

BOOK REVIEW

The Throne of Stone. 2000. J.P. Cross. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 351pp. ISBN: 99933-10-07-7. Rs. Not mentioned.

The throne of stone, depicted clearly on the cover photograph of the book under review, is a very large flat stone on a mountain top, slightly raised one end. It was on this unusual stone throne that generations of ancient Tura –known today as Dura-- chieftains or rulers of Turlung in the Lamjung district of West Nepal, sanctified by tradition and rite as ruler of the Tura people during the pre-unification days were crowned. According to tradition, the Chief or ruler of the Tura tribe or community would sit on the Throne of Stone and the chief Brahmin priest would anoint vermilion powder on his forehead. All the subjects would then come and pay homage.

The Duras today live on the hills of Dura Danda, Turlungkot and Kunchha Aam Danda in the Lamjung District of Nepal. They speak the Dura language and practice animism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The Duras have their own unique traditions and culture and their religious and cultural formalities are quite akin to that of the Gurungs. The male offspring of the Duras according to tradition are fitted with bows and arrows on the very day of their naming ceremonies, a fact that reflects their martial heritage. The book under review is about these Duras of Nepal and their loyalty and bond of friendship struck with the great ancestor of the unifier of Nepal. Looking back, it would seem hardly likely that events in an unassuming village like Turlung, of The Throne of Stone, tucked away in jungle covered mountains of west Nepal would play a prominent role in changing the course of history and shaping what is today known as modern Nepal.

The book under review, the first part, deals with these developments based on a reconstructed village version of those far off days – the pre dawn of Nepal's Gorkha dynasty. It is a commendable effort at trying to piece together the age-old chipped and broken pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of Nepal's early history before unification in 1768 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder

of the Shah dynasty of Nepal and the ninth generation descendant of Drabya Shah of the House of Gorkha.

The writer Col. J P Cross who spent some 56 years of his life in close association with Nepalis, as soldier, scholar and resident now lives in retirement with his surrogate son and family in a village of the Throne of Stone. 'My beloved *karma bhumi*' as he loves to call it. It was as an accepted and trusted member of the Dura community that the writer – besides obtaining oral history at 'grey-beard level' stretching back as far back as 500 years – also got the rare opportunity to look at records held in private homes for the same period. According to the author, in one case the record was never shown to anyone outside the family before. It was this trust that enabled him to fit in the pieces and put the whole story together.

The story takes the reader back to those very far off days before unification; attempts to answer some long forgotten questions and relates matters and events thought insignificant at the time to even deserve mention, or which to this day remained buried in the dim and remote past. The principal characters numbering some sixty six that stride the ancient stage and light the pages of the volume are either of Mongolian or Indo Aryan stock and belong mostly to the mountainous north of Nepal. They are either petty kings or chieftains and some mere 'robber barons' that controlled and fought bitterly over large or small tracts of land. These ancient actors "...were riddled with ritual, saturated with superstition and none immune to omen. Only a few have ever had their names previously noted. But without them the cauldron of the future of Nepal would surely have cooked a different brew."

The book consists of three neatly divided sections and in all consists of 14 chapters.

Father: 1479-1480.

Son: 1491-1496.

Grandson: 1557-1559.

The first section starts off amidst the Hindu *Dashera* festival in the Tura village of Turlung. The gory annual sacrifice of a tethered buffalo to be beheaded at one clean stroke and thus usher in good luck and ward off evil for the year is about to take place. But contrary to expectations the ritual goes badly wrong and the Chief Khaje Tura anxious of a successful outcome is bitterly disappointed. As a result, he now fears a crisis may befall the land. The first threat comes from Nuwakot to the west, a few days journey from

Turlung, famine stalks the land and the seed corn is already used up, the treasure chest is almost empty and the people, the brainy Khans of Aryan stock are desperate. The original plan is to cultivate the nearby Turas, assess their strengths and weaknesses and then annex Lamjung. The Ghales of Puindi up to the north smarting from tribal insult inflicted upon them through the secret marriage of the Ghale Chief's son to the sister of Khaje pose the second threat. The Ghales accordingly make plans to harass and kidnap some Turas to get even and thus get the upper hand in future dealings with them.

Meanwhile in the Nar monastery up in the high mountains the *Ramboche* and the most trusted chief trading monk discuss bringing in two more boys of fresh blood suitable as acolytes for the monastery. How the boys were brought in, whether through means fair or foul, through hypnotism or kidnapping did not seem to matter, as the two boys brought in earlier had been miserable failures. Khaje Tura is blissfully unaware that the unexpected threat from the third quarter could ever come about. Neither did the *Ramboche* know "that his order to bring in two boys of quality would change the course of history, irrevocably." (Pp. 25)

It is these events, coupled with the kidnapping of the sons of Khaje and Kulamandan of Nuwakot by the chief trading monk to be taken as acolytes for the Nar monastery, their ultimate rescue by the combined search parties headed by the fathers concerned; the tragic death of Tile the son of Khaje Tura; the bond of friendship – the *mit* ceremony – ultimately struck between the Houses of Lamjung and Nuwakot in true traditional Hindu fashion in spite of thoughts of forceful expansion harbored earlier by the latter that triggers off the beginning of this change and forms the first part of the book.

