Kingship, rituals, and power in Nepal

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DOI: 10.25148/etd.FI14060150

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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.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude, inexpressible in words, to Dr. Nathan Katz, Dr. Steven Heine, and Dr. Terry Rey for their invaluable and most generous guidance. They undertook a laborious task of guiding this inexperienced researcher and correcting many mistakes. I offer my grateful heart to them.

Dr. Katz initiated me into the study of my own tradition and sustained me with his unfailing intellectual and emotional support. He helped me to explore with his expertise and reflect by his silence. I owe my eternal reverence to him.

Dr. Heine’s outstanding research and academic caliber were sources of inspiration from the very beginning of my life at FIU. His intellectual support and compassionate guidance have been unforgettable. I am truly thankful to him.

It was Dr. Rey’s Modern Analysis of Religion course that helped me link Maurice Bloch’s theory to Hindu kingship rituals. I am most fortunate to have such an open-minded intellectual who became a constant and powerful source for this research. I wish to express my thankfulness to him.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Lesley Northup and Ellen Goldberg who inspired and provided me with all necessary support in ways too numerous to mention here. The research has benefited much by their intellectual support and motherly love.

I am equally indebted to my Professors of the Department of Religious Studies for their constant academic support, attention, and encouragement for the last two years. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance I received from Daniel Alvarez, Dr. Oren B. Stier, Dr. Christine Gudorf, Dr. James E. Huchingson, Dr. Eric Larson, Dr. Zion Zohar, and Dr. Ranabir Chakravarti.
I would like to sincerely thank Mirelille “Mimi” Sylvain-David and Robert Cruz of the Department of Religious Studies. They became an incredible help to me from the day I stepped in this Department. I would like to express my life long gratitude to them. I would also like to thank Jessica Reyes of the Department of Asian Studies and Louise of Religious Studies for their help.

I am grateful to my friends, and particularly I would like to mention the names of Michael Martinez, Regina Undorfer, Walter Milner, Prem Chapagain, Prasad Shankar Bhattacharya, Jane Atchison-Nevel, Maria Proviones-Bishop, and Ruben Garotte who encouraged me for my academic progress. Similarly, I would also like to express my thankfulness to GSA for its attention to my research.

I would like to extend my gratefulness to my family for their incalculable help and forbearance. They put up with every difficulty to nurture my academic aspiration and showed unusual understanding throughout. I also express my gratefulness to Dr. Ananda Mohan Bhattarai and Mrs. Pushpa Bhattrai for bringing some materials from Nepal and helping me in many ways during their research period in MIT. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. Taranath Sharma, Mrs Sharma and Hari Kafle who worked together to procure a twenty-five minute video tape on kingship rituals.

Above all, I express my immense gratitude to the writers I have quoted in this research and also to those whose works I went through in the process of writing my thesis. Without them, I would not be able to give this form to my research.
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.
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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

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\(^1\) 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, 81; 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).

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 exalted to be the world order itself, dharma incarnate, or,
at the very least, equal to ten wise men learned in the Vedas. So, whatever the king
does is the norm, and all dharma is subsumed in the rajadharma (the duty of the king).
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”. 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,

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3 Vishnudharmottara Purana, 1.109.21-51, 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; Naradasmrti, 18.20; Mahabharata, 3.185.26.
6 Mahabharata, 12.63.25.
7 Naradasmriti, 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.