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An Interview with Padma Ratna Tuladhar

David N. Gellner, Brunel University, London
Father Gregory Sharkey, Kathmandu

Padma Ratna Tuladhar is well known as an independent politician, human rights worker, and literary activist. First elected to the National Assembly under the Panchayat regime in 1986, he was outstanding for his bravery in openly criticizing the system from within its highest body. He is also known for his absolute integrity and incorruptibility. The following interview took place with David N. Gellner in his home in Lazimpat, Kathmandu, on January 9th 1996. Gregory Sharkey checked and corrected it with Padma Ratna on September 1996. David N. Gellner translated it from Newari. English words and phrases used in the middle of Newari sentences are given in double quotation marks. Single quotation marks are used for reported speech.

DNG: If I could start by asking about your childhood, your family home was in Kathmandu, wasn't it?

PRT: Yes, in Asan, in Nhāykañ Twāh.

DNG: Was it a large family?

PRT: My father was one of four brothers and I had one brother, now deceased. I still have one sister.

DNG: When you were young, were your uncles still living together? How many people were there in the house?

PRT: Let's see if I can remember: there was my grandmother (my father's step-mother), my father, my mother, my aunt (my father's younger sister), and my grandmother's two daughters, my uncles (my father's younger brothers), their children. Before we separated, yes, there would have been about 35 people in the household. But when I was small my father and uncles were often in Lhasa trading. Even my elder brother went to Lhasa. Only I didn't have that opportunity.

DNG: What did your father hope or expect that you would do in life?

PRT: I was also supposed to be a trader. My father had a shop in Lhasa; after that he had "contracts" to supply goods. Later we opened a shop in Kathmandu and I also worked there at the beginning. It was a provisions business, in Nhāykañ Twah. Later we had two plastic goods shops. I worked in four different shops at different times. But from my childhood I was always very guileless (*swajā*), "quiet", "shy". When I was a student too I was always, "shy", "quiet", not

liking to speak. I studied Nepal Bhasha [Newari] and Prem Bahadur Kansakar was my teacher up to SLC. He used to teach us all kinds of things, not just the curriculum. When I was studying in 9th class, there was the very first Inter-High School Conference Symposium of Nepal Bhasha Literature.

DNG: Which year was that in?

PRT: That was in the year [V.S.] '13 [1956-7]. My brother and my father's younger uncle were both studying in the same school and they were part of the organizing committee. Because I was "shy and quiet" I was just a "supporter", helping out, taking letters to Bhaktapur or Lalitpur, for example. It was held in my own school, in our own language. Now in our locality there was courtyard where the famous poet, Durga Lal Shrestha, lived. When I was child I used to go and study Nepal Bhasha in his house. I used to write one or two poems, even though I didn't really know how to, and Durga Lal would help improve them (*bhinkā biye*).

After that I went to Trichandra College. I wasn't in the "first batch" that studied Nepal Bhasha there. Next there was Hitkar Bir Singh Kansakar and others, more "active" than me, such as Dibya Ratna Shakya, who is nowadays in Moscow University having become a Russian citizen. The students' "union" brought out a magazine with articles in English and Nepali. It was called *Light* in English and *Jyoti* in Nepali. Prem Bahadur Kansakar, who had been chairman, Dibya Ratna Shakya, Hitkar Bir Singh Kansakar, and others who had been in the High-School Literature Symposium, as soon as they reached College, said, 'You should have articles and writings in our language too.' This wasn't accepted: the "student union leaders" wouldn't allow any

other languages than English and Nepali. Eventually after much pressing they formed a committee and brought out a magazine called *Jah* ['Light' in Newari]. About five to ten years before I reached the college the students had formed a committee called the "Nepal Bhasha Sahitya Pala". When I and my friends reached College we revived that committee. I should have done business -- my family were known as "Lhasa Newars" -- but I was influenced by Prem Bahadur, Durga Lal...

DNG: Who would you say were the greatest influences on you?

PRT: At school it was Prem Bahadur and Durga Lal; later it was Chittadhar Hridaya. Actually he was distantly related to me. He would often come to the house and encourage me to write.

DNG: So would it be right to say that when you were a student you were mainly interested in literature and not at all in politics?

PRT: Let me tell you how I first got involved in politics. In the year '14 [1957-8] I took my SLC and entered Trichandra College. The same year [1958] there was, finally, the first "general election" ever in Nepal. It took seven years after the coming of democracy for us to get a Constitution and a general election. Here in Kathmandu Valley, especially in Kathmandu city, there was fierce "competition" between Congress and the Communists. For Congress Ganesh Man Singh was standing, for the Communists Pushpa Lal Shrestha, "one of the founders of the Communist Party". The students divided into "factions", and I was on Pushpa Lal's side. I'll tell you why. Pushpa Lal's neighbourhood was not far from Durga Lal's. Even in literature there are "divisions", and Durga Lal Shrestha was a "progressive", and, under his influence, I supported Pushpa Lal. Durga Lal composed a song in support of Pushpa Lal. The famous singer, now deceased, Narayan Gopal, sang it, and so did Prem Dhoj. During the election they would go around in a truck singing that song. So Durga Lal went frequently to Pushpa Lal's house to see the song being practised and I went too. And when Durga Lal went round in a truck I went too. Even so, I wasn't particularly active politically, I was very "shy" and "quiet", that's the sort of person I was.

