Temple situated at Kurilakharka, the Western section of Beni Bazar and its association with the myth of Maharani and the political history of the Parbat Rajya. Baniya states, "*Kurilakharkaki Maharāniko itihās khojdai jada thyakkai tin shatabdi pundo puginchha, tin shatabdi purbako tehi itihāslai aadhar banaer Maharani upanyas lekhieko ho, yo katha baisechaubise rajyakalko ho*" [While exploring the history of Kurilakharka Maharani, we go back three centuries. Based on the history of that time, *Maharani* novel has been written. The story is based on the 22 and 24 states] (p.3). The temple has been made in the name of Maharani, but the reality about her has remained mysterious: who she really was; why she was called Maharani; why she was elevated from a deity to goddess; where she was from and married to whom; how long she has been revered as goddess; and so on. To explore and re-write "*tehi rahasyamahi katha*" [that mysterious history], (p. 5) is Baniya's main aim of writing this book. There is no historical record about Maharani.

Published by Shikha Publication in 2020, *Maharani* revisits the history of the Parbat Rajya: its administrative and legal system; its relations with other *rajyas* [states]; rivalry between two siblings for the throne; sacrifice of Maharani for the protection of the state; and social, economic and cultural life of the people. The rendering of 'local colour' has added to the aura of the book. For example, the use of Khas Doteli language takes a reader not only to the local vicinities of and around Myagdi but also to three centuries back. Moreover, the rendering of the real names of the local places and things as well as the way of life of people provides fascinating taste of local colour.

Maharani's main story revolves round the rivalry between two siblings, Malebam and Bhadriram, for the succession to the throne after King Ghanshyam decides to retire. Ghanshyam has two wives who beget a son each. Bhadriram is the son of the first wife, who is the daughter of the king of Jumla, which was one of the most powerful states during that time. She has already passed away in Jumla leaving her son, Bhadriram, in the care of her father. Malebam is born of

the second wife who is the queen now. The controversy about the throne arises because Malebam is elder by birth but younger by conception. The royal court declares Malebam the successor depending on the prevailing practice. But provoked and persuaded by the king of Jumla, Bhadribam claims the throne with a voice that he was conceived earlier. His claim disrupts the peace of the state. King Ghanshyam has gained a popularity of a liberal, benevolent and successful king. He looks for opinions of the royal court before declaring any decision. The people are happy to be under his rule. The common people do not have to face injustice. For example, in the murder case of Junge Sunar by Budhe Purja, Junge's wife gets proper justice. The people are convinced to be always ready for social work. For example, they happily join for the construction of a bridge over the river.

Aware of not having the right to the throne, Bhadribam demands a share of the state. The king rejects this demand too since he senses the division of the state weakens its fighting strength and subsequently makes it easy for the other states like Jumla to attack. Failed again, Bhadribam puts an odd demand that he wants to marry Vishwaprabha. Vishwaprabha is the princess of Deupur who has already been engaged with Malebam. Bhadribam has keenly read the depth of love between Malebam and Vishwaprabha. Although Malebam has also been engaged with another princess, Mahalbasanta, he loves Vishwaprabha more. King Ghanashyam and the courtiers attempt to convince Bhadribam but in vain. They are now fully assured that Bhadribam has been instrumental to the king of Jumla. There arises an impasse. In such a situation, Vishwaprabha broadens her heart to offer her life for the sake of the state. Bhadribam and Vishwaprabha go to live in the neighbouring village, Jyamrukkot.

Bhadribam's target is not the marriage to Vishwaprabha but the throne at any cost. Inspired and motivated by the king of Jumla and supported by Kamal Jaisi, Dilli Bhujel and Kalu Thapa, he weaves a plot against the Parbat Rajya. Vishwaprabha learns about this and informs Malebam. Malebam takes a timely action and exterminates Bhadribam and his attendants. In recognition of this, Malebam offers Vishwaprabha the title of *Rajmata* or Queen Mother or Maharani. Malebam orders his people to build a residential building for her. But surprisingly, Vishwaprabha thinks of becoming a recluse: "*baki jivan sanyasini bhaikan bitauna chahachhu*" [I want to live my life as a recluse] (p. 356). She goes missing and since then nothing has been heard of her whereabouts. After two centuries of her disappearance, Tul Bahadur Shakya bought the land where the residential building of Maharani was being constructed. He made a cattle-shed there, and started to offer incense and prayer clothes in the name of Maharani as well with a belief that there would not be any harm to his cattle from unseen forces. Baniya mentions, "*gothdhupko tithi ma Maharani lai pani dhup dhaja din thale*" [they began to offer incense and piece of cloth to Maharani as well on the ritualistic day of cattle-shed worshipping] (p. 267). Since then, Maharani has been worshipped as a goddess Maharani. People worship her for her incredible sacrifice for the protection of the state. In this sense, Mahesh Paudyal (2020, September 20) rightly comments, "the novel is a serious inquiry into gender and power relations, and a chronicle of women's great sacrifices in power history" (para. 2).

