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Bipin Adhikari

S.B. Mathe

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Authors' Rejoinder

Bipin Adhikari and S.B.Mathe

There is a Nepalese proverb, *aafni chhori nakachhari, tanderiko ke dosh*, which, translated, means if your daughter is of loose character, why blame the youths. The origin of the problem with regard to information dissemination - or disinformation, as some would like to believe - following the assassination of the Nepalese royal family on 1 June, must rest with our own elected government, which did not know how to cope with the assassination. The government may have been shell-shocked, but the least we expected of it was to gather its wits, take hold of the crime scene, dissociate from those who wanted to suppress the truth and enlighten the grief-stricken people with whatever details it had. In the absence of this, the army took over (or consolidated its position further?), took the government under control and monitored development of events. The vacuum was quickly filled by the Western media, which was used by 'insiders' to further their version of events.

Our paper was an attempt to show how the institutions that dominate the global flow of news and information covered the assassination of King Birendra and other members of the royal family. We focused, in particular, on the questions they failed to ask in their uncritical reliance on accounts furnished by the Nepalese authorities. In so doing, they allowed a manifestly inadequate report to gain credibility worldwide. Yet, it singularly failed to do so in Nepal. What has been proven is that King Birendra and the other members of the royal family were assassinated; what is still not clear, among other things, is who assassinated them and for what purpose. The answers may be clear to some of our compatriots, but to many of us, most of what happened that fateful day is still shrouded in mystery. Many of us still feel that the "whole" truth has yet to come out. Our contention was and still is that the global media, with all the resources at its disposal, could have played a more positive role in unearthing the "whole" truth. If the search for truth is naive, and we are branded as "ignorant" for not knowing how the global media operate, then we had rather be naive and ignorant than complacent and contented by the fare that was dished out to us. The disparaging labels do not matter, what is important is that the truth emerges from all the intellectual jousting.

We welcome the comments on our paper. Though John Whelpton and David Gellner do not subscribe to the alternative theory (to that which has gained acceptance), they nevertheless find our paper interesting and even deserving of publication. Our own compatriots, Ramesh Parajuli and Pratyoush Onta, on the

other hand, find our paper "shallow and un-analytical" [Parajuli, para 1] and "compilation of the same questions" [Parajuli, para 1 and 3]. Onta finds it "... tragically hilarious to realize that Adhikari and Mathe have not been able to discard a slogan of Panchayat vintage" [para 4]. Onta's intolerance of opposing views is even more evident in paragraph five, where he categorizes us, on the basis of an opinion we express that is widely shared by a lot of Nepalese, as ignorant analysts. Even more offensive is to further label those who participated in Stockholm as ignorant. Aside from these comments, we find the views expressed by the commentators remarkably refreshing and we are happy that our article has aroused them to react intellectually.

Our compatriots may be surprised to know that the so called "compilation of the questions" that have been asked were questions that we actually posed immediately after the tragedy. To assume that only a few people involved in the Nepali media are capable of asking these questions, and that the silent majority and those of us who were monitoring the global media in the two weeks following the assassination were not capable of posing the same questions, seems rather demeaning. We admit that we did not monitor the Nepalese media as much as we did the global networks, because our focus was on how these "swayers of public opinion" handled the news of the assassination and the implications thereof.

We would like to make the following specific responses to the comments on our paper. Gellner [para 1] thinks "the first, and less satisfactory theme concerns the power and irresponsibility of the Western media, particularly CNN and the BBC. The second, and more convincing, theme has to do with the unanswered questions and doubts which remain about the course of events". Whelpton [para 1] agreed that "several papers published highly detailed accounts without warning readers that much of the detail was in dispute. The international media also arguably did not make it clear just how widespread and lasting suspicion of the official version was among highly educated and well informed Nepalese." Meanwhile, he doubts [para 3 & 6], "given the lack of any positive evidence for alternative scenarios," that there was any conspiracy behind the carnage. As such, he does not think that the international media acted unreasonably [para 6]. Gellner, however, admits that "if the Western reporting shows anything, it is the failure of the West to convince non-Western people of its point of view." [para 2]. We reiterate our argument that, in the absence of reliable evidence, the international media should have given the news critically. If this had

been done, the state machinery in Nepal would have been under pressure to conduct a thorough and proper investigation according to the laws of the land.