The second section of the book shifts to Kathmandu, the 'Nepal of the Three Towns' as it was known then; its King the scheming Ratna Malla and his ambition of bringing the entire Kathmandu Valley under his rule; the mysterious deaths of twelve powerful Malla courtiers in the process, the fierce hunt for the culprit that follows resulting in two trials by ordeal with unexpected results; a strange prophecy that proves to be uncannily accurate; Khaje's disappointment with his wayward and good for nothing second son that leads to his being deprived as successor to his father, the son as a result secretly joining the Puindi Ghales the sworn enemies of the Turas; Khaje's request to his friend Kulamandan Khan for his sons to be rulers of Lamjung and the King of the Turas; the epic wrestling match that decides the major differences between Moslem rulers of Delhi and Bihar as a result of which a

small Hindu village up in the hills of Nepal was raided; unsuccessful efforts at peace making between Turas and Puidi Ghales resulting in the bloody hand to hand combat between the parties on the banks of the Marsyangdi river etc.

The third section deals with the death of Raja Yasobam of Nuwakot; the bitter and deep rooted differences between his eldest son Narahari and the youngest Drabya Shah, the latter's decision to take part in the annual race up to the mountain top with the help of his faithful Tura friends and thus be the ruler of Liglig and the overlord of Barpak, the plans, rehearsals and strategies to be victorious no matter what; the secret pact with the Brahman courtiers of Gorkha and the oath of secrecy by Drabya to get rid of Khadga Raja of Gorkha --regarded to be impure of blood by the Brahmans to be the ruler-- and be King in his place in the case of victory, the ultimate success of the plan through sheer courage, ruthlessness and will power; Narahari's insistence that Drabya hand over the acquired territories to him as King and to be under the jurisdiction of Nuwakot, Drabya's refusal and the attack on his person as a result during the *Shradda* (ancestor worship) ceremony wherein he almost loses his life; another showdown between the brothers and an attempt at emotional blackmail by Narahari during the *Dashera* festival when he as according to custom, refused to apply *Tika* on Drabya when the latter did not concede to his wishes. The section also deals with the kidnapping and the escape of beautiful Maya Tura, Drabya's first love, who he wants to make his queen in spite of her married status and ends on a somewhat sad note --a dramatic irony of sorts. Maya never knows that it is actually Drabya the man she had always loved, who orders her kidnap.

The book is well researched and coming as it does from the pen of a soldier, the sections where planning and strategies are employed by the rulers while preparing for battle, an ambush, or an attack stands out and is worked out in meticulous detail. Having probably witnessed battle scenes in the raw as a soldier and that too at a dangerously close range, the experience seems to have helped the author tremendously in providing a sense of realism to the battle scenes in the book. In this context, the description of the hand to hand combats especially, come frightfully alive within the pages of the volume. The following examples will help illustrate the case in point.

"Wraithlike they approached the unsuspecting sentry. Ahmed paused a couple of feet away and, in one movement, pulled the man's head back as, with the other hand, he clamped his mouth. A split second later Mandhoj's

kukri cut his windpipe and the man sank back into Ahmed's arms with a throaty gurgle as air from his lungs escaped with a rush of blood." (Pp. 174)

"The fight started. Drabya and Jaman, weapons at the ready, hurled their spears, sped on, cut, cut again, withdrew their spears and carried on up, opening doors, cutting, stabbing, shouting, killing and winning as they came to the top of the stronghold. A grizzled warrior drew his kukri and charged at them. They sidestepped, tripped him in his frenzy and callously killed him as he tried to regain his balance. They heard curses, shouts of triumph, shrieks of terror, they smelt the defecation of the dying, the blood of the newly cut and the fear of the prisoners." (Pp. 309)

"Drabya only had the much smaller kukri with him but he did not hesitate for one moment. He leapt at Mahare, feinted, bobbed and swayed ready to move any direction, unimpeded by the light weight of the kukri, eyes piercingly watching the other man's every movement. Mahare became even more enraged at Drabya's arrogance and temerity, but was handicapped by his much heavier weapon. He also cleverly feinted, lifted his scimitar over his head and made a feint at Drabya who thrust forward only to back out in the nick of time as the weapon was brought down with tremendous force. Before Mahare could lift it again, Drabya sidestepped, raised his right arm and brought his blade down on the top of the man's skull, splitting it in two. Blood and brains gushed and spurted everywhere and Drabya had to put his right leg on the twitching body to wrench the weapon out. He stood up, snarling, eyes red, a cruel, savage killing machine, ready to do battle with anyone who dared him, covered in the remains of the dead man's shattered body." (Pp.310)

The author is equally meticulous when describing the holy *mit* ceremony, or the bond of holy friendship, performed according to traditional Hindu rites between the Houses of Lamjung and Nuwakot.