Because I had to both stay in the shop and study in college at the same time, I didn't do very well in "education", whereas my friends studied and succeeded very well. But I was quite guileless. Whatever my father and uncles told me to do, I did. Because I had to stay in the shop, I didn't get the opportunity to study consistently. For example, when I wrote letters to my father in Lhasa I would say, 'I'm going to study well and become a doctor.' My elder brother and one of my uncles were sent to study at St Augustine's School in Kalimpong. And I said to my father, 'Let me go and study there too.' And I had a friend, Naramadeshwar, a poet of Nepal Bhasha, who was prepared to go to

Allahabad to study, and I asked my father to send me too, but that wish of mine was not fulfilled. The reason was that I was guileless (*swajā*), whereas my brother and uncle were difficult (*harāñ*). Perhaps it is like that in other societies too: parents will pay more attention to the difficult ones in the family. So I was never able to progress much in "education". I completed the I.A., and then B.A. with a "major" in Nepal Bhasha at Trichandra College.

Now I explained about the Inter-College Literary Conference. Because the "union" wouldn't give any place to Nepal Bhasha, we had to organize both a magazine and a conference of our own, separately. So we had a really well organized Inter-College Nepal Bhasha Literary Conference. It was the time of the Congress government, and the Home Minister, Surya Prasad Upadhyaya, came to present the prizes. At that time there was news on the radio in Nepal Bhasha. The students had made a petition to the government to allow also a cultural programme, and at that meeting the Home Minister gave assurances. So the radio programme called "Jivan Dabu" [Life's Theatre] began. The editors, organizers, and producers of the programme were the students from Trichandra College. All the other programmes on Radio Nepal were funded and organized by the government. That one programme the government didn't pay for at all; we did it all as "volunteers". The leader at this time was Hitkarabir Singh Kansakar. And when he wasn't there I went and did the programme. So I was involved from the beginning in the "movement" of language and literature.

DNG: At that time did you have any experience outside the Kathmandu Valley?

PRT: Not at that time. In 1965-6, after the beginning of the Panchayat period, they removed Nepal Bhasha and Hindi [from the radio], both the newscasts and 'Jivan Dabu'. There was a protest movement against this. In different localities there would be literary gatherings. Because political parties were "banned", the leaders, both Congress and Communist, were "underground" or living in exile in India. So there was no real "opposition political activity". But when there was the Nepal Bhasha Literary Conference, people would come to speak against the government at least in the field of language. So such conferences would be attended by a "mass gathering" and some "political figures" would be brought to speak. So the government of the time would send police to attack and arrest people even at literary and cultural meetings. They had arrested Hitkarabir Singh, they had arrested Bhikshu Sudarshan, and they had arrested Surya Bahadur Piwa. So it happened that there was a "gap" in the speakers for the Literary Conference.

I had been studying for my M.A. at Tribhuvan University, but my "results" hadn't come yet. Vishwa Niketan High School in Tripureshwar needed a teacher of English and Nepal Bhasha. I knew one of the English teachers there, who was also a story writer in

Nepal Bhasha, Gambhir Man Maske. He had to go for further training in English, so they needed someone to teach English; so I went to teach English and Nepal Bhasha to the 9th and 10th class. Now it so happened that at that very time the students of that school had undertaken to organize that year's Inter-High School Nepal Bhasha Conference. We Newars still have that tradition of taking turns (*pā phāyegu*), even when organizing events between campuses. Now because I was teaching at that school, people started to say that I had to speak at the conference. Up to that time, I'd never made a speech. That was the first time.

DNG: Which year would that have been?

PRT: That must have been [V.S.] '24 or '25 [1967-8 or 1968-9]. Now there was this "gap". Hitkar Bir Singh couldn't come. Bhikshu Sudarshan was also in jail, and so was Surya Bahadur Piwa. So I had to speak. And after that I was asked to speak again and again.

Now, I was doing "business", but I really couldn't do it properly, because I was guileless: I could not make a good profit. So, it was decided that I should do some other kind of work. With Raja Shakya, the writer of Nepal Bhasha stories, now the chief librarian at the "Asha Archives", I bought an old printing press and put it in an old house we have in Asan. When I used to have the shop in Nhāykañ Twāh, there was the daily newspaper *Nepal Bhasha Patrika*, published and edited by Fatteh Bahadur Singh, who used to come regularly to our house. When I was a student of Nepal Bhasha, I went to help with it, doing things like translating English bulletins from AFP or whoever. He would sometimes tell me to write an editorial. Now I have this habit, whenever anyone asks me to do something, of always saying 'OK', whether I know how to or not! Later we formed a special group to help bring out the paper and it was published on our press, and I became its editor.

There was also a literary magazine called *Jh_*, which came out very well at first. Later Chittadhar Hridaya was the editor. Then we, four or five of us, took that over too, and I became the editor and publisher of that.

For the newspaper I had to do regular "interviews" with the "major political leaders" such as Ganesh Man [Singh], Tanka Prasad [Acharya]. Also I became a writer of essays. And I used to write comedies too (*khyālah*) -- I brought out two collections of these -- and plays. So I became known as a Leftist writer. After the students' movement of [V.S.] '36 [1979] -- it must have been the following year -- a Progressive Writers' and Artists' Union (Pragatisil Lekhak Kalakar Sangh) was formed. So I also became acquainted with writers of Nepali too, as well as politicians. And I became known as a public speaker, not just of Nepal Bhasha, but of Nepali too.

About that time we formed the Matrhasha Parishad (Mother Tongue Movement) which brought together

activists of Nepal Bhasha, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, etc. The chairman was Ramananda Prasad Singh. After the students' movement the King announced a "referendum": which is better, the Panchayat system or a multi-party system? We held a mass meeting in Jana Bahal: there were representatives of different languages and I was the speaker for Nepal Bhasha.

