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A History of Nepal By John Whelpton Cambridge University Press, 296pp Pounds 40.00 and Pounds 15.99 ISBN 0 521 80026 9 and 80470 1

The kingdom of Nepal is often in the news these days, although rarely for encouraging reasons. Triumphant accounts of ever-faster Himalayan ascents have given way to puzzled reports by foreign journalists about Maoist revolutionaries and their violent battles with an increasingly unforgiving state. As rapidly as this poor country has fallen out of favour for trekking holidays, it has climbed the scale of locations for human-rights activists to watch. The kingdom of Nepal has the unfortunate honour of being home to Asia's fastest-growing war and is the world record holder for "disappeared" people. With more than 12,000 deaths since the conflict began in 1996, both government security forces and Maoist rebels stand accused of gross human-rights violations by international monitoring organisations raising the alarm about innocent villagers caught in the crossfire.

Even though John Whelpton's very readable History of Nepal was not written as a primer on the nation's present political crisis, it provides much helpful context for understanding the thorny question now posed so often by commentators on this troubled kingdom: how and why did seemingly peaceful Nepal suddenly erupt into brutal civil war? In keeping with the seriousness of the subject, the author's position is historically nuanced and judicious, providing a healthy corrective to the "from Shangri-La to Hell" type of reports common in the press of late. "Sudden and violent political change has been a recurrent part of the country's history," as he says, and the history of Nepal's royal lineages is one of intrigue, assassination, exploitation and corruption.

As a case in point, one may begin with Prithvi Narayan Shah, king of the principality of Gorkha and founding father of the Nepali nation state.

Ruthless and shrewd, this first Shah king issued orders to "cut off the lips and noses of the inhabitants of Kirtipur (a town in the Kathmandu valley) after its surrender in 1766".

A History of Nepal will be of interest to any student of South Asian studies, since it fills a serious lacuna in scholarship on the region. An example of the narrow scholarly gaze on Nepal is that while ethnographic descriptions of Nepal's Sherpa and Thakali communities are plentiful, Whelpton's text is the first accessible overview of Nepal's political history published by a university press in English. Particularly

welcome additions are the timeline of key events, genealogical tables of ruling dynasties, biographical notes on key historical players, a substantial glossary and an annotated bibliography with the author's commentary on selected texts. The use of a photo of a street scene in the plains town of Birgunj on the front cover - rather than a cliched image of snowy Everest or one of Kathmandu's temples - deserves special mention and will be appreciated by the underrepresented inhabitants of Nepal's lowlands, the Terai.

After a slightly choppy first chapter on the environment, state and society of ancient Nepal through the mid 1700s, the book settles down to six increasingly robust sections with ever more specific focus. Whelpton is particularly fluent in the political history of Nepal's past 150 years, and his observations are insightful and impressive. Since his reading of Nepali history is on the whole even-handed, it is surprising that he is so restrained when it comes to evaluating the vicissitudes of Rana rule. The Rana family autocracy, lasting 104 years and finally overthrown in 1950-51, was striking for its nepotism and violence. Passing off the "systematic discrimination against those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy" as sustaining "values that had underpinned the Nepalese state since its creation", and therefore as a "more positive ideological defence" of the Rana's repressive policies, strikes this reviewer as unnecessarily charitable. Most scholars regard the Rana century as a dark age from which the nation is still recovering.

Regardless, Whelpton deserves much praise for rising to the challenge of writing a comprehensive yet orderly history of a nation, which ranges from the geological formation of the Himalayas many millions of years ago to the political intrigue of 2003 - and all in under 300 pages. Teasing out trends and reconstructing the flow of ideas across millennia to give the reader a palpable sense of what it means (and meant) to be Nepali is harder still.

Whelpton succeeds on all counts. As a result, A History of Nepal is a compelling narrative introduction to this frequently misunderstood country.

Mark Turin is co-director, Digital Himalaya Project, Cambridge University.

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