We also reiterate that the public opinion about the alternative perspectives were either not discussed, or were not emphasized with the same intensity as the news that the Crown Prince killed everybody and then himself. We, therefore, wonder what novelty Onta [para 1] is looking for within the narrow objective of this paper. We have not pretended that all the arguments given in our paper have appeared for the first time; or that nobody thought about them before. In fact, plenty of people in and around the world were thinking alike. In an emotionally charged issue like this, everybody has his or her own opinion and these opinions are ventilated in different ways. What in our paper led Onta [para 4] to his conclusion is not apparent from his comments. As a matter of fact, in many instances we expressed what a lot of people felt around the world. There is no need to be analytical and intellectual on certain issues which are pretty obvious. As far as the necessity of "close textual reading of the different electronic (including internet) and print reports", as pointed out by Onta [para 2] is concerned, we did a fair amount of reading of electronic and other materials, as much as fell within the scope of our paper.

Onta's statement, on the basis of his interaction with some of them, that members of various international news organizations were skeptical of the findings of the Probe Commission [para 3] might be correct, but we did not come across headlines highlighting that suspicion, nor did the international channels propagated such suspicions as frequently as they aired the news categorically stating that the Crown Prince was the murderer. The Crown Prince was publicly indicted as the murderer, repeatedly, and a brief note somewhere in the text mentioning the suspicion on the probe commission report hardly made a dent in shaping international perception of the event. None of the prestigious global media came out with critical commentaries highlighting this suspicion, or at least emphasizing the inadequacies of the report at some length, or questioning its legal strength. That is why we said they lacked good faith. Anybody interested can still go through online resources of these media, and one could quite easily start with CNN and BBC materials. We will stand corrected if anybody can show news headlines and views in the front page of the global media criticizing the probe commission report. Maybe we are still being naive, but the search for the "whole" truth must continue.

Onta [para 1] also asserts that "those who are *familiar* with the way in which internationally dominant media outlets treat stories ..." are not surprised by how the media represents events in marginal countries like Nepal. Strangely enough, he is arguing both ways: he not

only says that the international media had expressed its suspicions about the probe commission report [para 3]; but he also asks, why should they care at all? These statements are contradictory. In fact, Parajuli [para 2] has gone beyond this and noted that our thinking that the international media "should show concern for Nepal's democracy or situation is nothing but naïve." Assuming that he is right, should we stop talking about what is good and what is bad or should the discussion about "what is" and "what ought to be" continue. Moreover, on the one hand, Parajuli states that the "paper has compiled the same questions that the media, Nepali and/or international, have already asked by August 2001", [para 1] while on the other he also claims that the local media was "helpless, especially in the immediate aftermath of the massacre" [para 3] and that "they didn't ask too many questions but simply relayed what they had been fed" [para 3].

We also disagree with Onta on some of the other issues. They relate to our proposition [para 5 & 6] that "Nepal's independence, democracy and human rights ... might have been gravely threatened by these assassinations" and that "since the assassination, the monarchy in Nepal has been controversial with the result that the popular confidence in the monarch that was the basis of national unity has been shattered." Kings still exist in the democratic world, because they serve certain public purposes. Even assuming that both these propositions are wrong, as Onta because the image of our political leaders, who once stood tall, took a beating during the post-1990 years." We accept this argument, along with what we stated above.

If certain people subscribe to the conspiracy theory, they can only be satisfied by a thorough investigation. Such an investigation of course could start with the arrest of the security guards at the scene, as well as questioning of other witnesses by professional interrogators. It is rather perplexing to note that the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) has launched a people's war to establish, among other things, a People's Republic of Nepal for the last six years, and at the climax of this war, the King and his entire immediate family have been killed. Should we not try to ascertain whether these events are linked? The tragedy is explained by reference to a love story that most of the people were completely unaware of and this becomes an all-embracing theory. The way the bodies of the royalty were consigned to the flames has left many wondering. While most Nepalese are kept in the dark, categorical statements that there was no conspiracy are made without any investigation.