We had just formed the Nepal Bhasha Manka Khalah. There were all kinds of organizations for Nepal Bhasha, such as Cwasā Pāsā, the Nepal Bhasha Parishad, Pāsā Munā, and so on. Some would put on satirical plays, some would organize music evenings, some would have literary meetings. We brought them all together to work cooperatively [under the umbrella of the Nepal Bhasha Mankā Khalah]. They made me chairman. This was about 17 or 18 years ago.

So I spoke in Jana Bahal and said that this referendum was a great decision for Nepal, but Radio Nepal had said that according to one "survey" only 54% of Nepalis understand Nepali, which means that 46% did not. There are so many who don't understand Nepali: the King's announcements must be translated into all languages of Nepal, otherwise the referendum is pointless, and the King will have no authority [to hold it]. For saying this, they arrested me.

Also in [V.S.] '38 [1981-2] Pushpa Lal [Shrestha, founder of the Communist Party] died [in exile] in India. There was a memorial meeting at the "open-air theatre". I was one of the speakers, and I said the same as I had said in Jana Bahal. Next day they came and arrested me again and put me in the Central Jail. There were political prisoners in there, mostly Communist activists, who used to be accused of being "Naxalites" at that time. I got to know them. A month or six weeks later there was a mass meeting of the Nepal Bhasha activists, and thanks to their pressure I was released.

What I came to appreciate in jail was that there was basically no human rights movement in Nepal in those days. Only Amnesty International was covering it. In jail you couldn't see newspapers. Those who needed certain kinds of medical or dental treatment couldn't get it, those who needed spectacles couldn't get them. So when I came out I formed a group called Rajbandi Vimocan Samiti (Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners). I was the chairman, and there were representatives of different parties as well as independents. This brought me into closer contact with political leaders.

DNG: How many times were you put in jail?

PRT: Once in Central Jail, once in Bhadracol Jail. Later during the "pro-democracy" movement I was put in Nakhu Jail and then moved to Chautara Jail.

DNG: Altogether how long did you spend in inside?

PRT: About 3 months altogether. That's all. After the "referendum" politics became a bit more open.

Even though the multi-party side lost and parties were still "banned", "comparatively" "political activity" increased. But "student unions" weren't "banned". The biggest student union in Nepal, which is now aligned with the UML, was the 'Fifth Convention' faction [of the All-Nepal National Free Students' Union]. At their conference they invited me as a speaker, since I was recognized as a writer and speaker with Leftist sympathies. I was very weak in Nepali: from childhood I had just spoken Newari, all my friends in school and college spoke Newari, and I didn't know how to [speak publicly in Nepali]. They wouldn't accept this; they insisted I come. And the speech was alright! Up till then I'd only spoken in Nepal Bhasha at literary congresses. After that I was invited to speak in Nepali at other such meetings, to the Teachers' Union, for instance.

So although I got involved in "politics", I didn't have a "political background". My background was in the language movement, or literary movement; also in the "human rights movement".

Then after the referendum there was the general election of [V.S.] '38 [1981], the first general election under the Panchayat system. You couldn't stand for parties, but you could stand as an individual. The Left had many "divisions"; some of them were in favour of taking part in the elections. The question arose of who should stand in Kathmandu and my name was put forward. When my name appeared in the *Gorkhapatra* as a candidate, some parties objected to my standing for election. There were meetings and the majority agreed that I should stand down. Now although I was a Leftist and he was in Congress, I respected Ganesh Man [Singh]. I went to see him and he asked me to withdraw, so I did.

Five years later there was the second general election. Again people said I should stand. I should go and fight from within the Assembly. Compared to before, more thought I should stand. I went to take advice from all the "senior political leaders" of different parties: Ganesh Man Singh, Rishikesh Shaha, Tanka Prasad Acharya, Dilli Raman Regmi. The majority opinion was that I should stand, providing I didn't become a Pancha and fought for the multi-party system. Kathmandu was the "capital city" so there was a lot of "international attention". There was a mass meeting in Basantapur. I spoke against the Panchayat system and in favour of democracy and a multi-party system; I spoke against corruption and the suffering of the people, the problem of water, and so on. I spoke very "freely, frankly" and without fear. Cassettes of that speech became famous and reached every district of Nepal, and even reached as far as America. Even though I was not a "political leader", I was nothing at all, but suddenly I was very "popular". So even after that, whatever I say, even though I point out that there are others who have suffered more than I have and know more than I do, they insist that I stand, saying that others won't win.

DNG: Others have told me that in this cassette you said that if people were giving you their vote because you were a Newar, you didn't want it. Is that true?

PRT: Yes, it is. The reason for that is this. I was in the movement for Nepal Bhasha. People were accusing us of being "communal", and saying that we were being supported simply 'because we were Newars'. There was the same debate in the Manka Khalah too, where some people said that we shouldn't get involved in politics. Now there were others who said that we have one national language, Nepali, and that support for other languages is a form of communalism. There are still such people. Now that I was standing for the National Assembly. For this there were many "issues", of which language was just one. The "major issue" was "democracy" itself, "freedom of expression". Also the development of the country is a "major issue". Now among the major issues, one is that of language, nationality/ethnicity (*jāti*), and religion (*dharma*). That's my opinion. Because of this, the papers kept accusing me of being "communal", that I was only winning thanks to the vote of the Newar community. So what I said to the Newars was, 'Don't give me a vote as a Newar, give me a vote because of my opinions, because of my 'politics'. I'm going to fight for the multi-party system and against the Panchayat system. I want peace, development, equality, human rights, an end to corruption. I am going as an independent Leftist. I am not going as a communalist or as a Newar. If you are giving me your vote only because I am a Newar, please don't do so.' That's what I said; it wasn't that I didn't want Newar votes. Obviously you can't win in Kathmandu without the votes of Newars.

