

The Ancestors of Jang Bahadur Rana: History, Propaganda and Legend

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Introduction

In 1846 Jang Bahadur Kunwar and his brothers emerged victorious from the long power struggle which had followed the fall of Bhimsen Thapa, and for a century afterwards the history of their family and the political history of Nepal were virtually synonymous. It was not unnatural for those with such a distinguished present position to lay claim to an equally distinguished past, and this was officially recognised by the *lal mohar* of 15 May 1848 authorising Jang's family to style themselves 'Kunwar Ranaji' and asserting their descent from the Rajput rulers of Mewar, whom the Shah dynasty also claimed as their ancestors. Later sources present an elaborate family history, tracing the line back to the hero of the *Ramayana* and also giving a detailed account of the part played by Jang's immediate ancestors in the foundation and expansion of unified Nepal. This article will first examine the legends concerning the family's origins, then look at the Kunwars' role in Nepal's military and political history down to the death of Bal Nar Singh Kunwar. The primary purpose is the simple and straightforward one of putting on record the basic facts about the early Kunwars by testing the version presented by the Rana family historians against the other available evidence. By way of conclusion, a brief attempt will also be made to see what light is thrown on the value-structure of Nepali society by the 'useful past' which was constructed for the Kunwars.

Family Origins

The 1848 *lal mohar*, as published by Satish Kumar (1967:158-9), gives the supposed Rajput pedigree as follows:

Among your ancestors, one brother was ruling Chittaurgarh, while the other three brothers, not seeing good prospects there, proceeded towards the hills. One of them became the Raja of Taklakhar (a place in the north-west of Nepal, now in Tibet), another went to reside in Jumla, and the offsprings of the third in later times settled in Kaski. Your great-great-grandfather, Ahiram Kunwar, came and lived in Gorkha in the time of our ancestor Nar Bhupal Shah, and (your) ancestors were called Kunwars until the present day. Now (since) I am pleased with you, it seems to me that you and your ancestors have been Kunwar Ranaji. Today again, I confer on you the caste of Rana.

A slightly different account of the Chittaurghat connection is contained in a document which was made available to Daniel Wright, British Residency Surgeon from 1863 to 1876, and subsequently published by him (1877:285-8). This makes the family the descendants of 'Rama Sinha Rana', great-nephew of the Chittaurghat ruler 'Tatta Rana' and grandfather of Ahiram Kunwar, and claims that on the fall of the fortress (presumably meaning its final capture by Akbar in 1568) he entered the hills and took service under the King of an unnamed state.

A more elaborate family history was published (in Hindi) in 1879, two years after Jang's death, by his former servant, Ramlal, who traces the line back to epic times and to Lava Vir, eldest son of Ram Chandra. In this narrative the departure from Chittaurghat is placed in the 12th century, and there are seventeen generations, not two, between 'Tatta Rao' (clearly to be identified with Wright's 'Tata Rana') and Ram Sinha Rana. Tatta Rao supposedly occupied the Mewar throne for a brief period after his father and grandfather had fallen fighting alongside Prithviraj Chauhan of Delhi against Mohammed Gori, and was then deposed by his uncle and sent with his younger brother to Bhilwara, some eighty miles from Chittaurghat. Four generations later, one of the brother's descendants moved to Pali in Marwar, which appears still to have been Rama Sinha Rana's home before he set out for the Himalayas. The hill-state in which he then settled is named as 'Karsanga' and was presumably in the far west of what is now Nepal.

Ramlal's detailed narrative, with his frequent dates and lengthy genealogies, the latter sometimes clearly inconsistent with the former, cannot, of course, be accepted as historical. Nonetheless, some of the stories which he incorporates in the early sections of his work are of interest for the way in which they involve kingship, and, doubtless designedly, echo legends concerning the Shah dynasty. King Siladitya, for instance, who reigned at Vallabhipur in Gujarat, enjoyed continuous success in battle because his *divasakti* summoned to his aid from out of a sacred pool the seven-headed horse which drew the sun's chariot. He was finally defeated only when a treacherous minister advised his Persian enemies to pollute the pool with cow's blood and thus destroy its magic power (Ramlal 1879:4-5). Siladitya's youngest queen was pregnant at the time of his death, so delayed becoming *sati* until she had borne a son and entrusted him to a Brahman woman. When the boy grew up he was chosen as king by the local people, and the Brahman woman's descendants became *rajgurus* to him and his successors. When eight generations later a descendant was killed in a military revolt, it was the *rajguru* family who again looked after an infant prince. This boy was rendered invincible by the spittle of the *risi* Harit, whose disciple he had become. He set off to take service under the ruler of Chittaur, to whom he was related through his mother, and en route was given a sword by Gorakhnath, the patron deity of the Shah dynasty. In due course he became ruler of Chittaur himself (Ramlal 1879:6-10). In writing all this, Ramlal doubtless relied on a combination of his own imagination and the general stock of Rajput legends, but the result is still truth of a kind, because it accurately reflects the traditional

conception of what the relationship between Brahman, Ksatriya and divine power ought to be.

The simple core of the story, the Kunwars' descent from the rulers of Chittaurghat, could in theory also be true in the straightforward, historical sense. There is, however, no evidence to corroborate it, and no reason to take it any more seriously than any of the similar pedigrees devised for so many other powerful families in the Nepal Himalaya. In the Kunwars' case there is not even clear indication that they advanced such a claim before Jang Bahadur's appointment as premier, and Leelanateswar Baral (1964:112-3) has suggested that the whole story was invented only after that event. He argues that if it had been current, earlier mention of the claim would have been found either in the material collected by Nepali scholars or in the Hodgson papers, particularly as Jang's own son-in-law was a pupil of Hodgson's at Darjeeling. *Ex silentio* arguments should always be viewed with caution, and, so far as Hodgson is concerned, this one is particularly weak. The son-in-law, Gajraj Thapa, certainly knew about his wife's supposed ancestry when he and Hodgson were in contact, since this was in 1856-7,² eight years after the *lal mohar* recognising Jang Bahadur's status: either he chose not to mention it, or Hodgson did not preserve a record of the information. When Hodgson was amassing the bulk of his material, viz. during his time in Kathmandu from 1820 to 1843, the Kunwars were not sufficiently prominent for their family oral tradition necessarily to have been set down for him. It cannot be ruled out that the nucleus of the story was already in existence before 1846, though, if this was so, the claim was certainly not accepted by any other family: the wording of the 1848 document clearly implies that the Kunwars had not up to that time been regarded as Rajputs in Nepal, but rather as ordinary Khas-Chetris.

Turning from the examination of the Kunwars' legendary history, some conjectures on their real origin can be based on the name itself. The word *kunwar* derives from the Sanskrit *kumar*, meaning 'prince', and was used widely in India as a title with that sense. The name is a common one in Nepal, and may obviously have been adopted by particular families because they were, or claimed to be, of royal descent. In other cases, however, what may be signified is rather a connection with the Kanphata yogis, ascetic devotees of Gorakhnath, who had played an important part in the religious life of the hills since the 14th century, and many of whom were intimately connected with the political development of the *baisi* and *caubisi* kingdoms.³ The title 'Kunwar' was given to followers of the sect who had not undergone full initiation, this being a natural corollary of the ascetics' styling one another 'Maharaj'. The lesser title was used in particular of children born to yogis by women in theory involved with them in the rites of the 'left-handed path' but in practice often simply their concubines. Many present-day Kunwars will be the descendants of such unions, in which the female partner was frequently a slave seeking to raise her status through association with the sect (Janaklal Sharma 1982:73-7).

Although members of a particular Khas-Chetri *thar* (i.e. persons bearing the same 'surname') are often spoken of as belonging to one 'clan', strictly speaking this is inaccurate, since the unit of putative common descent is the *kul* ('lineage'), several of which are found within a single *thar*. The descendants of Jang Bahadur and his borthers, together with the other Kunwars who were admitted to the biennial 'Rana Kunwar Divali' at Panchiyani temple in Kathmandu, belong to the Rana lineage of the Kunwar *thar*, and Khem Bahadur Bista has consequently suggested that it was their lineage name which led Jang's family to concoct the Chittaurgadh story (Bista 1972:104-5). There are, however, strong reasons for believing that the lineage name was changed after Jang's claim to Rajput status was officially accepted, and that, as assumed by Leelanteswar Baral (1972:111), Jang and his forbears belonged to the Khandka *kul*. As Bista himself admits (1972:43), this view is supported by the story told to him in Kathmandu of Kunwars who declared themselves as 'Khandka Kunwar' at the Panchiyani temple being admitted to the *kuldevata* ceremony. Secondly, in addition to being a lineage name in use in the present-day, 'Khandka', in the variant form 'Khanka', also figures in the Kunwar section of Brian Hodgson's 1833 list of lineages (1872:42-3), in which 'Rana' occurs only as a Magar *thar*. Finally, the version of Jang's genealogy given by Wright (1877:285) specifically states that for bravery in battle one of Rama Sinha Rana's six sons 'had the title of Kunwar Khadka conferred on him, by which title his descendants are known to the present day'. Ramlal (1879:28) gives a similar story, using the form *khundka*, whilst a modern account by a member of the Rana family (Phalendra Rana 1957:3) has *khadga* and claims the title was conferred on Rama Sinha Rana himself. All this leaves no doubt that Jang Bahadur was originally a Khandka Kunwar.

