

Mahendra Man Singh. 2013. *Forever Incomplete: The Story of Nepal*.  
New Delhi: Sage Publications.

The author says that he wrote this book to primarily answer the questions put to him by his children: “I thought it best to put what I know in writing and so present this story of the Kingdom of Nepal which will take the reader through various periods in its long history” (p. xix). It has nine chapters, epilogue, notes, glossary, a bibliography and an index. The last four give the book an academic feel although the author is described as a businessman who has also dabbled in Nepali politics occasionally.

The first three chapters tell a rapid but familiar story of Nepal from the ancient times to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work of the four martyrs of 1997 v.s. (1941) along with those of their comrades – including Ganesh Man Singh and Ganesh Raj Onta, my grandfather – is discussed in Chapter four. The oppositional political activities of the 1940s including the armed revolution led by the Nepali Congress (NC) party that led to the end to the family rule of the Ranas in 1951 are the subject of Chapter five. Chapter six covers the direct rule of Kings Mahendra (1960–1972) and Birendra (1972–1990) under the so-called Partyless Panchayat system.

Chapters seven through nine make for an interesting read. The work of those political forces opposed to the Panchayat system during the 1980s that culminated in the first *Jana Āndolan* of 1990 under the leadership of Ganesh Man Singh is detailed in Chapter seven. The author reminds his readers that Ganesh Man refused to accept the post of the prime minister of the interim government that was responsible for the writing of the new constitution and the holding of the first elections. Instead Ganesh Man suggested that his NC colleague Krishna Prasad Bhattarai be given that responsibility. As is well known, under Bhattarai’s care, a new constitution

was promulgated in late 1990 that turned Nepal into a constitutional monarchy with a multiparty parliamentary system and the first elections were held in 1991 which returned a majority government headed by NC's Girija Prasad Koirala.

In Chapter eight, author Singh makes the case that under the three Koirala brothers as Nepal's Prime Ministers – M.P. Koirala in the mid-1950s, B.P. Koirala during 1959–60 and Girija Prasad Koirala in the 1990s – the country suffered a lot as they took decisions that had detrimental consequences in the case of the Koshi Project, the Gandak Project and the Tanakpur Project respectively. The author describes Girija Prasad's signing of what the latter called a 'memorandum' on the Tanakpur Project with India as an act that added "folly to incompetence" (p. 230). He adds that when the country's Supreme Court "ruled that any written document between sovereign states amounted to an Agreement irrespective of whatever the document may be termed as" and "as such merited the provision as per Clause 126 of the Constitution" of 1990 which required such Agreements to be ratified by a two-thirds majority in Parliament, it was clear that Koirala had committed "perjury in a sovereign Parliament" (p. 231). He further concludes that in "overriding parliamentary practice," Girija Prasad "outdid his elder brother B.P. Koirala, who had bypassed Parliament in the case of the Gandak Project" (p. 232).

As is well know, soon after Girija Prasad Koirala became the Prime Minister in mid-1991, the relationship between him and Ganesh Man started to deteriorate as the former "threw advice, caution and principles to the winds" (p. 233). The author concludes that to "Koirala and his coterie, the people's mandate became a reason for them to do whatever pleased them" (pp. 233–234) and this was not acceptable to Ganesh Man who saw himself as the custodian of the "spirit of the People's Movement" (p. 233). Koirala's open disregard for Ganesh Man led to the latter's withdrawal from the active politics of NC party. Following this withdrawal, Ganesh Man launched what became known as the *Jana Jāgaraṇ* campaign. The author and some of his friends accompanied Ganesh Man during his campaign and that is described in Chapter nine of this book.

Ganesh Man first went to Biratnagar to explain to the people there, in his usual rustic language, "the reasons for his disappointment and sorrow at the manner in which the democratically elected government had not only trampled upon the expectations of the people, but also chosen to ignore his every

word of caution and advice” (p. 237). He also visited Jhapa, Ilam, Dhankuta, Phidim, and Dharan, all in eastern Nepal. In Phidim, the wires to the loudspeakers were cut even as Ganesh Man began to speak. The author suspects it was the work of Girija Prasad’s supporters. Ganesh Man addressed gatherings, big and small, in Bhairahawa, Nawalparasi, Lumbini, Taulihawa, Butwal, Tansen, and Syangja during the western Nepal tour of his campaign. In Syangja he is reported to have said rather presciently “...the country is in very critical state. It is as if gunpowder has been laid all over the country. Even a tiny spark is enough to make the country explode in a civil war” (p. 245).