DNG: These days there seems to be an upsurge of ethnic feeling. From one point of view this is understandable, but from another it could be seen as dangerous. What is your opinion about that?

PRT: Nepal is a multi-national (*bahujātiya*) country. It doesn't have just one nationality/ethnic group, one language, one culture (*samskṛti*), one religion. Different groups took part in the movement of 1990 and this was recognized. In the new Constitution it says that Nepal is a *bahujātiya*, *bahubhāsiya*, a "multi-national, multi-lingual" country. There isn't just one language but many languages, there isn't just one group but many groups, there isn't just one culture but many cultures, and there isn't just one religion but many religions. Whether you base it on democracy, on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or even on Nepal's own Constitution, all groups (*jāti*) are equal: equal under the Constitution, equal before the "law".

DNG: If that's so, do you agree that the government should provide primary education in the mother tongue throughout the country?

PRT: That's what we "demanded"! All languages are equal, so the speakers of all languages should be treated equally. If primary education is provided in the medium

of Nepali, it should also be provided in Newari, Tamang, and in all languages. Otherwise all these other languages will die out.

DNG: Nepal is a very poor country. It would surely be very expensive to provide textbooks in all these languages.

PRT: That may be. But can we say that it is alright if Nepal Bhasha and Tamang die out? We cannot. It is the government's, the "state's", duty to save the culture of the country, to save "national unity", to protect all the *jāti* of the country. There is money for Nepali. How can we say there is no money for Nepal Bhasha? Take Radio Nepal, for example. They have 16-18 hours of programming a day. To say there is no money for 15 minutes of cultural programming in Tamang per week, will people believe or accept that?

DNG: Radio Nepal is one thing. But surely, if we have to take all the school textbooks that currently exist, and have to translate them all into Tamang and all the other languages, print them, and distribute them, won't that take an awful lot of money?

PRT: It will. But the main question is, should we save the Tamang language or not? That's the "major problem". Should we save all the languages of Nepal or not? If the government can spend tens of millions of rupees for the development of Nepali, surely there must be a share for Nepal Bhasha. No one is saying that the other languages must immediately be given the same position as Nepali which is used from primary education up to university, on the radio, television, everything. But our languages are about to die out. So at the very least the government must give recognition, at least now "at the initial stages" it must support primary education. The Constitution now says that we have the right to open primary schools for education in the mother tongue. Newars are now "comparatively" well off: from an economic and an educational point of view. Even so, but they haven't been able to create more than a single school. There is no curriculum and there are no textbooks. So until the government has a "policy" and "implements" it, it will not be possible. What the government says is, 'We don't have the money.' Take the example of the Kanya Mandir a girls' high school in Nhyakā Twāh, a completely Newar area. There the language of primary instruction should be Nepal Bhasha. The government wouldn't have to spend much money: all they would have to do is put in Newar school teachers and provide books in Nepal Bhasha. Or take Labsipheri, an area which is 90% Tamang, the school should be changed to Tamang medium.

The problem is that the leaders' "intentions" are not good. Nepali, they say, is the national language. But Nepali is the "rulers'" language. They think it is OK if the Tamang language dies out. People talk about "human rights". These Tamang children don't understand Nepali or English. How will the Tamangs ever progress if their education isn't given in Tamang?

It isn't a question of money. First we have to accept the 'proposition that Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country, and that all people and all languages should have equal rights. First of all, the parties have to accept this proposition.

DNG: Up till now am I right in thinking that neither the Congress nor the UML have accepted this proposition?

PRT: "Orally" they accept it, they say that all languages and all groups are equal, but "seriously" they haven't adopted it. So that why this separate Janajati movement has arisen. Nepal is a small country with many "ethnic diversities". Before, the Limbus, the Gurungs, and other groups, weren't very educated. In the future their children, once they've been "educated", will reject "unequal treatment". Will they rise up or not? Look at the Soviet Union: for 75 years the Communists were said to be very "democratic". Allegedly, everything was equal; but languages and nationalities weren't really equal. Perhaps if, as Lenin said, they had treated all languages equally, the USSR wouldn't have split up. But the "Russian Empire" "dominated" all the others, the Byelorussians, the Ukrainians, and all the rest.

Nepal, though it is a small country compared to the Soviet Union, is still very diverse. In the same way, if no recognition is given to different languages, cultures, and nationalities, they will rise up against the government, just as some Limbus have already demanded an independent Limbuan. What's the reason they are demanding this? Because their language isn't recognized, because their nationality (*jātiyatā*) isn't recognized, or because the government does nothing to develop their area. In "human rights" there are the principles of "self-determination", "autonomy", and "self-rule". If they say, 'As part of "democracy", we need to have "self-rule", we need to have "autonomy", -- is it permissible to ask for this or not? Why should that be a problem for Nepal? We have to find a "political solution", a "democratic solution". We have to find a way to bring about "equal rights".

DNG: You've had experience of being a Minister. You were in the UML government [of 1994-5], but you have never joined the UML. What is the main reason for that?

PRT: As I explained, my "background" isn't really "political". So, from the beginning I didn't "join" any party. But I had to stand for election, and I had close relations with the Left. And in the elections, the UML "supported" me, and other Leftist parties didn't put up "candidates" against me. So I became like a "common personality" for the communist parties. There are those who say that communists should be "united" and they demand that "left independent intellectuals" should all join in one place. Opinions may indeed differ. But at least as long as they [the independents] are as one [i.e. support the Communists] at "elections", then the

Communists can win and form the government. When an "election" comes, there will be dialogue, talk of unity, but they don't succeed. They then invite us independents to help them. For example, the other day during the "mid-term elections" the Communists couldn't agree so they called me to arbitrate. It is the same on the campuses: if the left students are "united" they win; if they are divided, the Congress's Nepal Students Union (Ne. Bi. Sangh) will win. When they can't agree, among them also I have been asked to arbitrate. So that's another reason why I haven't joined.