This conclusion perhaps permits a futher conjecture. According to the traditional account of the 1559 seizure of Gorkha by Drabya Shah, the founder of the Shah dynasty, the previous king whom he defeated and killed was a 'Khadga' or 'Khadka' (Acharya 1967:1, 56-7). There is a conflict in the sources as to whether this pre-Shah king was a Khas or a member of one of the hill tribes, and it must be admitted that there is no necessary kinship with Jang's family since 'Khandka', today as in the 19th century, is the name of a completely distinct *thar* as well as of a Kunwar lineage.⁴ However, if it is assumed that the word was once a dynastic name used by ruling families at Gorkha and most probably elsewhere in the hills, then possibly the Khandka Kunwars came to acquire it either as rulers themselves or as associates of rulers. They could thus, after all, conceivably be allowed a royal pedigree, though of hills rather than plains provenance. Their subsequent claim to Rana status, if not a straightforward imitation of the Shah dynasty's claim, may have been prompted by descent on the female side from Magar Ranas, whose origin legend certainly connected them with Chittaurgadh:⁵ Khas-Magar marriage was common in the hills, and seems the more likely in this case because of Jang's own physical appearance.

The Kunwars and Nepali History

Our sources conflict over the location of Jang's ancestor's earliest home in the hills, but all the identifiable places mentioned are in the far-west, and this, of course, is what one would expect, given the long-term west to east migration of the Khas along the Himalayas. Although it is uncertain in which generation it took place, it is with the settlement of an ancestor at Kaski, the *baisi* kingdoms centred on Pokhara, that the family's history can properly be said to have begun.⁶ Here they were granted land at Dhungresanhu on the banks of the Seti Gandaki (Phalendra Rana 1957:3).

The abandonment of Kaski for Gorkha, all sources agree, was made by Ahiram Kunwar because he was unwilling to let the king of Kaski marry his daughter without full wedding rites. The king offered only the lesser ceremony of *kalas diyo puja* ('worship with pitcher and lamp'). Amongst Chetris today this is often used when the couple have cohabited before the ceremony, but it seems also to have been employed in the past where there was some imperfection in the bride's caste status.⁷ Quite possibly the king claimed Rajput status for himself but regarded Ahiram as a simple Khas. Whatever the precise circumstances, Ahiram took his defiance to the point of fighting against his royal master when the latter came with troops to seize the girl. After the battle he left Kaski and was invited to Nar Bhupal Shah to Gorkha, where he, or possibly a brother, received a *birta* land grant soon to be known as 'Kunwar Khola'.⁸ The details of this traditional account of Ahiram can, of course, be questioned, but he is himself undoubtedly a historical personage, being named in a document of 1799 to which his grandson Ranjit was a signatory.⁹

Ahiram had three sons, of whom the eldest, Ram Krishna, great-grandfather of Jang Bahadur, was twelve years old when the family arrived in Gorkha in around 1740.¹⁰ Both Ram Krishna and his brothers took part in the long struggle which Nar Bhupal Shah's son and successor, Prithvi Narayan, waged for control of the Kathmandu valley and of the hills to its east and west. The account of Ram Krishna's exploits given by Ramlal, and reproduced in detail in the biography of Jang Bahadur by his son Pudma,¹¹ suggests that he was in fact the major architect of the Gorkha victory. In contrast, the standard account of the unification of Nepal, Ludwig Stiller's *Rise of the House of Gorkha*, mentions him only incidentally. The truth in fact lies between these two extremes, and Ram Krishna's contribution was sufficiently valuable to ensure him an honourable though far from pre-eminent position among the *bharadari* of the new state.

Prithvi Narayan's campaigning opened with the seizure of Nuwakot, a strategically placed town in the hills north-west of the Valley, on 26 September 1744 (Acharya 1967:1,227-8). The king's own brother, Dalmardan, took a distinguished part, although only twelve, so there is no reason to doubt the claim that Ram Krishna Kunwar, and his brother Jay Krishna, then sixteen and fourteen respectively, were also

involved (Phalendra Rana 1957:7). However, neither brother's participation is reported by sources other than the Rana family historians, and Ramlal's picture of Ram Krishna as commander-in-chief of the Gorkha forces is complete fantasy (Ramlal 1879:31-2).

It was not until fifteen years later, after continual struggles over strong-points north-east and west of the Valley and the first, disastrous attack on Kirtipur, that Ram Krishna emerged in truth as a military commander. The *Bhasavamsavali*, a 19th century chronicle, includes him amongst the leaders of the Gorkha force which captured the forts of Palanchok and Kabhre in January 1760 (Acharya 1967: II, 384). The chronicle gives him the title *jetho budho*, literally 'senior elder', a designation known later to have applied both to village functionaries with land revenue and judicial responsibilities and to a central government official who attended on the king, acting as a messenger and investigator on his behalf (Adhikari 1984: 114; Kirkpatrick 1811:202). Ram Krishna was left as military governor of the newly conquered territory, installing himself at the village of Bhamarkot. This was the beginning of a special association between the Kunwars and the hill country east of the Valley, and an official document of 1804 still gives the village as the home of Ram Krishna's son Ranjit.¹²

The capture in August 1762 of Makwanpur, capital of the kingdom of the same name straddling the hills between Kathmandu and India, and the seizure six weeks later of Timal, Sindhuli and Hariharpur completed the encirclement of the Valley. According to Phalendra Rana (1957:8) Ram Krishna fought at Makwanpur, and the *Bhasavamsavali* lists him among the leaders in the later campaign (N.R. Pant et al. 1968:843-6). Victory at Timal, however, was marred by the death of his third brother, Amar Singh, from whom the Kunwars in the districts of Dadhuva and Saglekhola trace their descent (Phalendra Rana 1957:8).¹³

At the start of the following year, when the forces of Mir Kasim of Bengal invaded the hills in support of the ousted Makwanpur ruler, Ram Krishna was put in readiness to move against him but did not in the event see any action (Acharya 1967: III, 419). He was, however, very much involved in the fighting which reduced the settlements between his base at Bhamarkot and the eastern rim of the Valley, and in particular the capture of the key town of Dhulikhel on 23 October 1763 (Acharya 1967: III, 424). Over the next four years he was engaged in maintaining the blockade of the Valley towns, and also for a time transferred back to the Gorkha heartland to help ward off any combination of *caubisi* states against Prithvi Narayan (Stiller 1973:123-4; Regmi 1975:I, 453).

Ramlal (1879:39; c.f. Pudma Rana 1909:5) ascribe to Ram Krishna a key role in the conquest of the Valley, claiming that he led the troops which in 1767 defeated the British force under Captain Kinloch attempting to relieve the beleaguered Newar kingdoms, and that he also headed the force which took Kathmandu itself in September 1768. On the former occasion he appears in fact to have been ordered into action only

after the main engagement near Sindhuli had already taken place, and he probably never even made contact with the retreating enemy (Acharya 1967: III, 418 & 487-9; D.R. Regmi 1975: I, 191). As for the entry into Kathmandu, the account in the *Bhasavamsavali* does not name any of the leaders of the attacking columns, and Ram Krishna's name is well down its list of officers commended for their contribution to victory after the capture of Patan and Bhadgaon had completed the subjugation of the Valley (N.R. Pant et al. 1968; 878 & 908-9). Nevertheless, the wording of a remarkable letter he received from Prithvi Narayan three years later suggests that he did indeed distinguish himself in the fighting. This was written in September 1772 when Ram Krishna and Abhiman Singh Basnet were establishing Gorkha sovereignty in the Kirata region, east of the Dudh Kosi. The surviving precis as published by N.R. Pant (1968: 1095) runs as follows:

When Kalu Pande was killed at Kirtipur, I despaired of ever conquering the three cities of Nepal, but thanks to your wisdom and the force of your sword the conquest was achieved. To reward you in proportion to your efforts not even half my kingdom would be sufficient. I have granted the (revenues from the) territory around Simbu and from Dhulikhel to be enjoyed by you and by successive generations of your family. Your brother's death at Timal was a great sorrow. Now the task of conquering the Kirata country is yours. Dated (1829) Aswin Badi 5 Wednesday (16 September 1772)¹⁴

Ram Krishna was thus put on a level with the illustrious Kalu Pande, Gorkha commander-in-chief until his death in the premature 1757 assault and ancestor of the 'Kala Pandes', who were to play such a prominent role in Nepali politics over the next seventy years. A few months later the king was to tell Ram Krishna in another letter that 'you excelled the other sardars in the conquest of Nepal (sc. the Kathmandu Valley) and of the Kirata country'¹⁵ Such fulsome praise may have been partly calculated to encourage the recipient to further exertions, and the Kunwars, unlike the Pandes, Basnets and Panths, were not singled out for mention in the *Divya Upades*, Prithvi Narayan's political testament (Pokhrel 1986: 159). Nevertheless, these two letters, of undoubted authenticity, prove that Ram Krishna's military contribution was a major one. Had they been available to Ramlal or Padma Jung, they would have served their purpose better than the tales of imaginary exploits they present to the reader.

After the eastern campaign had concluded with the overthrow of the principalities of Chaudandi and Bijaypur and the establishing of Nepal's frontier on the Tista, Ram Krishna continued his military career in the west. He survived Prithvi Narayan, who died in January 1775, and served his son Pratap Singh (1775-7), grandson Rana Bahadur (1777-99) and great-grandson Girvana Yuddhya (1799-1816). For five years from 1777 he was in charge of the newly conquered Chitwan area, close to the

sensitive border with British India (Regmi 1975: 277-8 & 295). He died in 1787 or early 1788 (1844 V.S.) establishing a military base at Pyuthana in the western hills (Phalendra Rana 1957: 13).

