

ATTACK IN BIRGUNJ AND THE ROLE OF MUKTISENA IN THE ABOLITION OF THE RANA RULE IN NEPAL

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Abstract

The study examines how Nepal's armed resistance, notably the formation of Mukhtisena and the Birgunj attack, played a pivotal role in ending the autocratic Rana regime, leading to the establishment of democracy. Through qualitative analysis of historical context and political dynamics, the paper highlights Mukhtisena's collaboration with political parties like the Nepali Congress. Utilizing descriptive and analytical methods drawing from secondary sources, it emphasizes the strategic importance of the Birgunj assault in challenging Rana authority. Despite challenges, Mukhtisena's unwavering commitment to freedom propelled Nepal towards democracy. Focusing on the Birgunj attack, the study elucidates Mukhtisena's origins and their insurgency against dictatorship, shedding light on the complexities and outcomes of the armed movement.

Keywords: Anti-rana movement, Bhardars, Democracy, Nepali congress, Revolution

1. INTRODUCTION

On the night of September 14, 1846, Nepal was rocked by the assassination of Gagansingh, a prominent minister, during the reign of King Rajendra Bikram Shah. With the king's authority waning, Queen Rajyalakshmi Devi assumed control, surrounding herself with loyalists, including Gagan Singh Khawas. His subsequent murder spurred a royal decree summoning all nobles to Kot to identify the culprit. This directive unwittingly played into the hands of Janga Bahadur Kunwar, who, under the guise of supporting the queen, seized the opportunity to eliminate his rivals, leading to the infamous Kot Massacre.

Thus began the era of Rana rule in Nepal, marked by autocracy and oligarchy for over a century. Despite simmering public discontent, dissent against the regime struggled to gain traction initially. However, dissent gradually gained momentum, with intellectuals voicing opposition and internal conflicts within the Rana elite intensifying.

As global dynamics shifted and the youth grew emboldened, clandestine political movements emerged, laying the groundwork for a revolution against the Rana regime. Among these, the Nepali Congress played a pivotal role, clandestinely organizing the 'Janamukti Sena' to spearhead armed resistance.

While existing literature has extensively documented the broader anti-Rana movement, there remains a notable gap concerning specific events, such as the Birgunj attack orchestrated by Mukhtisena. The study seeks to delve into the formation and actions of the Mukhtisena (Liberation Army), particularly its pivotal attack in Birgunj, shedding light on the circumstances that led to its inception. Furthermore, it aims to analyze the profound impact of the armed resistance on Nepal's historical trajectory and political landscape, as it heralded the eventual downfall of the autocratic Rana regime.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A momentous chapter in Nepal's history was opened with the overthrow of the Rana administration, which was marked by political unrest, resistance, and the rise of new power structures. The following headings have been used for the literature review:

2.1 Emergence of Rana Rule and the Anti-Rana Movement:

The historical trajectory of Nepal witnessed a pivotal shift with the emergence of the Rana regime, replacing a monarchy deemed incompetent in governance (Stiller, 1981). This transition was fueled by a power struggle, culminating in the ascension of leaders like Jung Bahadur Kunwar, whose political acumen surpassed traditional royal authority (Gautam, 2022; Rana, 1974). Under Jung Bahadur Rana's premiership, Nepal saw a

transformation, relegating the monarch to a nominal role while consolidating power within the Rana family (Bhattarai, 2001).

Externally, global developments, including the decline of authoritarianism and the end of British colonial rule in India, influenced Nepal's political landscape (Rana, 1978). Rana regime (1846-1950), was marked by a breakdown in the traditional power structure, leading to a loss of unity and trust between the ruler and the people (Gautam, 2022). This was exacerbated by the regime's reliance on manipulation and the suppression of cultural expression (Hutt, 1987). Despite British support, the Rana rulers faced internal opposition, notably from the Indian Nationalist Movement (Mojumdar, 1975). These factors, combined with internal power struggles,, ultimately led to the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951 (Borgström, 1980).

2.2 Role of Political Parties and Armed Movements:

Several political parties worked to strengthen the anti-Rana movement in Nepal, which culminated in the Nepali Congress's violent resistance (Pandey, 2019). According to the well-documented contributions of families like Koirala and Rana towards the overthrow of Rana rule, the movement was cooperative (Pandey, 2019). Still, there is a lack of scholarship on particular military operations, like the Birgunj raid, even with the important roles that political parties and armed movements have played.