In the election under the Panchayat regime, I was known as someone who spoke in favour of the "people" and of "multi-party democracy". Some people have criticized me, saying, 'Now that we have parties, he doesn't even join his own party!'

Not long ago Madan Bhandari, the General Secretary of the UML, who was killed in the [motor] "accident" -- a great "loss" to them --, and the present UML Secretary, Madhav Nepal, came to me and "seriously requested" me to join. I discussed it with my "supporters", and with a meeting of the Padma Ratna Sahayog Samiti (Padma Ratna Support Committee) which has existed since the Panchayat election. And I discussed it with my friends and with "left intellectuals". They all said I should join the Party, nearly 90% of them, that I ought to join and take a leadership role. But I myself have not been able to take that decision. For one thing, I am by nature a very peaceful, "quiet", "shy", "candid" person. Whatever the truth is, I say it; whatever is in my mind, I have to say it. Such people are no use in the Party. Even if people criticize me, I don't get angry. Some newspapers criticize me and write what isn't true, but the editors are still friends of mine, and I never get angry.

Then there is something else. To be a Communist, to be a Communist worker or a Communist leader, one should cultivate a "proletarian character". But if you look at the Communist leaders, you don't see it. There are so many hundreds of thousands of poor people, people who don't get enough to eat. There ought to be workers in the Communist leadership, but in practice there aren't any. So I'm just a Communist supporter, but not a Communist Party member.

There are friends of mine who say that none of this is an obstacle. That I am "candid" is a good quality; that I speak "free and frankly" is also a good quality. 'You can still go into the party.' But I have decided that I am not suitable (*yogya*) to be a Communist Party leader. So I decided to try and make whatever "contribution" I could as an independent outside the party.

Now in the Panchayat time my election symbol was a sun. I was a "popular candidate"; I got the "second largest vote" in the "election". I was "popular" not just

in Kathmandu but in the entire country. So my "symbol", the sun, was known, and associated with the multi-party cause throughout the country. After 1990, with the restoration of the multi-party system, there came the first general election [of 1991]. People said I had to stand whether or not I was member of the party. "Without any conditions the Communists supported me." Now what symbol to take? According to the Constitution "independent candidates" should each take a different symbol, and I too thought to take a different symbol. But my "supporters" wouldn't hear of it. I had to keep the sun, even though it was the symbol of a party. So even though I didn't have to accept any conditions or submit to the party's "discipline" I fought the election with the same "symbol". So afterwards, from one point of view I was "independent", but from another I was aligned with the UML because I had fought the election under their symbol. I have been "criticized" for this, and still am.

It was the same in the recent "mid-term elections". They "supported" me in my constituency and I "supported" them in the other constituencies in Kathmandu. Now when they formed a "minority government" -- perhaps it is a weakness of mine -- I had no "ambition" to be minister.

DNG: Did you choose to be Minister of Health or did they give it to you?

PRT: My friends insisted that I should be a minister. But I said, 'How can I be a minister? I'm not even a member of the Party; I have neither the right nor the ambition to be one.' They said, 'If the Party offers, don't refuse it.' Then a phone call came at 12 o'clock at night, that I was to be offered a ministry. I said, 'If it is going to cause problems for the Party, I don't need to be a Minister,' because, as you know, there are only about 15 ministries, but about 30 or 40 people would have been waiting to be ministers. They said, 'No, the Party is agreed, you should be a minister.' My friends also said, 'Yes, you must be a minister; if you've been offered it, don't refuse.' So I agreed, but I didn't ask what "portfolio" I'd been given. That was what I got, the Ministry of Health and Labour.

Now there are those who said that this wasn't an "important" post: 'you should have taken another one.' But I don't agree. There are many poor labourers who live in very poor conditions and in the Ministry of Labour I could help to ameliorate their condition. The health service outside the city is also extremely bad. Basic health provisions haven't reached the villages. So I was very happy to be able to do something about this.

DNG: The UML government only lasted 9 months. What do you think its main accomplishments were?

PRT: The Labour Ministry is "one of the most neglected ministries". The majority of Nepal's people are workers. So this ought to be "one of the most important ministries". So it should have a higher budget, for training, etc. Obviously it was impossible

to complete everything, but "the basics" were begun. In the Health Ministry, what I said was that we must make basic health services reach all the people, even in the villages in the most remote areas. We had good relations with WHO and other "donor" agencies; for example, with Dr Bradley from the mission hospitals. Very good relations were established with him: he too has come here to serve the Nepali people. Likewise with the WHO.

We have various problems here: we have to lessen "corruption", the "bureaucracy" is very "slow". So I asked them "free and frankly" what problems they have, and I promised to give my "personal attention" to solving them. I used to meet with them regularly. It's not the kind of thing that can be solved instantly. We don't have the money or the "manpower". Nevertheless, we have to do something. In three or four districts we established mobile hospitals and announced where they would be on the radio. We recruited doctors and surgeons from the capital and other main cities and asked them to go out there. Within 4 or 5 months we managed to help over 100,000 people in different districts. In various places hospital buildings were on the point of falling down. We got help from the "mission hospitals" and WHO. We managed to do something about that. But of course though we accomplished something in 9 months, it wasn't complete. Had we been in place for 18 months or 2 years, we could have achieved a lot. If Ministers are really "dedicated" and really "honest" they can achieve a lot. The Minister has to give his "personal attention", and if he does so, any ministry can achieve "substantial progress and reform".