Ganesh Man was injured in a freak accident at the airport in Bharatpur at the beginning of his campaign in the central region. He was rushed back to Kathmandu for treatment. Before the mid-term polls called by Girija Prasad as a result of his decision to dissolve the Parliament formed after the 1991 elections, Ganesh Man published *Mero Āhwān*, a white paper exhorting the people to “Defeat Girija” and “Save Nationalism and Democracy” (p. 249). The author and his colleagues were involved in distributing this paper in different parts of the country in the weeks leading to the elections in late 1994. NC lost its majority when the election results were declared and hence the author thinks Ganesh Man’s strategy worked.

To my knowledge, this chapter provides the most extensive description of that campaign found in any book possibly in any language but certainly in English. The writing style is both personal and attractive. Even readers familiar with immediate post-Panchayat politics will find Chapter nine to be worth a read.

Although the author claims that his book highlights the story of the “sterling achievements...of some such people of Nepal who propelled the nation’s existential ethos” (p. xix), it is really a story of Ganesh Man Singh at the end. His political activities during the end stages of Rana Rule are discussed in great details in Chapters four and five. Those new to Nepali politics of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century will find interesting stuff there including the discussion of Ganesh Man’s escape from a Rana jail in 1944 (pp. 118–119). When I checked the endnotes, I found that the author has sourced this section to many other available writings but not to Chapter 18 of Ganesh Man Singh’s *Mero Kathākā Pānāharī – Khaṇḍa I* (2058 v.s.: 126–135). I am surprised by this because the author’s text about this daring escape is really a paraphrasing of the very interesting account available from the horse’s

mouth, as it were, in that earlier autobiographical account as recorded by the journalist Mathbar Singh (Basnet).

Being a nephew of Ganesh Man, the author has described the political journey of his uncle (whom many describe as the ‘iron man’ of Nepali democracy) in such a way that his antipathetic treatment of both B.P. Koirala and Girija Prasad Koirala becomes obvious. Both B.P. and Girija Prasad had many failings but if the NC party allowed them to behave as despots in two different phases of Nepali history as the author insinuates, the fault obviously should also be shared by Ganesh Man as one of the founding leaders of the party. This is especially true for the years after 1976 when B.P. and Ganesh Man returned to Nepal from self-exile in India with the agenda of ‘National Reconciliation.’ That after B.P.’s death in 1982, Girija Prasad and Ganesh Man had an equal chance to develop the party organization but Ganesh Man did not do as much as the younger Koirala on this front is an obvious failing on the part of ‘iron man.’

If B.P. and Girija Prasad emerge as villains, Kings Mahendra and especially Birendra appear as side heroes in this book. The author is entitled to feel that way but in my view, he has not engaged with many available analyses of the reigning record of these two kings adequately to support his view. In addition, many of the publications related to B.P., the NC party and Nepali politics, made public during the past 30 years or so allow us to have a much more sophisticated view of what was going on in Nepali politics in the 1970s and subsequently. These publications also allow us to say a lot more about the relationship between B.P. and Ganesh Man before the former’s death in 1982 and between Ganesh Man, Girija Prasad and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai between 1982 and 1997 when Ganesh Man died, leaving forever incomplete the promise of democracy he had made to the four martyrs of 1997 v.s. Here I am referring to a large number of works in Nepali and English, many of which are missing in the bibliography of this book. For instance, I am most surprised that among the several publications of Bhola Chatterji on B.P., only one is listed and none of B.P.’s own writings since the publication of his *Jel Jarnal* (Koirala 2054 v.s.) are referred to. I am not suggesting that the author should agree with B.P.’s rendition of history but not to engage with what is available is surely a sign of an attitude that cannot be described as adequately open and democratic. But I guess that is a freedom allowed to a writer who does not claim to be an academic but simply a “worthless nephew” (p. 254) of Ganesh Man!

## References

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