2.3 Importance of the Birgunj Attack:

In the larger story of the anti-Rana movement, the Birgunj incident has inherent significance, but it is rarely discussed in academic circles. Existing literature offers important insights into the origins and actions of Mukhtisena, including books like Shyam Kumar Tamang's 'Liberation Army's Unwritten History' (1999). However, the Birgunj raid is conspicuously absent as a separate topic. This omission offers a chance for more investigation into the intentions, strategies, and outcomes of the Birgunj attack concerning Nepal's anti-Rana conflict.

2.4 Research Gap and Future Directions:

The lack of academic focus on Mukhtisena's attack on Birgunj indicates a significant research gap in the body of literature now available on Nepal's anti-Rana movement. A thorough analysis that concentrates only on the Birgunj attack could provide insight into Mukhtisena's tactical plans, the battle's sociopolitical ramifications, and the attack's overall importance in the final collapse of Rana power. It is therefore imperative that future study projects give top priority to investigating this little-known facet of Nepal's past to further our comprehension of the anti-Rana movement and its complicated dynamics.

3. METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study is based on a qualitative research design. Based on this design, the study has been prepared based on secondary sources. Such secondary sources were collected from libraries and private collections. Based on the collected sources, this research was completed. The descriptive method has been adopted in the places where the materials are used. It is felt that the study will be more reliable if some concrete and factual materials collected or obtained during the study are kept in the appropriate place. Because the study is related to historical topics. Most of the descriptive and analytical methods have been adopted during the writing process.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Political parties such as Prachanda Gorkha, Nepal Praja Parishad, and Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Rastriya Congress, Rastriya Congress, Nepal Prajatantra Congress, and Nepali Congress were opened in Nepal by protesting the Rana regime and establishing democracy in the country. Such political parties sometimes made plans for peaceful protests and sometimes armed protests. However, because the Rana government was very repressive and cautious, the political parties could not easily advance the movement. Similarly, the conference of the Nepali Congress held in Calcutta decided to carry out an armed movement in Nepal. This movement is called the Mukhtisena (Liberation Army) movement in the history of Nepal.

4.1 Historical Background

During the agitation against the Rana regime, the movement initiated by Pachanda Gorkha, Nepal Praja Parishad, and other political parties faced ruthless suppression. The Rana ruler believed that subsequent movements led by the Nepali Rashtriya Congress, Nepali Congress, Nepal Communist Party, and other political entities could be similarly quelled. Consequently, political parties deemed it necessary to alter their strategies. Peaceful protests within the country seemed futile against the Rana rule, prompted parties to organize movements abroad. Even those initially advocating nonviolent resistance found themselves compelled to take up arms. Ultimately, the armed movement emerged as the most viable means to overthrow the Rana regime (Tamang, 1999).

Junga Bahadur Rana established a hierarchical order within the Rana family, which subsequent rulers adapted to their advantage. Chandra Shumser, while restructuring the line of succession, categorized the family into the 'A', 'B', and 'C' classes (Sharma, 1994). Disputes among the Ranas led to the expulsion of 'C' class members from the Kathmandu valley by those of the 'A' class. Dissatisfied with the new leadership in Kathmandu, the 'C' class Ranas resolved to challenge the ruling faction.

Suvarna Shamsheer believed that the Rana regime's power in Nepal lay chiefly in its military strength, and the only effective countermeasure was a military offensive (Adhikari, 1998). Recognizing the weakness of revolutionary forces against the wealthy rulers, he advocated for the establishment of an armed force even before the formation of the Nepali Rashtriya Congress.

Following discussions between Suvarna Shamsheer and Purna Singh Khawas in Calcutta, the groundwork for the Jana Mukhtisena (People's Liberation Army) was laid. Under this plan, Suvarna Shamsheer undertook the responsibility of financing the necessary army and weapons, thus initiating the formation of the Jana Mukhtisena (Tamang, 1999). This initiative stemmed from the conviction that removing the Rana rule in Nepal necessitated armed intervention.

Purna Singh Khawas, Thirabam Malla, Dilman Singh, Dil Bahadur Rai, G.B. Yakthumba, Sundarraj Chalise, and others joined forces to launch armed resistance against the Rana regime in Nepal, drawing strength from Nepalis with experience in India's Azad Hind army (Gautam, 1998). In June 1948, the groundwork for the People's Liberation Army was laid.