"Stripped to their inner clothes and fully immersed in the icy river, the two men faced the sun. Shutting their eyes, they cupped water in their hands as they took the oath they had decided upon - "for as long as the sun and moon shine on the earth our Houses will be allies." (Pp.129)

But easily and by far the best portion of the book is the annual race to the mountaintop, wherein the victor sits on the Throne of Stone and is proclaimed the ruler of Liglig for one year. The description with attention to the minutest detail, of the strategies employed -fair or foul- and the intense preparation for the race by contestants to win at all costs, come what may, brings the very spirit of the ancient race, with its drunken brawls and cheering

crowds, miraculously alive. A part of the description of the race to the top quoted below graphically brings home the point.

“If I lose this, his brain shrieked, I am lost. Both he and Drabya were equally determined to win. Unfortunately for Drabya he slipped, stumbling on a stone that had become loose when Mahare trod on it at an angle. He lurched forward and put his arms out to stop a nasty fall at the same moment as his rival slowed down to burp and fart the gasses that all that *raksi* had generated in his stomach. There was a crash as the two bodies met and Drabya’s weight carried Mahare forward at an angle. He tripped and fell, Drabya falling on top so breaking the impact. As his two helpers helped him up, they were pushed from behind but Jaman was ready and weighed in with zeal so making the confusion even more shambolic. From the bottom of the mountain all that could be seen was a mass of tumbling bodies. ...Jaman overtook him and, at the last prearranged spot before they debauched onto the valley floor, cleverly managed to trip Mahare who went flying through the air, turning over as he went. He gave a yell of woe that quickly turned to a scream of pain as he landed, face up, in a thorn bush. The others dashed past him, Jaman giving way to Drabya who, lungs bursting, passed the others to arrive first. To the deafening roars of applause he slowed down, came to a stop, turned away from the rush of folk who came to congratulate him and puked his guts out – ghee, *raksi*, the lot.” (Pp. 303)

Another major highlight of the book is the epic wrestling match between Kulamandan Khan and Mahmud the Magnificent that resolved the quarrel between Moslem rulers in Delhi and Bihar as a result of which a small Hindu village up in the mountains was raided with gruesome results. The reader cannot help thinking that the writer, with a bit of research on the art of freestyle wrestling, could have laid more emphasis on the wrestling match and described it in realistic fashion, as he does the annual race to the mountain top. As it stands, the description of the wrestling match leaves much to be desired and appears somewhat mundane considering the level of anticipation and suspense whipped up before the event.

The principal characters are well drawn, true to the times and throb with life and vigour. They are convincing, come out strongly, as they stride the ancient stage. The translation of the song that Maya Tura sings at the end of the story deserves special mention. The translation is brilliant, flows smoothly and is authentically poetic.

"With laughter do I dream my dreams,
 While wide-awake I weep.
 My love has gone for good, it seems,
 Our tryst we cannot keep.
 The snow-capped Hills, the peacock's screams,
 Are all of life a part.
 In waking hours and in my dreams,
 My love you stole my heart."

It is only the last four lines, quoted below, that somehow do not follow the regular rhyme scheme and the first line that lacks the flow and smoothness of the others.

"In our next life you'll be my wife,
 You'll be my very own,
 And we'll be seen as king and queen
 On the Lamjung Throne of Stone."

If the Tura song allows and does not deviate from the original, maybe the translation could be slightly altered so as to maintain the flow and the regular ab, ab, rhyme scheme.

*In the life hereafter, my wife you'll be,
 You'll be my very own,
 And seen as King and Queen we'll be,
 On the Lamjung Throne of Stone.*

Though a Thesaurus for Nepali words used in the text is provided at the end, it would be easy on the readers if Nepali words -spelt correctly as pronounced- like *gundruk*, *ghee*, *chiura*, *ijjat*, *raksi*, *kos*, *jar*, etc. etc. freely used in the text were italicized to avoid confusion. In comparison, the curved Nepali or Gorkha knife the *khukuri* surprisingly spelt *kukri* in the book -the incorrect anglicized version- though forgivable in the case of other western writers cannot be so in the case of *Belaaiti Maailo*. His having spent some 56 years of his life with Nepalis as scholar, resident and moreover as a soldier and speaking the language like a native will just not permit it. The typographical errors are quite abundant and give the impression of the volume being unceremoniously hurried through the press. Though relevant parts of

the map of Nepal and north east India are given at the end of the book, a detailed political map of Nepal along with relevant portions of north east India with the present day international boundaries would be more helpful to study those parts in proper perspective.

The lines: "A fine fellow like you should have no difficulty in seducing one of those rich Newari women with gold ornaments in their nose and ears – that will give you a double satisfaction."(Pp. 200) harbors a factual error in the sense that Newar women unlike most of their other Nepali counterparts do not according to tradition pierce or wear ornaments on their noses. Besides, to break the monotony usually associated in reading thick volumes, maybe a dozen or so sketches of the main events covered, especially the annual race to the top and the wrestling match, could be included to further enhance a brilliantly written *unputdownable* book. A treasure-trove, a perfect theme for a film or a Tele-serial!

– Ananda P Srestha