Although the *Bhasavamsavali* does not emphasise Ram Krishna's military role, it does describe in detail his pious gesture in paving at his own expense the road between Pashupatinath and the nearby temple of Guyeswari, and in establishing a *guthi* (land made over in trust for religious purposes) for the feeding of Brahmans and ascetics. The land donated had belonged to a Bhaktapur prince and had been given to Ram Krishna as spoils of war. An inscription set up by descendants of his brother, Jay Krishna, claims that both brothers made the gift jointly.¹⁶ The Rana family historians add the anecdote that Ram Krishna asked permission to undertake the project when Prithvi Narayan asked his followers to name their own rewards after the conquest of the Valley. The king expressed astonishment as he had long had it secretly in mind to pave that road himself, but he nevertheless gave him permission to go ahead (Ramlal 1879: 40; Pudma Rana 1909: 51; Phalendra Rana 1957: 11).

Phalendra Rana links this episode with the origin of the *guru-cela* relationship between an Adhikari Brahman family and the Kunwars. Whilst supervising work on the road, Ram Krishna supposedly observed a Brahman hovering a foot or two above the earth, deep in meditation. He was instructed in a dream by the god Pashupatinath that the dream was none other than the god himself, and that he should make him his *diksa guru*.

Ram Krishna's piety undoubtedly enhanced the stature of the Kunwars in the eyes of their contemporaries, just as it impressed the chronicler, but it did not of itself guarantee political influence. He appears never to have been made a *kaji* ('minister') but to have retained to the end of his life the rank of *sardar*, which he probably obtained during the eastern campaign (D.R. Regmi 1975: I, 244). Phalendra (1957: 13) claims that he was awarded the special status of *mukhya sardar* after the 1773 capture of the Chaudandi capital. In fact, Prithvi Narayan had described him as such in the letter of 1773 quoted above and the words do not denote a new rank but simply the opinion that he was the most valuable of the *sardars*.

There is little evidence on Ram Krishna's political role, but he appears to have been a partisan of Bahadur Shah, a younger son of Prithvi Narayan, who was sent into exile by his brother King Pratap Shah, and then subsequently struggled with Queen Rajendra Lakshmi for the regency after Pratap's death and the accession of the infant Rana Bahadur in 1777. A letter which Bahadur Shah sent in November 1777 suggests he expected Ram Krishna would support him (Regmi 1975: I, 288). However, Ram Krishna's involvement was not deep enough to compromise him with the opposing faction. Sympathy for Bahadur Shah was in any case widespread among Prithvi Narayan's older commanders, whereas Pratap Shah, and afterwards his widow, relied more on Newer, non-Gorkha adherents (Shaha 1982: 85-6)¹⁷.

Whatever Ram Krishna's precise standing in the factional struggles at court, the land grants made to his family in perpetuity would, barring the most extreme political upset, guarantee the Kunwars local influence and a secure if modest livelihood. Prithvi Narayan's letter of September 1772, quoted above, referred to Simbu and Dulikhel, of which the former cannot now be identified. Dhulikhel, on the other hand, is a well-known Newar settlement beyond the eastern rim of the Kathmandu Valley, situated about twenty miles from Kathmandu itself and five miles west of Ram Krishna's new home at Bhamerkot. The modern road to the Tibetan border passes through it, and in the pre-tarmac era it stood at the junction of major trails leading both northwards, and, via the Sun Kosi valley or adjacent ridges, to the eastern territories Ram Krishna played an important part in acquiring for the new, unified Nepal. Whilst he took over the Dhulikhel *khet* lands - that is the low-lying, irrigated fields - he supported the inhabitants in a successful petition to retain their *pakho* (nonirrigated) lands (M.B. Regmi, 1978, 1978b). Thereafter the Kunwars appear to have acted as patrons of the town, interceding when central government threatened to infringe the citizens' remaining land rights.

Ram Krishna's death in 1787/8 was followed a year later by that of his brother, Jay Krishna (Phalendra Rana 1957: 40-1) and the two mens' sons, Ranjit and Chandravir, were left as the senior representatives of the family. Both were to pursue military careers and play their part in the further expansion of the Nepal borders.

In the case of Ranjit, grandfather of Jang Bahadur, the Rana family historians provide a detailed narrative, though, as with Ram Krishna's career, their testimony is unreliable. Ramlal's account is marred not only by predictable exaggeration but also by chronological confusion. Ranjit's first alleged military exploit is the suppression of a rebellion in Jumla, the traditional leader of the *baisi* kingdoms, which occurred shortly after the area had been brought under Gorkha rule. Ramlal (1879: 40-1) dates this to 1772, yet it is known from other sources that the initial conquest of Jumla was not achieved until 1789 (Stiller: 1973: 185). The source of the confusion will be Ramlal's placing Ram Krishna's death sixteen years too early (viz. in 1771 rather than 1787). Assuming Ranjit did actually fight in Jumla, this may have been during the 1789 campaign (in which case the reference to 'rebellion' will be a mistake), or alternatively it is possible he was involved in suppressing the uprising which broke out in Jumla and other parts of western Nepal following the Chinese invasion of 1792 (M.R. Pant 1966: 10, 45-6).

Ranjit is also supposed to have participated in the conquest of Chitwan, the area of which his father was then made governor. This operation took place in 1777 under the direction of Abhiman Singh Basnet, with whom Ram Krishna had earlier campaigned in the east, and of Swarup Singh Kharki (Acharya 1965: 75-6). If Ranjit did in fact take part, then (Ramlal 1879:41;) and (Pudma Rana 1909: 6) must be wrong in stating that he was eighteen years old when his father died, as this

would make him only eight in 1777.¹⁸ Ramlal is in any case mistaken in making him commander of the Gorkha forces on this occasion. There is, however, no reason to doubt the tradition that Ranjit participated in the campaigns of the mid-eighties which overthrew the caubisi kingdoms east of the Gandaki (Ramlal 1879: 41-2), though he must again have been serving in a subordinate capacity.¹⁹

It is with Nepal's two invasions of Tibet - in 1788 and 1791 - that Ranjit first indubitably emerges as a major military leader. The chronicles list him among the commanders of both expeditions, and, significantly for later developments, he was again closely associated with Abhiman Singh Basnet (D.R. Regmi 1975: I, 432, 439 & 444). Ramlal's portrayal of Ranjit as commander-in-chief for the second invasion is an exaggeration, but not completely removed from the reality.

There is a more serious conflict of sources concerning Ranjit's role during the Chinese invasion of Nepal which Nepali actions in Tibet provoked. A large Chinese army crossed the Himalayas in 1792 and advanced down the Trusuli valley. The course of events is described in detail in a letter sent shortly afterwards by the government in Kathmandu to its officers in the far west.²⁰ The Nepali forces fought a series of delaying actions on the line of successive left-bank tributaries, and although the Chinese were always able to continue their advance their casualties mounted and negotiations were opened. In the course of these, the Chinese demanded to be allowed to cross the Betravati river and to hold talks at Nuwakot, the town on the ridge south of the river which guarded access to the Kathmandu Valley from the north-west. When permission was denied, they foolishly attempted to force a crossing, and were driven back with heavy losses. Negotiations were resumed and peace agreed on terms which involved the Nepalis giving up their gains in Tibet and agreeing to send a 'tribute' mission to Peking.

Whereas this contemporary account mentions a number of Gorkha commanders and implies that Damodar Pande, son of Prithvi Narayan's old Commander-in-Chief, played the most prominent part, Ramlal makes Ranjit the leader throughout. Ramlal is supported in this by the 'chronology' (i.e. chronicle?) cited in Regmi's account of the war (Ramlal 1879:43-4; D.R. Regmi, 1975: I, 445). However, if Ranjit did in fact have a central role, it is inexplicable why this should have been ignored in King Rana Bahadur's letter. In any case, the details of Ramlal's narrative are wildly distorted. Not only is there the usual exaggeration of number - a Chinese force of 10,000 to 15,000 becomes 70,000 and an engagement in which the Chinese lost around 200 men becomes one with 4,000 casualties on each side²¹ - but he describes a final Nepali victory at 'Panchmane ('Five Chortens') mountain,' in which Ranjit used torches fastened to the horns of oxen and lamps hung in trees to trick the enemy into believing they were under mass attack, and then fell upon them from the rear. The basis for this story may be a local legend about a Panchmane ridge within the Kathmandu Valley, but it clearly has no foundation in reality.²² The final conclusion must be

that Ranjit was serving against the Chinese in a junior position - perhaps an assistant to Abhiman Basnet's nephew Kirtiman - or he was not involved in the campaign at all.²³ His posting to Jumla (see above) might have occurred immediately after his return from the second Tibetan expedition at the end of 1791.

In the years following the Chinese invasion, Gorkha expansion was largely suspended, and political developments in Kathmandu were the main focus of concern. In the wake of Colonel Kirkpatrick's unhappy mission to Kathmandu in 1793, Bahadur Shah, regent since 1785, was relieved of his post and imprisoned by his nephew, King Rana Bahadur, who now took personal charge of the government. There followed the dramatic events of Rana Bahadur's abdication, attempted reassertion of control and withdrawal to Banaras in 1800. The inclusion in the king's party of Ranjit's seventeen year old son, Balnar Singh Kunwar, was to be of crucial importance for the family's fortunes.