Although the Janamukti Sena (People's Liberation Army) was formed, its leading party was not established until August 15, 1948, when Suvarna Shamsheer Rana, Mahabir Shamsheer Rana, Mahendra Bikram Shah, and others announced the establishment of the Nepal Prajatantra Congress Party. With the formation of the party, the Janmukti Sena expanded its ranks. Initially stationed in Siliguri, India, the Janmukti Sena camp was later relocated to Lucknow, then to Laheriyasarai in Bihar, strategically positioned for incursions into the Nepalese border regions (Adhikari, 2001).

As political parties recognized the inadequacy of non-violent means to overthrow the Rana regime, leaders like Ganeshman Singh, Kedarman Byathit, Gopal Prasad Bhattarai, and others gravitated towards armed resistance (Upadhaya, 1997). Thirabam Malla of the Janamukti Sena played a crucial role in amassing weapons, although obtaining the requisite armaments to challenge the Rana government's trained army proved challenging due to limited resources and manpower. Despite its weaknesses in training and discipline, the Mukhtisena (Liberation Army) demonstrated unwavering determination to serve their country (Adhikari, 1998).

4.2 The Activities of the Mukhtisena

Independently, activists of the Nepal Prajatantra Congress devised plans for a violent movement against Rana rule, while the Nepali Rashtriya Congress B.P. group shared similar goals. Although the former possessed considerable financial resources and the latter manpower, their shared objectives hinted at potential collaboration (Pandey, 2019). The suggestion of Indian leaders, like Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, to merge the two parties gained traction (Sharma, 1991). Eventually, on March 27, 1950, a joint statement was issued regarding their unification, leading to the formation of the Nepali Congress on April 9 and 10, 1950 (Pradhan, 1990). Following the merger, the Nepali Congress revitalized the Mukhtisena, which had been established before the union of the two parties, gearing up for armed action (Rana, 2017).

When the Nepali Congress launched an armed movement against the Rana regime, socialist leaders from Burma facilitated the provision of weapons. Initially tasked with collecting arms, Thirabam Malla was later joined by Indian leader Bhola Chatterjee (Chatarji, 1967). While the Nepali Congress secured arms support from Burma at the government level, individual contributions came from North Indian States and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah of Kashmir (Parmananda, 1982). With weapons procurement in progress, the Nepali Congress initiated specialized training for its Mukhtisena (Liberation Army).

Following discussions, a conference held in Bairagania on September 26 and 27, 2007, emphasized the need for escalated armed struggle. Party chairman Matrika Prasad Koirala was entrusted with full authority for the struggle, while B. P. Koirala and Suvarna Shamsheer Rana were tasked with arms procurement and Mukhtisena mobilization (Sharma, 1998). The movement aimed for national expansion, establishing headquarters near the Nepal-India border and in Indian territories such as Lucknow, Banaras, Gorakhpur, Raxaul, Joghani, Calcutta, and Siliguri (Parmananda, 1982). Training for the Liberation Army commenced at these locations.

4.3 Departure of King Tribhuvan

Amidst growing discontent with the Rana regime, various political parties in Nepal adopted different approaches, some advocating peaceful protest while others prepared for armed resistance. The international atmosphere also brimmed with anticipation for change. The Ranas and King Tribhuvan, sensing the shifting dynamics, strategized to leverage the situation to their advantage (Gautam, 1998).

Following the killing of four martyrs, King Tribhuvan initially seemed to withdraw from anti-Rana activities. However, he resumed his involvement after Padma Shamsheer's resignation and Mohan Shamsheer's ascension as Prime Minister. Engaging actively in politics, the king bolstered public relations and took measures against the Rana regime (Adhikari, 2021). He faced accusations from the Rana rulers, who planned his expulsion and

rumored relocation to Gorkha after the 1950 Bhaitika (Tihar Festival) (Tuladhar, 1980). Mohan Shamsher's premiership further intensified oppression against the king and the populace opposing the Ranas.

Recognizing the looming threat, King Tribhuvan arranged with the Indian Ambassador, Chandeshwar Prasad Narayan Singh, for refuge at the Indian embassy if needed. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru assured King Tribhuvan's safety and respect should he seek sanctuary (Gautam, 1998). Meanwhile, the Nepali Congress devised a clandestine plan for an armed revolution, intending to relocate King Tribhuvan to Palpa and launch the uprising from there. B.P. Koirala traveled to Palpa to orchestrate the plan but encountered obstacles, leading to its abandonment (Adhikari, 2001).