DNG: In your opinion would you say that, compared to Congress, Communist ministers are better people?

PRT: One can't say better or worse; it is a question of "ideology". Where the Communists are concerned there is a kind of "discipline", you have to be "pro-people", you cannot be "corrupt". Congress is the same of course: they too should not be "corrupt", should not tell lies. But they have a "class character". There is a "trend": the Communists have from the beginning been dedicated to the workers and the peasants, so the "people" have come to have the "impression" that the Communists are not corrupt, that the Communists serve the people. If you go to the Congress or other Minister's house you'll see hundreds of people, coming to beg a government job, some kind of work, to seek an "agency", a "dealership". But if you go to a Communist Minister's office there won't be that kind of crowd, because people know that he won't give it.

I "established" this when I stood in the Panchayat period, that I would not be corrupt. I stood up and said that I would not take bribes. If I were to eat just one *paisā* the people must punish me. I have nothing, but I have this one thing, honesty, to be proud of. I said in mass meetings that I wouldn't do any individual's

selfish work. So people with a "personal interest" don't come to me. One or two people, who don't know or who are really suffering, come to me. And I do help them. But I won't do any irregular kind of work. But anything that is in accordance with the "law" I will do. I told people from the start that I would not engage in corruption for myself, and nor would I do it for anyone else either, not for my brother or for friends. So that kind of people don't come to me.

"Comparatively" the same is true of the Communists. Take Man Mohan Adhikari, the former Communist Prime Minister, for example. His "image" must be the best of any Prime Minister. He wasn't "involved" in a single "scandal": there was no question of corruption or "commission". So, to him also, businessmen and others didn't go and ask him to fix things, because they knew he wouldn't do it. If people know that someone isn't like that, they won't go there.

It is also a question of "class character". The Congress Party's "supporters" are mostly "businessmen", rich "capitalists", and so on. Most of the supporters of the Communists are people without money, just peasants and workers. So, because of this "class character" or "class connexion", for that reason also there was less of that kind of problem.

You can tell if you look at the election "booths". Congress supporters will be drinking "beer" and eating in restaurants whereas the Communists will be sitting there eating Waiwai "instant" noodles. It's a kind of "trend", from the student level upwards, the Congress are "capitalist", the Communists "progressive". For that reason too "corruption" is "comparatively" less.

DNG: Nepal has received so much "aid". Some people, even Nepalis, say that so much has come in that Nepal has become "dependent" and it might have been better if it had never been there in the first place. What is your opinion about that?

PRT: There are two things. Firstly, there has been a lot of "aid", it has been "misused" and there has been "corruption", so a bad "culture" has developed, both in the "bureaucracy" and in the "political parties". But also, on the part of the "donor countries" there has been no attempt to prevent "corruption". America has given Nepal a lot of aid. If it has been misused, the Americans ought to bring it to light. A second problem or "complaint", is that, of what foreign countries give, more than 50% they themselves take away! "American advisors, American engineers, Japanese consultants." There are those who say this shouldn't be. The problem is that this is an "international" age. Nepal may be "politically independent", but "economically" it cannot be. "Interdependency" is the "reality" of the "world" today.

Foreign aid has to be used "maximally", but "international agencies, friendly countries, NGOs" send so many 100s of thousands, but half goes on salaries. A [Nepalese] NGO director will get [Rs.] 15, 20, or

25,000 per month whereas a Minister in Nepal gets slightly over 6,000!

DNG: It doesn't seem right.

PRT: No, it isn't right. These international agencies should pay according to Nepali standards. This is the problem of "NGO culture". They spend 90% of their budget on directors' salaries, conferences, publicity, expenses on hotel dinners. A university professor only gets 6,000 a month. But somebody just graduating and going to work in an NGO gets 15 or 20,000. This NGO "culture" will have a "negative effect" in the "future". So people are saying this has to stop. "Foreign aid" has been misused. Nepal has received aid worth tens of millions of dollars, but where is the development? There is so little.

In the health field the Netherlands "government" has made "hospital buildings" in various districts but they aren't maintained, and two years later they are falling down. The Americans have built various buildings, but when the Ambassador goes to see a one year later, there is already gross neglect! So the Americans should say to the Nepalese government "in friendly terms": 'We have come to help work for the benefit of the Nepali people. But you don't maintain what we build. If you continue like that, we can't help you.' If they said that the government would have to take it seriously. So there is fault not just on the Nepali side, but also on the side of the "donor countries". They have taken American "taxpayers'" money. The "Nepali people" are their "target group". They will only be happy if the money reaches the Nepali people. They didn't give the money so that because of "corruption" some Nepali could make himself into a rupee millionaire! From that point of view also they ought to take care.

But if you stopped "foreign aid" altogether, this country would not be able to manage. In order to develop the country, the only possibility is for us to earn "Himalayan dollars" just like the Arabs have earned "petrodollars"! So the solution to this problem is that the government must stop "corruption" and the foreign donors must make "maximum use" of the money they give and make sure it reaches the Nepali people.

In my opinion, "aid" is a right. "In international politics it is one of the rights of the underdeveloped countries to get money from the developed countries" because Nepal and other countries have had "raw materials" taken from them, or whatever. Also, since there is a "world community" it is the "responsibility" of developed countries, it is one of their "duties". It is one of the rights of poor countries to ask for it. 'You have money, we don't have money. You have enough to eat, we don't have enough to eat.' There are many problems in various "developing" countries, not just Nepal. Mostly foreign aid is "misused". It is the same in India or Pakistan. It is an "international problem". So "donor countries" must also be aware themselves and make sure "aid" isn't "misused".