There is no direct role on what role, if any, Kunwars had played in the political struggles of the nineties, nor on their position in the network of families at the heart of the Nepali *bharadari*, and in particular what marriage connections they possessed. Ranjit Kunwar, like his father before him, may none the less be assumed to have had little political importance on his own account, and in 1799 held the relatively low rank of *subba*.²⁴ The reason behind Bal Narsingh's appointment to Rana Bahadur's entourage can therefore only be guessed at, but one hypothesis which readily suggests itself is that, like the young Bhimsen Thapa himself, he owed his position to the patronage of Kaji Kirtiman Singh Basnet.²⁵ As has already been seen, both Ranjit and Ram Krishna Kunwar had been close military associates of Kirtiman's uncle Abhiman Singh Basnet, and a special relationship between the two families may possibly have developed. A more remote possibility is that the Kunwars' alliance with Bhimsen Thapa's family, rather than commencing from Bal Narsingh and Bhimsen's shared Benares exile, in fact predated it, so that Bhimsen himself recommended the former's inclusion. The Kunwar origins story, as presented both by Wright (1877: 285) and Ramlal (1879: 26), the first ancestor to enter the hills married the daughter of a 'Bhagale Kshetri', and it was to the Bagale Thapa *kul* that Bhimsen's family belonged.²⁵

Whether friendship with the Thapas was a long-standing affair or not, it was natural that the Kunwars should share with the latter some of the spoils of victory when Rana Bahadur returned in triumph from Benares in 1804 with Bhimsen Thapa as his principal advisor. Ranjit Kunwar had been a *subba* at the beginning of 1799 when he signed the statement recognising the infant Girvana Yuddha as king, but he was now appointed to the higher rank of *sardar* and attached to the force under Amar Singh Thapa which the new regime despatched to Kumaon²⁶. During the next few years many other Kunwars were to take part in the drive westwards, including Ranjit's younger son, Revant, his cousin Chandravir and Chandravir's sons, Bir Bhadra and Bal Bhadra.

It was in Kathmandu, however, that the really dramatic development for the family was to take place. In March 1806, when Rana Bahadur was assassinated by his half-brother Sher Bahadur, Bal Narsingh Kunwar, who had heard his cries for help, struck down the murderer. His own dramatic account of the incident has survived in the form of a petition he later addressed to King Rajendra:

... in the garden a jackal howled. Rana Bahadur said, 'Listen!', and leant on one elbow as he listened out for the cry. At that instant the outcaste (viz. Sher Bahadur) darted forward, let the scabbard of his sword fall to the ground, cried out 'Your mother!', and quickly struck out, just missing Rana Bahadur's arm and hitting him in the chest. Rana Bahadur cried, 'He's killed me.' and on hearing this I ran up. He had moved his arm to reach his own sword, but could not lift the weapon, and the outcaste wielded a second stroke, striking him in the shoulder. As I came up I kept calling on Sher Bahadur to have mercy, but he lunged again. His weapon glanced off a rafter, grazed Rana Bahadur's arm, swept over my cheek and cut my clothing. Then I caught hold of his sword by the hilt, receiving a cut on the hand in the process. I let go of the sword, grabbed him by the throat, and squeezing and pushing got him down on the floor. I plunged my khukri into a vein, he let go of his sword, and then his arm tautened. I grasped his sword and stood up.²⁷

The circumstances of this assassination were peculiar. Sher Bahadur's maternal uncle, Kaji Tribhuvan Khawas,²⁸ had been accused by Rana Bahadur of conspiring with the British against him whilst he was in Benares. The kaji was actually being led to execution when he protested that he could show he had not been alone in responsibility for what had happened. Thereupon an impromptu court, consisting of most of the leading *bharadars* and presided over by Rana Bahadur himself, was convened in Tribhuvan's own home. In the course of proceedings, Rana Bahadur accused Sher Bahadur, hitherto a leading member of the government, of complicity. The latter protested that he had confessed his earlier opposition activities when Rana Bahadur returned to Nepal in 1804, and that he had been granted pardon at that time. He received the reply that the pardon had covered only his offence against Rana Bahadur personally, and that he must answer to those present for his crimes against the state (*dhunga*).²⁹ Rana Bahadur now rather spoiled his point by referring to the assembled representatives of the state as 'donkeys' and 'slaves', and his half-brother was given permission to go and take tea in the corner of the terrace where the court was sitting. A moment later the jackal gave him his cue.

After Bhimsen Thapa himself arrived on the scene (he had been absent for his evening meal at the critical moment) Sher Bahadur showed signs of revival and Bal Narsingh finished him off with a final sword cut. Rana Bahadur's body was then taken down to the courtyard, where Bal Narsingh found Sher Bahadur's brother-in-law waiting, sword in hand, with a number of followers. He cut him down, and the remainder of the party were put to flight by soldiers on duty. Acting in the name of the six-year old King Girvana Yuddha, Bhimsen moved ruthlessly against the alleged accomplices: among those executed were Kaji Tribhuvan Khawas, Kaji Narsingh Gurung and Vidur Shah (Sher Bahadur's full brother), all of whom had held prominent positions during Rana Bahadur's exile, but had been reconciled with him and facilitated his eventual return. Bhimsen also ensured that Rana Bahadur's senior queen, Rajrajeshwari, who had been exiled to Helambu in 1804, was brought back to the Valley and made to ascend the funeral pyre. This cleared the way for Lalit Tripura Sundari, only recently married to Rana Bahadur, to assume the regency and to remain for many years the formal wielder of an authority held in practice by Bhimsen himself.

By presenting Sher Bahadur's act as part of a wider plot, Bhimsen and his closest associates, including Bal Narsingh, were thus able to strengthen their own position decisively. Whether in fact those who perished in the purge were involved in such a conspiracy must remain an unanswered question. It appears, however, that the political situation before the assassination had been shifting and that different groups might have had good reason to feel apprehensive. For two years after his return to Kathmandu, Rana Bahadur had held no formal position in the administration, and the *cauntaras* and *kajis* had ruled in the name of his infant son. On 26 February 1806, however, just under a month before his death, the ex-king had been appointed *mukhtiyar* ('executive' or 'minister') to his son.³⁰ Both Sher Bahadur and Narsingh Gurung were among the *bharadars* who attested the *lal mohar* of appointment, but they may have privately felt that the move was an attempt to destroy the balance that had existed up till then between the 'Benares group' and themselves. The presence of Sher Bahadur's brother-in-law in the courtyard on the night of the assassination could thus conceivably be part of a preconcerted arrangement, as claimed by Rana Bahadur's biographer, Chittaranjan Nepali (1963: 78), thought it is also possible that they had only set out for Tribhuvan's house after learning that he was in imminent danger.

The importance of the Sher Bahadur episode for Bal Narsingh's career has perhaps been over-stressed in some accounts by ignoring the fact that he already held the relatively high rank of *sardar* and almost certainly enjoyed Bhimsen Thapa's special confidence.³¹ Nevertheless, his action markedly increased his standing and that of his entire family. Ramlal (1979: 48) and Pudma Rana (1909: 9) write that he was granted an hereditary *kajiship* and also the right of automatic access to the king. Phalendra Rana (1957: 17) claims that his brothers were made *kajis* at the same time. The precise details may not be reliable, but there is no reason to doubt Bal Narsingh's own promotion, nor the

fact that members of his family rose with him. Independent evidence confirms that he was indeed in post as a kaji in 1809 and in every year from 1816 to 1837,³² and the present lack of positive proof for the intervening years is not significant, given the paucity of available material. Bal Narsingh's brother Revant is likewise known to have held similar rank in 1813 and again from 1816 to 1830.³³

In addition to high public office, Kaji Bal Narsingh was also able to strengthen the link between his own family and Bhimsen's by marrying Ganesh Kumari, daughter of Bhimsen's younger brother, Nain Singh Thapa. The date of the marriage is not known, but it was probably some years after 1806, as their first child, Jang Bahadur, was not born until 1817. This was Bal Narsingh's second marriage, but the name and family of his first wife, who had already borne him one son, Bhaktabir Singh, are also unknown (Acharya 1961: 43).

Bal Narsingh's father, Ranjit, was with the army in Kumaon at the time of Rana Bahadur's assassination. His own promotion from *sardar* to *kaji*, which had taken place by 1809 at the latest (D.R. Regmi 1975: II, 207), may possibly have been a direct consequence of his son's action.