King Tribhuvan, envisioning a departure from the Rana government, departed Narayanhiti Palace on November 6, 1950, accompanied by his family and Colonel Narayan Narasimha, reaching the Indian Embassy shortly after (Udash Pokhrel, 1996). Subsequently, on November 11, 1950, King Tribhuvan and his family departed for Delhi, India, via Indian Air Force Dakota aircraft (Pande, 1988). This event precipitated a governance crisis in Nepal. The Rana government's unsuccessful attempts to restore King Tribhuvan prompted the decision to place his four-year-old grandson, Gyanendra Shah, on the throne on November 7, 1950 (Rana, 2017). Nepal found itself engulfed in turmoil due to these developments.

4.4 Armed Movement of Mukhtisena

The government of India played a crucial role in supporting the king of Nepal and aiding the revolution by providing weapons and financial assistance to the Mukhtisena (Liberation Army) of the Nepali Congress. This support facilitated the return of the Nepalese king to his country, paving the way for immediate action by the Nepali Congress. An emergency meeting of the central members of the Nepali Congress held in Calcutta on November 9, 1950, resolved to initiate an armed movement in Nepal (Adhikari, 2021). The Mukhtisena, spearheaded by the Nepali Congress, decided to launch the revolution by capturing the city of Birgunj, a crucial gateway to the Kathmandu Valley.

On November 11, 1950, two groups of Mukhtisena soldiers, under the leadership of Chief Commander Thirbam Malla and Purna Singh Khawas, respectively, advanced towards Birgunj from Raxaul, an Indian railway station near the border (Manandhar, 1983). Dividing into groups, they successfully seized key locations in Birgunj, including the residence of Bada Hakim, a local official. However, a confrontation ensued with the national army, resulting in casualties on both sides. Tragically, Thirbam Malla, a pivotal figure in the armed movement, was fatally wounded during the attack (Tamang, 1999). Despite this setback, the revolutionaries remained resolute in their mission to liberate Nepal from Rana rule.

The capture of Birgunj yielded significant gains for the Mukhtisena, including numerous rifles, ammunition, and around 100 prisoners from the national army (Upadhya, 1997). However, the sudden upheaval caused confusion among the local populace and government employees. Following the success in Birgunj, the Nepali Congress established a people's government, with Tej Bahadur Amatya appointed as the military administrator (Pandey, 2019). The Mukhtisena soldiers continued their northward advance with unwavering determination, fueled by their commitment to ending Rana's tyranny in Nepal.

Despite establishing control over Birgunj, the Mukhtisena soldiers remained steadfast in their cause, with leaders like B.P. Koirala and Suvarna Shamsher Rana rallying support for the revolution. They appealed to the public for assistance in providing essentials like warm clothes, medicine, and food for the liberation army (Gautam, 1998). Moreover, Suvarna Shamsher emphasized that rank in the army would be based on merit rather than birth, inspiring individuals to join the cause with the promise of advancement based on qualifications (Gautam, 1998).

5. CONCLUSION

With the ascent of the Rana regime, dissent against their rule began to simmer in Nepal. Initially, the first Rana Prime Minister, Junga Bahadur, adeptly quashed opposition, but over time, internal conflicts among the Ranas escalated, fueling the anti-Rana movement. Despite this growing resistance, Rana dominance endured in Nepal for a staggering 104 years. Those who dared to voice revolutionary ideas against the Ranas were often exiled, with many seeking refuge in India. However, the British government in colonial India, aligned with the Rana rulers, posed a significant obstacle to anti-Rana efforts. Consequently, Nepali citizens opposing the Rana regime also engaged in movements to overthrow the British colonial government in India.

Nepali youths who migrated to India formed various political parties with the aim of ending Rana rule in Nepal and establishing democracy. Among them, figures like Suvarna Shamser and B.P. Koirala, who founded the Nepali Congress party, also established the Mukhtisena to spearhead an armed movement against the Rana regime. The Mukhtisena meticulously planned coordinated attacks on Nepal from multiple locations, with Thirabam Malla leading the assault on Birganj. The Liberation Army successfully captured the Badahakim of Birganj and seized control of government army barracks, subsequently declaring the establishment of an independent government. Bolstered by this triumph, the liberation army pressed on with their advance.

Simultaneously, the anti-Rana movement gained momentum, reaching its pinnacle in 1951. Finally, after years of struggle, the Rana rule met its end in Nepal.

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