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Bipin Adhikari

S.B. Mathe

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# *The Global Media, the Probe Commission and the Assassination of Nepal's Royal Family: Questions Unasked and Unanswered*

Bipin Adhikari and S.B. Mathe<sup>1</sup>

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The international coverage of the massacre of Nepal's King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and six other members of the royal family on 1 June 2001, demonstrates not only the potent power of information technology, but its misuse by those who have both the resources and power to impose their view of events on a global public at the expense of the views of the common people in the world's marginalized countries. The victims of misinformation, or incomplete information, are smaller countries, weaker economies, new democracies and those countries that are compelled to rely on the good faith of others to communicate with the rest of the world in all areas of their national concern. When good faith, a prerequisite for investigative journalism, is absent from the coverage of global events, such coverage may well contribute to negative outcomes for the people affected by said events. Where international coverage of the massacre of Nepal's royal family was concerned, that lack of good faith – most evident in the global media's uncritical acceptance of the official version of the event – provides the basis for international sanction of fundamentally extra-constitutional or unconstitutional actions. The Probe Commission appointed by the new King, Gyanendra, to inquire into the circumstances of the murders, was not set up according to the requirements of law. Its investigation – as we will show in this paper – was manifestly inadequate, and in accepting its findings uncritically, the international media fell far short of the high standards it claims to uphold. Why did the media not try to get to the bottom of the affair? Their reports were too definitive, without any reference to reliable sources and authority. The people of Nepal have not been well served in the aftermath of the assassination, and the international media has lent the Probe Commission report a veneer of legitimacy it does not deserve.

The assassination of Nepal's royal family was portrayed from the beginning as the result of a family quarrel; it was not a coup d'état or any other form of national or international conspiracy. None of the Western media reporting on the assassinations made any serious inquiry regarding this extremely serious case of regicide. The world was encouraged to believe what the information channels were asked to propagate. All of the western media united in telling the world that the Crown Prince had killed his parents and close relatives. Alternative possibilities were simply not considered. But the available facts do not prove this assertion beyond a reasonable doubt. It must be mentioned here that none of the global media expressed worries about Nepal's independence, democracy or human rights, all of which might have been gravely threatened by these assassinations. None of them looked with any great depth into Nepal's history, its geo-political realities, the internal problems it has been facing, or many other pertinent and critical issues. The news media seems not to have considered the news of serious enough importance to merit investigative or even critical reporting (or perhaps those who were assigned to report on the assassination were not professionally qualified to deal with such a critical event). The only exception was the Nepalese Service bulletins of the BBC in London. But much of the world understood the events in Nepal through the lens provided by the English language service of the BBC, CNN and their like.

The information age is sweeping through many developing countries like a tidal wave, regardless of whether they are prepared to cope with the challenges associated with it. This age is characterised by instantaneous global exchange of large amounts of information (text, images and sounds), provision of various services (by way of collecting information, adding to it, distributing it), the use of a variety of 'carriers' like microwaves, radio frequencies, optical fibres, and the use of a large variety of devices such as the print media, broadcasting, cable TV, the Internet and e-mail. These technologies have helped to coalesce com-

munities and groups that share common interests. They have also helped to stimulate intellectual interaction and are characterised by their high speed of operation and rapidly falling costs. However, while lacking in central management and coordination, they possess the potential to revolutionise society.

The potential of the information age to revolutionise ways of working, thinking, learning and living can hardly be overstated. Its essence is not merely connectivity (the ability to access and contribute to information flows), nor even the new associations, contacts and interest groups that are formed, but a more global perspective, which is the product of the analysis, assimilation and integration of more information, and, even more important, the application of this increased understanding to the information that is flowing relentlessly along the information superhighway. The global exchange of ideas (made possible by the Internet and other means of worldwide communication) is substantially spontaneous and without any central management and coordination. It is a virtual "free for all" in the best (and worst) sense. There is no way for authoritative information providers and their responsible editors to confirm and challenge the news before dissemination. The danger of misinformation cannot be over-emphasised. The purveyors of misinformation have become even more elusive. Their fraudulent information will increase, sometimes skilfully woven into an otherwise credible account. In this milieu, the skill to analyse and to independently evaluate and verify information will be critical and essential. The fast pace of e-mail message exchange, participation in mailing lists, bulletin boards and newsgroups, and the browsing of information on the World Wide Web has stimulated intellectual interaction to a degree which humankind has not seen to date. And this will increase in the coming years.

We will show in this paper how the institutions that dominate the global flow of news and information – CNN, the BBC, etc. – covered the assassination of King Birendra of Nepal and other members of the Royal Family. We will focus in particular on the questions they failed to ask in their uncritical reliance on accounts furnished by the Nepali authorities. Their failure, we will argue, allowed a manifestly inadequate report, produced by a commission of inquiry appointed outside the proper procedures, to gain a credibility worldwide that it failed to gain in Nepal.

### **The failure of the rule of law**

The first day of June 2001 heralded an end to many of

the cherished and sacred values of Nepal with the assassination of King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and six other members of the royal family. The assassination of King Birendra and the tragic demise of the Crown Prince and the Crown Prince's younger brother ended the succession from father to son in the Shah dynasty that had continued uninterrupted for 11 generations. Since the assassination, the monarchy in Nepal has become controversial, with the result that popular confidence in the monarch, which was the basis of national unity, has been shattered, and certain values (such as democracy and human rights) have taken a severe battering. A dynasty that defended the country from all imperialist forces throughout its history, which championed national independence and patriotism, which gave Nepal a tradition of sustainable diplomacy, and which had encouragingly learnt to legitimise itself by changing according to the democratic aspirations of the people, is under severe critical examination. A nation in an acute state of political and economic crisis has been brought closer to the brink by the tragedy in the royal palace.