Early in 1806, the Nepali forces crossed the River Satlej and began their long attempt to annex the kingdom of Sansar Chand. Although rapidly successful in the field, they now faced the formidable task of taking his great fortress of Kangra, and a four year siege commenced. Kaji Amar Singh Thapa, in overall command, requested further support from Kathmandu and Bhimsen's brother Nain Singh Thapa was sent at the head of reinforcements. On arrival he tried to persuade the other commanders that they should launch an all-out assault on the walls. When he failed to secure their agreement, he attacked with his own men alone; the operation was unsuccessful and he was himself killed in the course of it (M.R. Pant 1968a:54-5).³⁴

Kathmandu now despatched to the front Chauntara Rudrabir Shah and Kaji Dalbhanjan Pande, the latter being a prominent member of the Benares group. The two entered negotiations with Sansar Chand and provisionally accepted a compromise arrangement under which the latter would be allowed to keep his kingdom, but would give his daughter in marriage to King Girvana Yuddha. Because of difficulties he was then having with another hill ruler, Kaji Amar Singh Thapa was initially in favour of the deal, but when his position on the other front improved, he changed his mind and wrote to Kathmandu that outright victory was still possible. The proposed agreement with Sansar Chand was therefore turned down by the Nepal government and Rudrabir and Dalbhanjan were recalled to Kathmandu (M.R. Pant 1968b: 18, 132-3).³⁵

In this affair Ranjit Kunwar appears to have opposed Amar Singh Thapa and backed the compromise proposal (Ramlal 1869: 45; Pudma Rana 1909: 8).³⁶ This was not to be the last example of tension between the two men, for three years later, in September 1810, Ranjit was writing bitterly to Bhimsen Thapa, accusing Amar Singh of denying him and his

son, Revent, the resources to support extra companies which Kathmandu had authorised (D.R. Pant 1971). This split also probably involved Ranjit in ill-feeling with the other main branch of the family, for his cousin Chandravir, also serving in the west with his sons Bal Bhadra and Bir Bhadra, was married to Amar Singh Thapa's daughter, Ambikadevi. (Thapa 1981: genealogical tables). That Chandravir was backing his father-in-law is suggested by the fact that the contemporary Garhwali poet Molaram, who wrote under the patronage of Bir Bhadra Kunwar, alleges in his verse history of Garhwal that Rudrabir and Dalbhanjan were bribed by Sansar Chand to support his request for terms.³⁷ Further evidence of a split between the two branches of the family can perhaps be seen in Bal Narsingh Kunwar's counter-signature of a royal order of 1811 relieving Chandravir of an appointment as a captain in Garhwal (M.R. Pant 1969: 303-5). The quarrel will have been all the more natural given the rivalry between Amar Singh Thapa and Bal Narsingh's patron, Bhimsen. Against this whole background it is scarcely surprising that Bal Narsingh was to receive an unsympathetic response when, many years later, he sought financial help from cousin Bir Bhadra (Pudma Rana 1909: 18).

The siege of Kangra now continued, and in 1809 Sansar Chand agreed to surrender the fort if he could first be allowed twenty days' truce in which to remove his family and possessions. In fact he used this period of grace to escape to Lahore and solicit the aid of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, while in the meantime his officers at Kangra busied themselves with reprovisioning and then renounced the surrender agreement once the twenty days were up. Ranjit Singh moved into the district with his army and in August 1809 he took over the fort himself. A major battle between Sikhs and Gorkhas ensued, and afterwards Amar Singh Thapa finally agreed to withdraw to the east bank of the Satlej.

Ramlal (1879: 46), Pudma Rana (1909: 8-9) and Phalendra Rana (1957: 15) all write that Ranjit Kunwar was killed in the fighting at Kangra, yet there is an extant letter of his written in September 1810, a year after the Gorkha withdrawal, whilst a document of June 1814 refers to him as leader of a force then en route for Pyuthana in central Nepal.³⁸ The false version of events presented by the Rana family historians was almost certainly originated by Jang Bahadur himself. In an interview with the British Resident in April 1852 he expressed violent hatred for the descendants of Ranjit Singh, 'who, he said, had in a most treacherous manner caused the death of his Paternal and Maternal Grandfather some years ago in the fort at Kangra'³⁹. Jang's *maternal* grandfather, Nain Singh Thapa, had indeed died at Kangra, albeit long before Ranjit Singh became directly involved, but Jang was clearly 'improving' considerably on the truth, presumably to impress on the British that he would always be a reliable ally of theirs should trouble again develop in the recently subdued Panjab. If, as is possible, grandfather Ranjit Kunwar had in fact died in the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16, Jang could have had the additional motive of concealing his family's role as opponents rather than allies of the British.

Chandravir Kunwar may have died before the outbreak of war in 1814 (Gyewali 1961: 3), but his sons, and also Bal Narsingh's brother Revant, were still with the Nepali forces in the west. The decision to fight rather than concede British territorial demands had been strenuously opposed by Kaji Amar Singh Thapa and his senior colleagues, and it is most likely that Chandravir's sons backed their grandfather in this controversy and that Bal Narsingh supported Bhimsen's advocacy of war. Once the fighting began, however, Chandravir's son Bal Bhadra found himself at the centre of the stage. He was commander in the Dehra Dun district, and when the British invaded at the outset of hostilities, he withdrew inside the small hill fort of Kalanga or Nalpani. He held off a vastly superior enemy force for a month, finally escaping through British lines with the seventy surviving members of the garrison. He had been enabled to hold out for as long as he did principally because of the military ineptitude of his opponents, but the appalling conditions which the Nepalis had endured within the fort and the chivalrous spirit in which hostilities had been conducted greatly impressed the British. Bhadra survived the war, but in 1824 died in battle in Afghanistan, and his former opponents then erected a monument at Kalunga, 'as a tribute of respect for our gallant adversary, Bulbudder, commander of the fort, and his brave Gurkhas, who were afterwards, while in the service of Ranjit Singh, shot down in their ranks to the last man by Afghan artillery' (Gyewali 1961: 3; Atkinson 1882: II, Part 2, 640). Although Jang Bahadur in 1851 sanctioned a land grant for the maintenance of Bal Bhadra's son's widow (Gyewali 1961: 15), he never mentioned his relative in conversations with British acquaintances, and the British therefore long continued to believe that their opponent had been a Thapa rather than a Kunwar. As with his fabrication concerning Ranjit Kunwar's death, Jang was perhaps loath to speak of days when Nepal and Britain had been enemies, but the real reason for his silence may well have rather been the lack of warmth between the two branches of the family.

Jang's own father and grandfather played a much less prestigious role in the conflict than did Bal Bhadra. As has been seen already, Ranjit Kunwar was sent with troops to Pyuthana a few months before the outbreak of war, but nothing is known of his subsequent history and he probably died shortly afterwards. Although Ramlal (1879: 48) and Phalendra Rana (1957: 18) claim that Bal Narsingh had seen military service with his father during the Kangra campaign and had been wounded in the fighting, he had probably spent most of his time at court in Kathmandu until he was sent in 1814 with the Sri Mehar regiment to Vijaypur in the eastern Tarai (Phalendra, *loc. cit.*). The silence of Ramlal and Pudma concerning this appointment would suggest that he was never involved in any serious fighting during the war.

During the post-war years, Bal Narsingh and his brother Revant retained their position as kajis, whilst a third brother, Balram, who was perhaps considerably younger than the other two, is known to have been a kaji in 1826 and 1827 and a captain thereafter until 1837. Their cousin Bir Bhadra, also served in the latter rank, whilst his brother Bal Bhadra, as has already been seen, entered the service of Ranjit Singh in the Panjab.⁴⁰

Bal Narsingh's alliance with Bhimsen's family was further cemented when his second wife, Bhimsen's niece, gave birth on 18 June 1817 to their first child, Jang Bahadur. Jang's six full brothers were born over the next eleven years (Acharya 1961: 43), to be followed by two daughters (Ramlal 1879: 52).

Up until his dismissal from office in a purge of Bhimsen's supporters early in 1837, Bal Narsingh held a succession of provincial governorships. He was possibly at Dhankuta from 1816 to 1820 (Acharya 1961: 43), and certainly there from 1828 to the winter of 1832/3 when he was transferred to Dandeldhura in the far west. In 1835 he was again transferred, this time to Jumla (Pudma Rana 1909: 16-17). These responsibilities did not prevent him from also spending periods of time in Kathmandu. He was, for example, among an official delegation which visited the British Residency for discussions with Brian Hodgson in June 1833.⁴¹ Jang Bahadur was born in Kathmandu, at the Maruhiti *tol*, the family having probably established their main home here rather than at Ram Krishna Kunwar's old base at Bhamerkot beyond the eastern rim of the Kathmandu valley.⁴² After the birth quarrels between Bal Narsingh's first wife and Jang's mother led him to move to a new home at Thapathali, leaving the first wife and her son, Bhaktabir, behind at Maruhiti (Acharya 1961: 43).

Although Bal Narsingh's time will have been mainly divided between the capital and his provincial commands, it is clear that he had a continuing involvement with Dhulikhel which was not restricted to the mere receiving of revenue. In 1833 he endowed a religious festival in the town, the Srikrishna Jatra, whilst in 1837 he intervened successfully when there was a threat to confiscate the inhabitants' remaining *birta* lands (i.e. the *pakho* (non-irrigated) land as against irrigated fields which the Kunwars themselves had taken over under Prithvi Narayan Shah).⁴³ A royal order of 1874 refers to the annual celebration in the town of a 'Balnarsingh Jatra', which may perhaps be identified as the original Srikrishna Jatra, renamed after its founder.⁴⁴ The relationship with the family is remembered today in Dhulikhel, itself, albeit in distorted fashion, in the form of the local belief that the town was the *maiti* (woman's paternal home) of Jang Bahadur's mother and that Jang's own glorious future was presaged when he was discovered asleep in nearby fields with a king cobra standing guard over him.⁴⁵ Although Ganesh Kumari's father, Nain Singh Thapa, must have had his main home at Kathmandu or in Gorkha district, the tradition does suggest that Jang, and presumably other members of his family, spent time in the area. This supposition is perhaps supported by the fact that Hemdal Thapa, who was later to become father-in-law to Jang's eldest daughter and a close political associate and who does not seem to have been related to Bhimsen came from Nava Buddha, situated a little to the south of Dhulikhel:⁴⁶ the two men were conceivably first brought together as children by the common Dhulikhel connection.