We can study the Maoist theory about the assassinations in different ways. We agree with Whelpton [para 4] that the Nepalese monarch no longer makes

foreign policy, so looking at these assassinations as a move to eliminate a pro-China king as the Maoists have argued may not sound convincing. Different commentators have their own perspectives about the Maoists. What is important to note is the conspicuous silence of India and China on the Maoist movement. The Chinese have not stated whether they have fraternal relations with Maoists. Similarly, the Indians have been extremely tolerant on this issue, which is atypical if one considers the many instances of Indian interference in Nepal after 1950-51. It is a fact that Nepal is a place where India jousts with China, and it is the opinion of the King on foreign policy that has always mattered most, no matter who is in the government in Nepal. A constitutional monarch is a nonpartisan monarch; and as such, his influence both on the people and on policy is considered significant.

As far as Nepal is concerned, to quote from the January 2001 report of Stratfor, the Austin-based US intelligence firm, it has "a strong geostrategic value to world powers. The power that stations its space-linked surveillance, intelligence and navigation systems on Nepal's high mountain gets geostrategic leverage over several Asian regions, from Central Asia to South-East Asia." Suggesting that Nepal is likely headed toward even more difficult times with the probable change of its entire political system, from multiparty democracy to Communist or Maoist state, the report further states that "[g]iven the country's invaluable geostrategic location, literally at the top of Eurasia, this will give a dramatic advantage to Beijing's geographical position on the continent while causing major problems for India." Arguing that China's presence in Nepal would also complicate matters for the US Navy in the Indian Ocean, the report cautions that "India will be forced to counter Nepal's apparent slide toward Beijing through other means..." Nobody knows who the Maoists in fact are, what their generic character is, and what their ultimate objectives, apart from republicanism, are; and there are indications that the people's war may not subside even if there is a compromise between the government and the Maoists. However, the pace with which a few sidelined leaders have managed to seize the political initiative and the growth of the movement to such an extent that it threatens the whole country is simply astounding. The Maoists may pave the way for other types of extreme interventions.

Isabel Hilton's *New Yorker* article merits some attention. Her reliance on Rabi Shamsher, or for that matter anybody who has so far been traced, can be a threshold reference but not a mark of finality. They were silent when their statements were most needed. Additionally, none of these witnesses have spoken on oath nor faced professional investigators. They have not

come forward to face the journalists nor have they explained how they survived, while all the family members of the King were killed. In the interest of the nation, all these witnesses should have volunteered to come to the people, and give their versions of the truth. Hilton has spent much time and energy on trying to figure out what happened that fateful day, but she does not offer any information about the army, especially the security guards, and it appears that she has not approached the story with multiple theories in mind. We absolutely agree when Whelpton [para 2] says "if someone wanted to eliminate the royal family why do it in such a bizarre way?" This is a question that can only be answered by a thorough investigation of the incident. However, one can still argue that if the King was killed as a part of design, the story of "an act of irrationality on Dipendra's part" [para 5] will appear more protective to the conspirator than Whelpton's alternative of a "straightforward terrorist-style attack" [para 2].

Finally, a couple of comments made by Sijapati also deserve specific response. He is too gentle about the issues we raise. His propositions that Nepal has limited strategic importance; that the armed guards in the palace are not under the chain of command of the Royal Nepal Army; and presumably the implication that the former acted without any instruction from the latter in this case are too generous a misunderstanding of the facts. Again, a blanket excuse for those who were responsible for consigning the royal bodies to the flames without going through the compulsory "post mortem" forensic procedure, that too on the basis of a Hindu tradition which has never been a rule, is unacceptable. If the royal army as he contends is taken as an entity separate from the Royal Nepal Army, we are afraid the system is unconstitutional. We do not intend to enter the domain of what Hindu religion dictates or does not dictate. The law of the land does not create any exception to the post-mortem procedure; and the Hindu state of Nepal is organized around the principle of supremacy of law, not of religion. By the way, who gave the army the power to define religion and to bypass the legal procedure on that basis? We however accept the factual error in identifying Neer Shah.

Gellner has noted [para 5] that "it is a basic rule of epistemology that unless there is an alternative, more encompassing theory, one has no choice but to go with the existing theory, unsatisfactory though it may be." We would like to argue that, if there are various conflicting theories, the best approach is to keep the options open. With these comments, we would like to rest our case. We thank once again the five commentators for taking time to read the paper and offering valuable comments and insights.

September 7, 2001