DNG: Another thing I feel I have to ask about is the famous Cow Controversy (*gai kānd*). Did you or did you not say that Muslims or others who have the custom of eating beef in Nepal ought to have the right to slaughter cattle?

PRT: I was "one of the founding members" of the "Nepal Human Rights Organization" (Nepal Manavadhikar Sangathan, HURON); Rishikesh Shaha is the chairman. At the HURON convention in Bara district I was the "chief guest". The subject was "human rights". It is my habit, wherever I go, to speak strictly on whatever the subject is: if it is literature, I speak on literature; if it is "sports", I speak on "sports". Some people, when invited to speak at a "sports" occasion, speak about "politics"; but I am not like that. So what I said, at this national "human rights" meeting, was that since the "restoration of democracy", the "major human rights" have been "restored": "freedom of expression", the freedom to establish and register a "political party", etc. But in other, different contexts there are still other "human rights problems". That's how I started.

Nepal doesn't have just one *jāti* and one religion, but people of various different religions. During the Nepali Congress government's rule, different groups made different demands. For example, the Tamangs wanted Lhosar, their "New Year", recognized as a holiday. Similarly, Muslims have many festivals, like the Hindus. Now for Hindus, there is 15 days' holiday every Bada Dasain. Then there is Swanti-Tihar: again there are 3, 4, or 5 days' holiday. After that there is Ram Jayanti, Buddha Jayanti, and so on. How many [public] holidays they have! But the Muslims don't have a single holiday recognized by the government. They are a Nepali community too. So when the UML government came, it was recognized that this demand made sense. Nepal is a poor country with too many holidays! We ought to be working to develop, but actually we are always taking holidays!

What I said was, it was good that the UML government gave the Id festival as a public holiday for Muslims. And the Tamangs were given one day for Lhosar. But there are others. Should the Newars be given a holiday for their Nepal Samvat-New Year celebration or not? In the same way, the Gurungs, Magars, Limbus, Rais, Maithili-speakers are coming: should they be given holidays or not? They should. But how many holidays should there be in Nepal? There are already too many, and they should be cut. If Nepal is a country of religious harmony (*dharmik sahisnūtā*), Hindus should reduce their own holidays and give them to the others. Of the 15 days at Dasain, they should give one to Muslims, one to Rais, and so on. In this way I spoke about "religious harmony", "national unity", and so on.

Now there are other human rights problems in the religious field. In Nepal there are not just Hindus, but Buddhists as well. Nepal has been begging money

internationally on the grounds that it is the "Lord Buddha's birthplace". Yet in the "Constitution" the very word "Buddhism" doesn't even appear! So there is no constitutional recognition of "Buddhism". But I was a Minister, don't forget. So I said, as long as the "Constitution" hasn't been amended, it will be a "Hindu kingdom"; that's fine. But at least we should acknowledge the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which supports freedom of religions and equality of religions. Even our Constitution, though it declares Nepal a Hindu kingdom, talks of freedom of religions and equality of religions too. But if you call Nepal a Hindu kingdom, there is no recognition (*mānyatā*) for other religions: Nepal has Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, followers of Bon, followers of the Kirant religion. They have no recognition. So that is the problem. So what I said was, there will only be religious harmony in Nepal when everyone has the right to carry on their own religious customs, traditions, and practices. Let me give you an example. Nepal has many Muslims. Now their customs require them to eat beef. Even in a Hindu kingdom, it should be possible for them, within the boundaries of their settlements, in accordance with their "culture" and religion, to have that "practice". In my opinion they should be allowed to eat beef in that way, if their "culture" requires it. Just within their own settlements. The Tamangs, also, who are Buddhists, have to have beef, just as the Newars have to have buffalo meat. Because it's a Hindu kingdom, the "law" doesn't allow them to kill cattle, so they go up to the hills and make the cow fall down the hillside. That way they can say the cow died [rather than being killed] and can eat it. In the same way, the Tamangs should be given permission to eat beef within their own settlements. If we look at it from the point of view of human rights, they should be given that permission. That's all I said.

But when it was "reported" [by the newspapers], I was supposed to have said that cows should be slaughtered. What I said was, there are many problems of "human rights" remaining, but people don't talk about them. Now I am also a "human rights workers". Human rights workers have to have the courage to say things. I was talking from the point of religious equality, religious freedom, and human rights. I never said that I myself should kill cows!

DNG: But you did say that they should have the right to kill cows?

PRT: Just as in Hindu religion and "culture" one kills buffaloes, sheep, goats, and among Newars, some kill ducks or chickens, in the same way, there are Muslims in this country: 2 or 2.5 million according to different reports. They are "one of the Nepalese communities", they are "Nepalese citizens". Whatever rights to religious practice Hindus have, Muslims and Christians should have too. If we ask whether they should have the right to practise their religion within

the boundaries of their own settlements, we have to say they do. But I never said, 'Now cows must be killed.'

When I was a member of the National Panchayat, there was a Finance Minister called Bharat Bahadur Pradhan, and there was the question of "tariffs" on various "imported goods". One of these "tariffs" was on "imported canned beef": "the rate of tariff is 10%". This is printed. The Hindus protested against this. The ex-Prime Minister Nagendra Prasad Rijal, one of the leaders of the Hinduism movement, called for the resignation of the Finance Minister. Even before that Dr Prakash Chandra Lohani, the present Foreign Minister, "when he was Finance Minister" introduced such a "tariff": "canned beef".