Bal Narsingh's loss of office in 1837, shortly before Bhimsen's dismissal and imprisonment, was a heavy blow in terms both of prestige

and of income. Pudma Rana (1909: 18) perhaps paints too stark a picture of ensuing poverty (there was still *birta* income to be relied upon) but there is no reason to doubt his story of Bal Narsingh needing to ask his cousin Bir Bhadra for a loan to complete a building project and failing to get it. Nonetheless, the family remained active in the campaign to secure Bhimsen's release, which was achieved at the end of the year: it was alleged two years later that Balram Kunwar, Bal Narsingh's younger brother, had bribed the king's father-in-law to speed the process.⁴⁷ Following the release, or possibly when news arrived of Mathbar Singh Thapa's evasion of the British to reach the Panjab, Bal Narsingh himself regained office.⁴⁸

Tracing the course of subsequent political alignments as tensions in the Darbar mounted still further and relations with British India worsened, is a difficult task, but an important factor in determining Bal Narsingh's conduct was probably the marriage of Jang Bahadur in the spring of 1839 to a daughter of Prasad Singh Basnet.⁴⁹ A prominent figure during Bhimsen's last years, Prasad Singh was the great-nephew of Abhiman Singh Basnet, with whom both Ram Krishna Kunwar and Ranjit Kunwar had campaigned in earlier days, and the marriage can be seen as the renewing of an old alliance. Bal Narsingh was among the victims of the 'Kala' Pande financial exactions 1839, but after Bhimsen's death in prison that summer he was less enthusiastic than many other *bharadars* over the prospect of allying with the British Resident, Brian Hodgson, to oust the Pandes. His own position as a debtor of one of the Indian subjects whom Hodgson was championing, and also the stance of his brother-in-law Mathbar Singh Thapa, then endeavouring to play both pro- and anti-British cards simultaneously, will have been part of the explanation. However, the major factor was probably the link with Prasad Singh Basnet, who was alternatively aligning himself closely with the Pandes and drawing away from them. The influence was not entirely one way, for it is likely that Bal Narsingh's position helped moderate the strength of Prasad Singh's commitment to the Pandes. Nonetheless, Bal Narsingh's own stance was sufficiently ambiguous to earn him a place in the 'indifferent' category of the 'List of Good, Bad and Indifferent Chiefs' which Hodgson drew up in autumn 1840 and in which Prasad Singh was listed as 'bad'.⁵⁰ In contrast, the head of the other main branch of the family, Bir Bhadra Kunwar, was unambiguously classed as a 'good chief': in his consistently pro-British attitude he was probably following the line taken by his uncles, the sons of Amar Singh Thapa.

The alliance between Bal Narsingh and Prasad Singh Basnet continued under the 'British Ministry' led by the Paudyal *gurus*. The appointment of Jang Bahadur as a *kaji* in the autumn of 1842, together with the securing of control of the *sadar daphtar khana* (Central Lands Assignment Office) by Prasad Singh's brother, Kulman Singh, which probably occurred at about the same time, indicated a slight shift in the balance of power within the *bharadari* in favour of this Kunwar-Basnet alliance.⁵¹ Bal Narsingh's death occurred shortly afterwards, probably in December 1842.⁵² Pudma Rana (1909: 32) writes of this event leaving the young

Jang Bahadur alone to face the coming political storm, but in reality his position was buttressed by a family connection which dated from his great-grandfather's time and which his own marriage had renewed.

Conclusion

The Kunwars wish to have themselves accepted as the descendants of Rajputs reflected the higher value placed in Nepali society on real or supposed Indian, as opposed to indigenous origins. The tendency is an ancient one in the Himalayas, the earliest documented example being the claim of rulers in the Nepal valley in the first millenium A.D. to descent from the Licchavis of Vaisali (M.R. Regmi 1976). The Shah dynasty's own claim to Rajput status is documented from the reign of Rama Shah in the 17th century (Acharya 1967: I, 30), but such genealogies had probably been suggested long before both for them and for other *baisi* and *caubisi* ruling houses. Like the Thakuris, Nepal's Brahmans claimed India as their original home, both Kumaoni and Purbiya groups allegedly having come from Kanyakubja on the Ganges. Such assertions among the elite found ready imitation amongst other groups in the population: the Magar Ranas' supposed Chittaurghat connection has already been referred to, whilst one of the origin legends of the Gurung *car jat* claims that they were Rajputs from the south who had lost their caste status (Pignède 1966: 164-70).

The felt necessity for making such claims was partly a consequence of historical instances of settlers from the south establishing ascendancy over the indigenous population. However, more important than whether the physical origins of a particular elite group was or was not in the plains was the fact that the values in terms of which they justified their hegemony were of Indian origin. The acceptance of Hindu social values, and in particular of the caste system meant the acceptance of the plains as the central reference point, in relation to which the hills were culturally as well as geographically peripheral. To assert one's ultimate Indian origin was thus to assert one's own centrality in the dominant cultural tradition. Not only in Nepal but in South Asia generally, local societies were assimilated to an overarching Hindu structure not just by the physical immigration of Brahmins and Kshatriyas from elsewhere, but also by existing tribal leaders and priests redefining themselves in terms of these Hindu categories and then adopting a suitable origin legend to buttress their new status.

The process should not, however, be seen as a purely Hindu phenomenon. In Europe, too, claims to foreign origin have been put forward by those seeking to associate themselves more closely with a dominant cultural tradition to which their own region was felt to be peripheral. Thus the progressive Hellenisation of Roman culture was reflected in the adoption of the legend of the foundation of the city by the Trojan Aeneas, which found its fullest expression in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Similarly, the so-called *Bruts* of medieval Britain, most famous of which is the work of the 12th century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth, traced the

descent of the island's rulers from another supposed refugee from Troy, Brutus. Examples of the same phenomenon could no doubt be found in many other cultures.

The preference thus seemingly revealed for the foreign over the indigenous is nonetheless only part of the story. In Nepal, as elsewhere, the contrary tendency to value one's own locality over that which comes from outside is also important. The two principles are both embodied in the *Muluki Ain* of 1845, where Brahman and Thakuri, with their supposed ultimate Indian origin, take precedence over the remainder of the population, yet within the Brahman category those long-established in the hills are regarded as superior to more recent immigrants from the plains (Höfer 1979: 151-2). The opposing principles are seen fused in Prithvi Narayan's famous assertion in the *Divya Upades* that it is now Nepal which is the *asal* (real) *hindustan*, India itself having succumbed to *mleccha* domination (Pokhral 1986: 159).

In the case of the Kunwars the second tendency, valuing the local over the distant, is seen not so much in the family's official propaganda as in legends concerning Jang Bahadur preserved in the folk tradition. One such example has been presented above in the Dhulikhel story of Jang and the *nagraja*, which clearly sees him as a local boy made good, rather than the *rajkumar kumaratmaj* ('prince and son of princes') as he styled himself after his Rajput status had been officially recognised. The belief that Jang Bahadur became maharaja 'from an ordinary soldier' (Clark 1977: 260) is another reflection of a popular tradition that makes his origins less, rather than more grand than they actually were.

In addition to a preference for the near and familiar, the folk tradition also presents an emphasis on Jang as an individual, rising through his own merits, rather than as a member of an illustrious family. However, in a traditional society, with position primarily dependent on ascriptive status, strong emphasis on the family as a collective unit must be the normal rule. A striking example of this attitude was found at the heart of the Nepali political order in that, in addition to the normal principle of hereditary succession to the throne, it was felt that even during a particular sovereign's reign, loyalty was owed to the dynasty as a whole rather than to that one individual (Kirkpatrick 1811: 24). Hereditary right was also important in determining the relative importance of families within the *bharadari*, as seen in the institution of the *tharghars* and in Prithvi Narayan's injunction to leave control of relations with India in the hands of the descendants of Shivaram Basnet, and of Tibet with those of Kalu Pande (Pokhrel 1986: 159). The point was not that such rights were never violated - in fact they frequently were - but whenever this happened strong resentment would be generated: the hostility of many *bharadars* towards Bhimsen, for example, was not just the inevitable jealousy of the man at the top of the tree, but also generated by indignation that a man whose family had not been conspicuous in Prithvi Narayan's day should now have become preeminent. Against this background, it was

particularly important for the Kunwars, or any other *bharadar* family, to build up the role that they had played in the service of the Shah dynasty, both at Gorkha and in unified Nepal. The distortions which have been analysed above in the accounts of the 'Rana family historians' were an inevitable result.

