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Kingship, rituals, and power in Nepal

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

KINGSHIP, RITUALS, AND POWER IN NEPAL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

by

Nawaraj Chaulagain

2003

To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Nawaraj Chaulagain, and entitled Kingship, Rituals, and Power in Nepal, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Steven Heine

Terry Rey

Nathan Katz, Major Professor

Date of Defense: July 21, 2003

The thesis of Nawaraj Chaulagain is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Douglas Wartzok
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2003

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the People of Nepal.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

KINGSHIP, RITUALS, AND POWER IN NEPAL

by

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Florida International University, 2003

Miami, Florida.

Professor Nathan Katz, Major Professor

Drawing on the ritual theory of “rebounding violence” as developed by Maurice Bloch, the contemporary anthropologist, the thesis examined some kingship rituals periodically observed in Nepal and highlighted their political implications. The study also made an assessment of the concept of “divine kingship” in orthodox “Hindu” tradition and traced connections between religion and politics.

In Nepal, kingship is taken as a symbol of sovereign power and national unity, and the king is often revered in public festivals as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, or as a representative of some other divinities such as Indra, Bhairava and the Buddha. The thesis explored such rituals, demystified the concept of “divine kingship,” and displayed through historical evidences how Nepali rulers have appropriated religious occasions for their own legitimacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
1. Kingship in Hindu Tradition: Divine or Secular?	1
2. Kingship, Ritual, and History	17
3. Kingship Rituals in Kathmandu	40
a. Indrayatra and the Chariot Procession of Kumari	40
b. Vijaya Dashami	59
c. Pachali Bhairava Yatra and the Tantrik King	73
4. The Coronation Ritual of the Hindu King in Nepal	81
5. Samyak Mahadan Puja: King as an incarnation of Dipankara Buddha	98
6. Conclusion	114
WORKS CITED	125

Section One

Kingship in Hindu Tradition: Divine or Secular?

In traditional Hindu contexts, kingship may be defined as the central institution of the states ruled by or centered upon the person of one man, the king. Traditional Hindu society ruled as a kingdom is characterized by a complex and hierarchical internal structure and is often divided into different social classes in which the monarch represents the center or pivot of power, and the various institutions are constituted in such a way that they either indirectly boost or directly legitimize that power. As the center of the society organized as a state, the monarch is also projected as a mediator between various parts and interests that make up the social order and also between the human and supra-human worlds. Hindu kingship, thus, assumes the central position of both the sacral and the secular power, or the mediation thereof. In this section, we will concentrate on the issue of “divine” kingship in Hindu tradition and discuss its political implications.

In Sanskrit literature, the monarch has been designated by various titles like *rajan* (one who gladdens or delights), *bhupa* or *bhupala* (protector or guardian of the earth), *goptr* (herdsman), *nrpa* (protector of men), *isvara* (lord), *prabhu* (thriving or the mighty one) and *gopa-janasya* (herdsman of people)¹. He is also called a *kshetriya*² (the man who can protect men, who is valorous, restrained and powerful, and who is the punisher of the wicked), *natha* (the term denoting the ideas of “refuge” or “protection”), *drighabahu* (of long arms), *mahabahu* (of mighty arms, or long arms, the designation

¹ The term “*gopa-janasya*” occurs as early as the times of *Rigveda* 3, 43, 5. Note: words italicized and explained within brackets belong to the Sanskrit language.

² *Sukraniti*, I, 8I; J. Gonda talks about some of these epithets in his *Ancient Indian Kingship* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1966) 1-20.

often given to Visnu, the protector god par excellence for his capacity to bear the heaven and earth on his mighty arms), *dharmatman* (an embodiment of dharma, of order, truth, norm and justice), and *deva* (a god, or at least one of a class of powerful beings, regarded as possessing supernormal faculties and as controlling a department of nature or activity in the human sphere). He is also symbolically said to be the “husband” and “lord” (*vallabha, pati*) of the land or earth. Further, the king and the land, two units of the state along with the people, are regarded as the “father” (*pita*) and “mother” (*mata*) of the people, who in turn are taken as their “children” (*praja*).³

Although the special designations attributed to his position already subsume the duty and power of the king, Sanskrit texts are unanimous in assigning to the king the protection of the people and the maintenance of the order of the world, or even of the whole universe. He is readily exalted⁴ to be the world order itself, dharma incarnate,⁵ or, at the very least, equal to ten wise men learned in the Vedas.⁶ So, whatever the king does is the norm,⁷ and all dharma is subsumed in the *rajadharma* (the duty of the king).⁸ A kingless country, therefore, comes to ruin and it is irreligious (literally, not in accord with the Vedas) to inhabit a kingless country: “Nothing is more conducive to sin than a kingdom without a ruler”.⁹ He is “the maker of the age” and it depends on him, as determined by the Brahmins, whether the age is the *krta*, *treta*, *dvapara*, or *kali* age (four cyclic aeons in terms of successive deterioration of moral and social values,

³ *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, I.109.21-51, describes the earth as a mother and relates the king to earth and people.

⁴ J. C. Heesterman also mentions some of these epithets in his “The Conundrum of the King’s Authority,” *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Oxford University Press, Delhi 1998); J. Gonda, 1-20.

⁵ *Ibid.* 14; *Naradasmṛiti*, 18.20; *Mahabharata*, 3.185.26.

⁶ *Mahabharata*, 12.63.25.

⁷ *Naradasmṛiti*, 18.21.

⁸ *Mahabharata*, 12.63.25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.41.27; 105.44; 5.39.78; 12.67.4; 12.66.7; *Ramayana*, 2.67.9.