DNG: Which year was that in?

PRT: It must have been from about '42 or '43 [ca. 1986]. The "tariff" was allowed and so you can get "canned beef" in "cold stores", so the importation was "allowed". I was all in favour of this being a country of religious harmony where no one fights for religion. I said the same things then: there are those who eat beef: Muslims, Christians; and as individuals Hindus and Buddhists can eat it too. But then I was alone and no one paid any attention.

DNG: Obviously the fact that you were a Minister was behind a lot of the criticism. Who was it who mainly criticized you for this?

PRT: It was friends in the Nepali Congress Party who began it. They made the topic "religion", but the "motive" was "political". It is the Nepali Congress activists who are against me: I know them very well. One or two of them said straight out to me that we have to defeat you in the "election" and we won't let go of this. When I went out to various districts as Minister of Health there would be demonstrations with black flags, but only 15, 20, or 30 people. Mostly Congress people. You could tell because at the end of their speeches they would shout "Jay Nepal". Only Congress activists do that, not anyone else! In some places I knew them personally.

From that it was taken up by "Hindu fanatics". There was a mass meeting in Janakpur where there was an Indian speaker. The "border" is "open" of course. He announced a Rs. 50,000 "reward" on the head of Padma Ratna Tuladhar, which came out in various newspapers. Then there is a "Hindu fanatic" called Yogi Narahari, who is also a "historian". He also spoke on one place and said that Padma Ratna should be cut up into as many pieces as he has hairs on his head. So in the beginning it was "political"; then the "Hindu fanatics" "reacted" to it. But the general populace weren't that impressed by this. Firstly, some thought it was OK what I said about human rights. Then, one or two Hindu scholars pointed out that nowhere in the Hindu scriptures is it written that one shouldn't eat beef. Rather, in the ancient Hindu religion one *had* to eat beef.

So, it was first "political", then the "fanatics" came in, but they didn't have all that much "success". For my part, I was trying to be very "restrained"; because, if I had been "provoked" those opposed to me would have been successful. The Tamangs and Gurungs came to my office in the Ministry -- they are "martial races", aren't they! -- and said, 'We are ready to do whatever you want. Just say the word.' I said to them, 'No, this "issue" is very dangerous, very "sentimental". We mustn't do what our opponents want. We must stay peaceful.' And finally it died down.

During my time as Minister there was this one controversy. But from one point of view it was a good thing. Because at least it was discussed. People talk about "human rights" all the time, but never about rights in the religious field. They talk about "equality" and equal rights, but never discuss about where these equal rights should be. At least, along with the "negative" there was this "positive" fact that these "issues" were discussed.

DNG: Thank you very much for your time and frankness.

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These end notes were omitted Mary Cameron's Research Report, *Biodiversity Conservation and Economic Development in Nepal's Khaptad National Park Region: Untouchables as Entrepreneurs and Conservation Stewards* (HRB XV:2 pp 56-63):

1 Acknowledgments I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Biodiversity Support Program (U.S. Agency for International Development) for support of the trip to Nepal, and department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at Auburn University, Auburn Alabama for kindly permitting the compression of my teaching responsibilities to facilitate travel to Nepal. My participation in the project would not have possible without the forethought of Guenter Rose at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the American principal investigator; I thank him for his sincere and determined interest in the people of Nepal. I would like to thank my colleagues Professors Kelly Alley, Paul Starr, and Conner Bailey for reading early drafts of this paper and discussing its ideas with me. Finally, I would like to thank Steven Everett from the Department of Music at Emory University for his thoughtful participation in the original brainstorming of a topic unfamiliar to musician, and for his friendship.

A longer version of this article is forthcoming in **Human Organization**.

2 The data were collected during fieldwork conducted in far western Nepal during 1988/89. The research was funded by the Fulbright Foundation, Sigma Xi Scientific Honor Society, the Women in International Development Section of the US. Agency for International Development at Michigan State University.

3 Methods to protect, guarantee, honor, and reimburse the intellectual property rights of local people is a required component of the project, rightly so. Our decision to meaningfully tie local ethonobiomedicals knowledge to a technology practical in the administering of health care in Thalami led to the idea of donating foot-driven "pill machine" (whose prototype is found throughout Sri Lanka)

that compress powdered plants into lozenges. This will meet people's people's most-voiced dissatisfaction with their herbal medical system, namely the difficulty in swallowing "so much Powder" (Cameron, 1986). Such pragmatic approaches to what is a well-recognized thorny legal issue have been tried with success by Shaman Pharmaceuticals (King, 1992; Posey 1990)

4 There are two main differences between caste structure in Nepal and India. 1) Nepal's Legal Code incorporates all Nepalese citizens into the caste system, Hindus and non-Hindus alike (where as in India many non-Hindu ethnic groups are not incorporated into the caste system); and 2) Nepalese ethnic groups, designated as *matwali* ("Liquor drinking") in the caste, occupy the third level of the caste hierarchy and are considered pure or touchable. This same level in the Indian system is designated as the impure *vaisya* Sanskrit category, and these persons are Hindu. See Hooper [1979] for a detailed description of the Nepalese caste system.

5 Of the fifty families in the research population, fifteen lower caste families (52 percent of total low-caste families with land) claimed to have lost land in the past decade due to annual monsoon erosion and two destructive. Although upper castes generally lose the most land in natural disasters, those lower caste families with land are not close behind. The loss of land due to erosion throughout Nepal's farming foothills contributes to a wry national joke that Nepal's largest export to India, soil, is free.

6 For a complete discussion of the impact of land reform, and the distribution of the deceased king's Land, on land holding relations in Bhalara see Cameron [1993].