NOTES

1. The most famous of these claims, that of the Shah dynasty itself, has been carefully analysed by Leelanteswar Baral (1964) and shown to be almost certainly false. There is no reason to doubt that some migration took place from plains to hills under Muslim pressure, and that this was a factor in the progressive Hinduisation of the Khas tribesmen and Tucci (1956: 130) may conceivably be correct in supposing that the arrival of Rajput refugees triggered the 14th century collapse of the 'Malla Empire' in western Nepal. However, there is evidence that Thakuri families were established in the hills well before this time, and, if they are not of straightforward Khas extraction, the Thakuris are probably to be seen as the descendants of Gurjaras or other peoples who entered the sub-continent from the north-west (P.R. Sharma 1972).
2. Brian Hodgson's 'Recollections', English Historical MSS. c.262 (Bodleian Library), p. 210.
3. The fullest account of the sect in Nepal is that of Unbescheid (1980).
4. Baral (1964: 111) assumes that 'Khadka' has the same reference both when used of the Kunwars and of the early Gorkha king, and he seems unaware that it is a *thar* as well as a *kul* name.
5. Hodgson Papers (India Office Library), Vol. 58, ff. 37-8, cited by Baral (1964: 121).
6. The move to Kaski is mentioned by Wright (1877: 286), Ramlal (1879: 28), and Phalendra Rana (1957: 3). According to the first two it was made by Ahiram, but Phalendra claims the first settler was Ahiram's father, Ratnajit. The latter's version is consistent with (and perhaps deliberately designed to incorporate) his naming two brothers of Ratnajit, Kunwar Dhanjit and Kunwar Manjit, and claiming the former as the ancestor of the present-day Kunwars of Kaski and Lamjung.
7. This simplified form of marriage is now often employed in case of elopement or to avoid the expense of the full rites (Furer-Haimendorf 1966: 49-50).
8. Wright (1877: 287) and Ramlal (1879: 30) both make Ahiram himself the grantee, whereas Phalendra Rana (1957: 7) claims the grant was made to a younger brother, Manajit, and that the latter is the

ancestor of the Gorkha Kunwars. This may be based on genuine oral tradition unavailable to the earlier two writers, but the recurrence of the name 'Manajit' in two successive generations is suspicious, (See Note 6). No uncle or brother of Ahiram is mentioned in any other source, and possibly the two Manajits and Dhanajit were invented after Jang came to power by other Kunwars who wanted to prove a connection with his family.

9. Copper-plate inscription recognising Girvana Yuddha as king, Phalgun 2 Sudi 1855 (8 March 1799), published in Nepali (1963: 121 ff.)
10. The date follows from Ram Krishna's being 59 when he died (Wright 1877: 287; Ramlal 1879: 40) and from Phalendra Rana's statement (1957: 13) that this was in 1844 V.S. (1787/8). Ramlal places the death in 1771 and the arrival in Gorkha in 1724, but this is clearly wrong, since a letter received by Ram Krishna in September 1783 is still extant (Acharya 1965: 88).
11. The close resemblance was first pointed out by Marize (1980: 64). It is most probably the result of both men depending on the same Nepali source, presumably the document mentioned by Pudma (1909: 1) as being in his possession at Allahabad.
12. *Lal mohar* of 3 Chaitra Badi 1860 (29 March 1804) appointing Ranjit Kunwara quoted by Acharya (1967: II, 384).
13. Phalendra adds that a lamp is still lit every evening in his memory at Pashupatinath, paid for out of a donation made by his brothers. Nay Raj Pant and his colleagues (1968: 192-3) state that it was the middle brother who died, but this is refuted by a document published in their own volume (913) naming Jay Krishna as partner of Ram Krishna in a religious donation made after the conquest of the Valley (see below, Note 16).
14. The year is missing from the original document and supplied by the editor.
15. Prithvi Narayan Shah to Ram Krishna Kunwar, 9 Phalgun Badi (?) 1829 (15 Feb. 1773), published in Pokhrel (1986: 150-1). The year is supplied by the editor: D.R. Regmi (1975: I, 244) dates the document to 1774.
16. Published by Naya Raj Pant et al. (1968: 912-3). The text was made available by Jay Krishna's great-great-grandson. It is not made clear in which generation the inscription was set up, but the reference to Ram Krishna and Jay Krishna as *briddhaprapitamaha* (literally 'great-great-grandfathers') suggests it is relatively recent. The document's date for the donation itself is equivalent to 1773/4, whereas the *Bhasavamsavali* places it in 1770/1.

17. See Baburam Acharya (1965: 70-1) for the 'non-Gorkhali clique' which influenced Pratap Singh.
18. Ramlal places this campaign in 1775. Eighteen years might be correct for Ranjit's age in 1771, the year that Ramlal supposed his father died (see Note 10).
19. The reduction of the *caubisi* states was completed with the final conquest of Kaski in 1786/7 (M.R. Pant 1969:326). Ramlal's date of 1781 is a simple error, unless referring to a limited Nepali success earlier on.
20. Rana Bahadur to Kaji Jagat Pande and Captain Galaiya Khawas, Sunday 7 Kartik Badi 1849 (7 October 1792), published in *Itihas Prakas*, 1 (1955), pp. 3-4 and in Naraharinath (1966: 17-20.) See also Stiller's account (1973: 206-12).
21. The true size of the invasion force is known from the Chinese historian, Wei Yuan, translated in Landon (1928: II, 275-81). Ramlal describes the battle as taking place at Daibung, which was the Nepalis' base immediately before and after the last battle north of the Betrawati and also the position from which the Chinese launched their abortive attack across the river. Rana Bahadur's contemporary letter (see previous note) puts Chinese casualties at between 150 and 250 in the first of these engagements, which is almost certainly the one referred to by Ramlal and Pudma Rana. Although the Nepalis were technically victors in this battle, they subsequently withdrew south of the Betrawati to facilitate negotiations. Stiller (1973: 208) less plausibly assumes the reference is to an earlier clash near Dhunche, the Nepali base before they fell back to Daibung; in any case, the actual casualties here, too, were very light, Rana Bahadur putting them at 40-50 on the Nepali side and 200-250 for the Chinese.
22. D.R. Regmi (1975: I, 471) records a popular belief that the Chinese army reached the top of the ridge and then fled when they saw a large number of armed men and women coming towards them. He suggests that a small Chinese delegation may have met regent Bahadur Shah there. The five chortens (*mane*) from which the ridge gets its name were supposedly erected by the Chinese.
23. Kirtiman Singh Basnet is mentioned in Rana Bahadur's letter as one of the commanders at the repulse of the Chinese on the Betrawati, and in view of the probable association of the Kunwars with the Basnets, Ranjit might well have been in his detachment. Had Ranjit played a more prominent role, this would most likely have been mentioned both by Phalendra Rana and by Perceval Landon: the historical material presented by the latter largely derived from *mahila gurujyu* Hemraj Pande, a prominent court figure in the final years of Rana rule (Dinesh Raj Pande, personal communication), and he, like Phalendra, would certainly not have passed over Ranjit's exploits, had they possessed any plausibility.

24. List of *bharadars* subscribing to the *tamapatra* of Wednesday 15 Magh Sudi 1855 (20 February 1799) recognising Girvana Yuddha as king, published in Nepali (1963: 121). Subbas usually served as district administrators, and were normally subordinate to the sardars placed in military control of newly conquered areas. Ranjit was himself a sardar during the Tibetan campaign (see 'Nepal Desko Itihas', *Ancient Nepal* (24 July 1973, p.2) but seems then to have remained in the lower rank, or out of employment, until his appointment as a kaji in 1804 (see below, Note 26).
25. The spelling 'Bhagale' is found both in Wright (1877: 285) and Ramlal (1879: 26). Ramlal equates 'Bhagale' with the Indian caste name 'Baghel', the former presumably being an intermediate form between the latter and the *kul* name 'Bagale'. The derivation is, however, questioned by Jagdish Regmi (1978: 46).
26. The *lal mohar* of appointment, issued on 29 March 1804, about three weeks after Rana Bahadur's return, is quoted in Acharya (1967: II, 386). The *Bhasavamsavali*, quoted in M.R. Pant (1967: 150) records his posting to the west.
27. Undated *arji* (petition) of Kaji Bal Narsingh Kunwar, published Nepali (1963: 144-7). A condensed paraphrase is given in D.R. Regmi (1975: II, 164-7); the 'Khardar Bal Bhadra mentioned in the document should probably be identified with the 'Khardar Bal Bhadra Pandit' of the *lal mohar* of 13 Jyestha Badi 1861 (7 May or 6 June 1804, depending on whether the intercalary Chaitra had been included in Nepal) published in Nepali (1963: 139-41), rather than, as assumed by Regmi, with Bal Narsingh's cousin Bal Bhadra Kunwar. The *arji* is the source for the remainder of the account of the assassination in the text.
28. Tribhuvan was the son of a leading noble of the Newar kingdom of Patan, who had gone over to Prithvi Narayan during the unification struggle. Tribhuvan's sister is thought to have become a concubine of King Pratap D Singh and the mother of both Sher Bahadur and Vidur Shah (D.R. Regmi 1975: I, 171), and this is presumably the point behind the reference to Rana Bahadur's mother (legitimately married, but a Brahman widow) made by Sher Bahadur during the assassination.
29. The Nepali *dhunga* (literally, 'stone') is first found used in this sense in Prithvi Narayan's time (M.C. Regmi 1978: 171-4).
30. *Lal mohar* of appointment, dated Wednesday 8 Phagun Sudi 1862 (26 February 1806), published in Nepali (1963: 74). According to Acharya (1965: 119 & 123) prior to this date Bhimsen and Sher Bahadur had been *de facto* heads of government, whilst Ranjit Pande and Ranadhoj Shah had been nominally appointed chief kaji and chief chauntara respectively.