Unquestionably, *Maharani* is a historical fiction that engages a plethora of issues. It has unveiled some hidden issues which can be, as Lohani (2020) opines, "*itihasko bibechnako mahatwopurna anga*" [a good source for further exploration about history] (para. 11). Basically, I observe three issues to be more pertinent: the original script of Khasa Language; the relation between the Thakuris and Magars; and worshipping of Maharani. The issues raised are worth researching.

The Devnagari script has been commonly accepted as the mother of the current Nepali language. But Baniya brings a reference: "*Khas bhasako afnai maulik lipi 'Kharosti' thiyo re lop bhayo. Devnagari le bishthapit garyo*" [They say, the Khas language had its own script called 'Kharosti. It has been displaced by Devnagari] (p. 5). Whether it is a hearsay or a fact, it is now a subject matter for further research.

Baniya also brings into light the unattested history about the original of the Thakuris and the Magars. He mentions: "*Magarat ka kaiyeu magar rajaharule pani janai halyachhan ra aafukan Thakuri bhanaun thalyachhan*" [It is heard that Magar kings of the Magarat too wore the sacred thread (*janai*) and started to be called the Thakuris] (p. 215).

Baniya further states, "*Nishiko Magarputra Aanand 'Shahi Thakuri' bhayaka hun re*. [Ananda, the son of a Magar of Nishi became Shahi Thakuri]" (p. 216). There are debates nowadays about the original relations between the Thakuris and the Magars as well as the Khasas. Some people believe the Thakuris and the Magars are originally from the same ancestors. About the connection between them, Baniya refers, "*Khasale janai lagaudainthya re, Magarle pani janai nalaunya, bihebari sanatan chalthyo re. Khasa raja Gaganiraj le po Khasaharu sabaikan ekmustha janai badya hun re*" [Both the Khasas and the Magars did not wear the sacred threads. Marital relationships between them were not restricted. Khasas began to wear them only when king Gaganiraj offered them the threads] (p. 217). Hopefully, more researches will be made on these "*itihaste pusti nagareka prasanga*" [historically unproven references] as Thapa (2021) too depicts.

The third issue Baniya poignantly raises concerns to the myth of Maharani. The people of Beni and the surrounding areas have deep reverence to Maharani. They worship her as a goddess. After saving the Parbat Rajya from the hand of Bhadribam, she went missing. After two centuries of her disappearance, Tul Bahadur Shakya revered her as a deity. In due course of time, the public reverence elevated her to the position of goddess. Baniya sheds light on the creation of Maharani myth as: "*gaigoth ko surakchhyako nimitta Maharaniko namma dhup dhaja din suru gareko tehi challanle Maharani lai deuti banayo. kalantar ma deutile Devi Bhagawati ko manyata paun thalin*" [Shakya's offering of incense and prayer clothes for the cattle's protection elevated Maharani into a deity who was recognized as goddess Devi Bhagawati in due course of time] (pp. 367-68). Baniya dismantles this very myth of Maharani by contending that she is unquestionably a brave patriotic lady, "*birangana*," (p. 368) but not a goddess. By disclosing the hidden story, Baniya intends to stress on the fact that the mythic story about Maharani is manmade.

The fact behind defying the Maharani myth is Baniya's rebellious mind. Despite grown up in a highly religious Hindu family and being a good reader of religious scriptures himself, he developed a rebellious consciousness towards such scriptures. In an interview with Mahesh Paudyal (2020, September 22), he revealed, "But the rebel inside me since my schooldays did not allow me to accept those scriptures as they are. I had a critical, interrogating and contrapuntal mind. I naturally started identifying their loopholes, discriminatory and illusionary contents and limitations" (ans. to q. 3). Furthermore, his political involvement in the Communist Party added to his critical and interrogating mind. Thus, he defies to accept the Maharani myth—Maharani as a goddess—founded without a factual history. However, more research will explore more facts about this myth in the days to come.

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