31. He is listed as a sardar in the *lal mohar* of 6 June 1804 cited in n. 27).
32. Mahila Guru's letter of 8 October 1809 to Kajis Bhimsen Thapa, Ranadhoj Thapa, Bal Narsingh Kunwar and Ranajit Kunwar, cited by D.R. Regmi (1975: II, 207). See also the table of Kunwar office-holders in Stiller (1976: Appendix A).
33. Letter of Kaji Amar Singh Thapa to General Amar Singh Thapa, dated Tuesday 1 Marg Sudi 1870 (23 November 1813), published in *Purnima*, No. 10, Magh-Phagun 2018 (Jan-March 1962), p/43; Stiller (1976: Appendix A).
34. This must have occurred in winter 1806/7, since the letter from Kathmandu placing Bhakti Thapa under the joint authority of Kajis Amar Singh Thapa and Nain Singh is dated Saturday 13 Kartik Badi 1863 (8 November 1806), whilst the *Bhasavamsavali* states that Nain Singh died in 1728 *saka* (1806/7). Stiller (1973: 235) places the episode in 1808, but this must be an accidental slip, as he cites M.R. Pant, who quotes both documents.
35. This abortive agreement is confused with the one actually concluded in 1809 by D.R. Regmi (1975: II, 203) and also seemingly by Stiller (1973: 235-8). Pant's account of the earlier negotiation is fully supported by his quotations from the *Bhasavamsavali* and the *Gadhrajavamsavali*.
36. Both Ramlal and Pudma Rana describe the rejected proposals in terms very similar to those of the *Bhasavamsavali*, but they ignore the role of Dalbhanjan and Rudrabir and present the quarrel as one between Ranjit Kunwar, whom Pudma wrongly describes as commander-in-chief, and Amar Singh Thapa alone. They also perhaps confuse the Amar Singh Thapa who commanded in the west with Bhimsen Thapa's father of the same name.
37. Molaram, Gadhrajavamsa, quoted in M.R. Pant (1968b: No. 18, 137). The poet's connection with Bir Bhadra is shown by verses in his *Girvana Yuddha Prakasa* (*ib.*: 139-41).
38. Ranjit Kunwar to Bhimsen Thapa, dated Sunday 11 Badra Sudi 1867 (9 September 1810), published in D.R. Pant (1971); Bhimsen Thapa and Ranadhoj Thapa to Bhaktawar Singh Basnet, 18 Jeth 1871 (29 May 1814) in M.R. Pant (1964).
39. George Ramsey to Lord Dalhousie, 14 April 1842, Dalhousie Muni-ments (Scottish Record Office), GD 45/6/154.
40. See the Kunwar office-holders table in Stiller (1976: Appendix A). The list of Nepalese *bharadars* forwarded to Calcutta on 6 June 1816 by Acting Resident Lt. Boileau (Nepal Residency Records,

India Office Records) NR/5/35) lists Revant as a captain, however, and unless this is simply an error, he was presumably temporarily demoted during the war but had regained his former rank by the end of 1816.

41. Hodgson to Government, 13 June 1833, NR/5/44.
42. Although Acharya (1961:43) suggests that the birth might have occurred at Dhankuta, Jang's son in a speech inaugurating his father's statue in 1885 specifically says it was at Kathmandu, (Gimlette 1928: 180-1) and Maruhiti is mentioned in a manuscript account of Jang's early life in the collection of Mohan R Prasad Khanal (Sri 3 *Maharaja Jang Bahadur Rana*, Part 1, p. 13).
43. See the documents translated in *Regmi Research Series*, 10, 1 (Jan 1978), pp. 8-9.
44. Order of King Surendra to the Newar Cultivators of Dulikhel, dated 8 Paush Badi 1991(31 December 1874), published in His Majesty's Government, Communications Ministry (1975: I, 500). The editors prefer to equate the Bal Narsingh Jatra with the modern Bhagwati Jatra.
45. Interview with Khoju Shrestha, Dhulikhel, October 1983. Other versions of the story place it elsewhere. Rishikesh Shaha (1983: 8) associates it with Jang's alleged sojourn among the Tharus of the Tarai in the late 'thirties.
46. *Lal mohar* appointing Hemdal Thapa a kaji, dated Saturday 3 Marg Sudi 1903 (21 November 1846), published in *Adhikari* (1984: 138). A list of *bharadars* compiled in 1843 and included among the Hodgson Papers in the India Office Library (Vol. 52, ff. 169-71) shows him separately from the well-known Thapa families of Bhimsen and Kaji Amar Singh Thapa.
47. 'Nepaul Summary', (John Hopkins Collection, Cleveland Library, Ohio) January 1839; Hodgson to Maddock, 1 March 1839, NR.5/49; Hodgson to Government, 25 February 1839, FS 18 December 1839, No. 91.
48. Bal Narsingh is among the countersignatories of an official document of 10 Baisakh 1895 (4 May 1838), published in *Itihas Prakas* 2,2 (2013 V.S. (1956/7)), p. 166, and is shown as a kaji in 1838 in Stiller (1963: Appendix A).
49. Acharya (1961) places the marriage to the Basnet girl at this point, and that to Nanda Kumari Ksatri in 1841. Pudma Rana's dating of the latter marriage to January 1839 (1909: 20) appears to be a mistake, since in a list of Jang's wives which he himself drew up in the 1870's and which is published in Dixit (1983: 139-47) the first and second wives, though unnamed, can be

plausibly identified with Prasad Singh's daughter and with Nanda Kumari respectively: both women are described as 'Jeetha Maharani', and the date of death of the first is given as 1847, the same year in which oral tradition claims the Basnet wife died (information from Puruswattam Shamsher J.B. Rana), while the date of 1850 for the second wife's death is consistent with the birth of her first son Jagat in 1848 (N.R. Pant 1974: 14). Pudma's list omits entirely mention of Jang's pre-1839 marriage(s).

50. English Historical MSS (Bodleian Library) c.262, p.22. The inclusion of Prasad Singh Basnet in the anti-British grouping suggests the list was drawn up in late October or November, since earlier Prasad had swung behind the anti-Pande majority in the *bharadari*. For fuller treatment of factional politics at this time, see Whelpton (1987).
51. Jang's appointment as a kaji is reported in Wheeler (1878: 9 November 1842 entry). Kulman Singh is shown in charge of the *Sadar Daphtar Khana* in a list of *bharadars* compiled early in 1843.
52. Bal Narsingh's death is dated by Pudma Rana (1909: 32) to 24 December 1841, but this must be an error for December 1842, the date given by Baburam. Pudma's chronology in this section of his work seems to be consistently a year out: he places the famous incident of Jang Bahadur's leap into the well in 1841 (ib.: 31), but this is known from the Resident's Diary to have occurred on 27 April 1842 (Wheeler: 1878).

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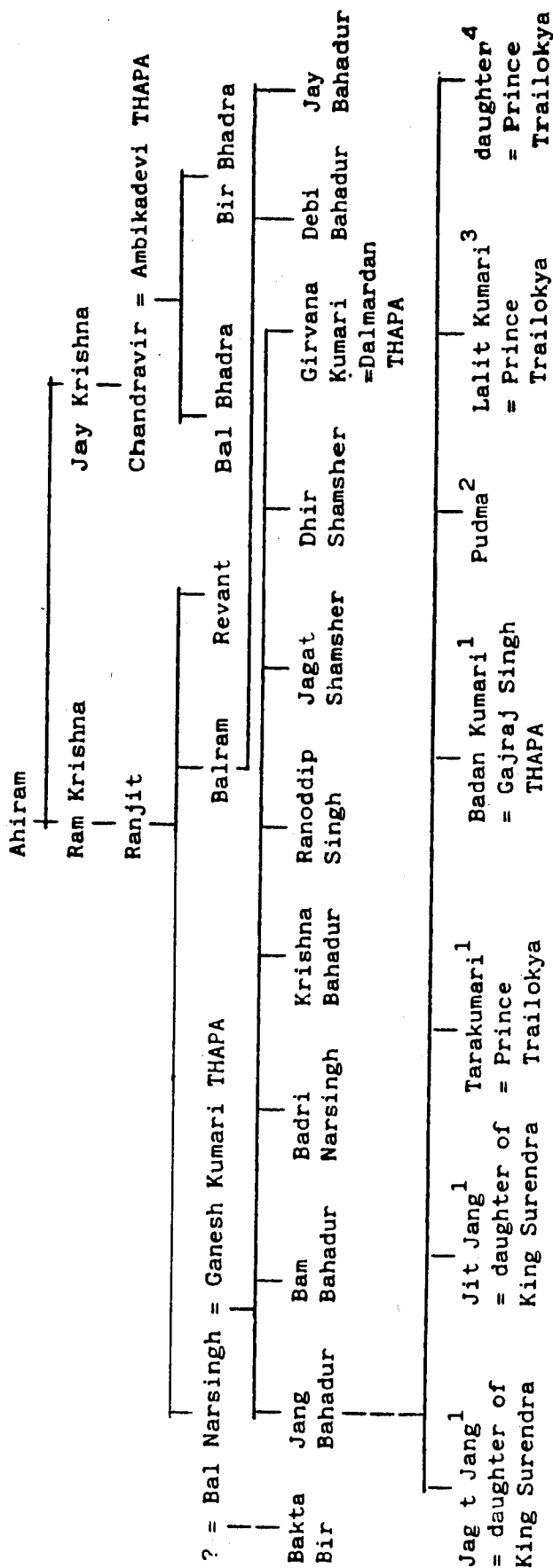
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KUNWAR (JANG BAHADUR)



1 Children by Nanda Kumari Devi, sister of Sanak Singh Sripali Tandon, married in 1841³

2 Son by a daughter of Ranasher SHAH.

3 Mojumdar, 'Indo-Nepalese Relations', *op.cit.*, p.370. Lalit Kumari may have been the child of Siddhi Gajendra Laksmi BASNET, whom Jang abducted after coming to power. Siddhi is mistakenly described as Tara-kumari's mother by Kashinath Diksit (Bhaeka Kura, Kathmandu: Narendramani Diksit, 2031 VS (1974/5), p.13). Jang had already married another daughter of Prasad Singh BASNET in 1839.

4 Daughter of Hiranya Garbha Kumari SHAH.