It is not clear whether His Majesty's elected Government existed immediately after the assassinations were accomplished. It seems that the news after the assassination was handled by the army, and the elected Prime Minister, who is accountable to the House of Representatives, was not consulted at all. Neither the judiciary police nor any civil police officer were involved in the funeral preparation or in further investigation of the murders. Their involvement, as primary investigators, is dictated by the law of the land. It seems that the available information was not shared even with the Cabinet members, the leading figures of the main political parties, and religious or spiritual endowments. At the time of this writing (August 6, 2001), no detailed interviews have been conducted with the ADCs of the King and of those who were killed, the Chief of the Palace Secretariat, security guards at all main gates of the Palace, cooks, bar attendants, or other servants. The public is not yet informed about who entered the Palace, at what time, and when they returned. There is a widespread rumour that a serious scrutiny is underway and the unreliable witnesses are being silenced. Dhirendra Shah, the youngest brother of King Birendra, who was declared dead after two days, is taken as an example. One thing is certain - whoever did it could not have done it without taking the palace security system into confidence. Strangely enough, the bona fides of the security system were accepted without proper investigation.

The Royal Family was murdered by one man or a group, in a palace guarded by as many as five thousand armed guards. The palace itself, in principle, falls under the per-

sonal responsibility of the Prime Minister. The King's dynasty was virtually eliminated. It was done cold bloodedly within half an hour, with shots fired at different places within the innermost recesses of the Palace. Yet the Prime Minister of the country had no explanation to the people. No investigation was ordered, nobody was arrested, and no indictment filed. No sooner had the shooting taken place than there appeared to be attempts to suppress facts that would open the incident to public perusal and debate. A rumour was spread that the Crown Prince of Nepal had run amok with an assault rifle and killed his father, the King, his mother and many other close family members and had then shot himself. The Crown Prince's younger brother, who was next in line of succession, was also killed. The blame was put entirely on the Crown Prince who was already dead. No specific sources were identified, but phrases such as "inside sources" were used to spread the information. Prestigious news agencies like BBC and CNN propagated the news around the world citing these "inside sources". The dead Crown Prince was declared a murderer without citing witnesses and without adhering to the basic principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty. The Nepali people were not willing to believe that their beloved Crown Prince could have killed his father, who he held in great esteem, his mother, with whom he reportedly had had differences about the selection of his bride and future queen of Nepal, and his younger siblings. In the absence of verifiable facts, the rumour mill worked overtime. The international news media continued to blame the Crown Prince, forsaking all rules of investigative journalism.

If the June 1 event was a story of a Crown Prince committing regicide, patricide and fratricide, there was no need to withhold the news, no matter how unpalatable. The dead bodies of the King and others were not shown to the people, nor was the place where the shooting occurred shown to them or the civil authorities under the existing accountability framework. The normal processes decreed by the Criminal Law and Procedures of the country were not followed. The dead members of the royal family, including the sovereign, were deprived of the normal investigative process accorded to every ordinary citizen of the country. No security guards on duty at that time were arrested for questioning nor were the ADCs taken into police custody for questioning. The public, at least, is not aware of any such action. No video camera was used to record the scene of the crime; non-royal eyewitnesses were not called for questioning; the immediate witnesses were not asked to give their on-the-spot statements as the law required. All those who were shot dead were taken to the army hospital. Some were said to be still alive and some were even declared out of danger but died later on. There was no information about the security guards who were on duty. It is

simply unacceptable that the King of Nepal had nobody to come to his defence in a heavily guarded palace. To add to the bewilderment of the people, no medical bulletins were issued about the wounded who were being treated in the army hospital. Some people allege that some of them may have been killed in the hospital after they were found to be still alive. The fact that the dead bodies were cremated with undue haste, denying the public outside Kathmandu the opportunity to pay their last homage to their beloved monarch, also raised questions.

### **The failures of the Probe Commission**

The aftermath of the assassination became even more confused with the second version of events, given by the bewildered King Gyanendra, that it was all an accident. The protests in the streets compelled him to change his version and appoint a Probe Commission to investigate the massacre. The resulting report became the most question-begging document that any Probe Commission ever produced in Nepal. Who killed the King and his close family members is a question that the Probe Commission has not satisfactorily resolved. The Commission, appointed by the new King to pacify the angry populace, was given too little time and resources to carry out a thoroughly professional investigation.

Most people seem to be of the opinion that the report is simply a series of interviews, intended to bolster the official line that it was the Crown Prince who committed the heinous crime of June 1, without bothering to investigate other theories, or following up on all leads. The Commission did not investigate and account for all the members of the royal family, the ADCs and all the members of the royal household and did not trace all their movements on that fateful day. All the survivors were not questioned on camera, and their answers were not checked to see whether there were anomalies and inconsistencies. There was no question about what is legally known as 'malice aforethought', or 'benign motive', and the actions of the victim to break the chain of causation were not identified. No attempt was made to see if there had been any suspicious activity in the palace. The burden of proving the defense rests on the defendant. In the present case, the very idea of having a defendant was ruled out at the outset. The Commission did not even think that the standard of proof required a balance of probabilities. All these questions merited answer. The international media did not comment on these intriguing aspects of the case. Despite the many questions that remain unanswered, the international news media was quick to pass judgement on the Crown Prince. With all the resources at their disposal, they could have done

their bit in the search for truth, to point out the extra-constitutionality of the way the probe Commission was set up and the serious deficiencies in its procedures – which they might have done if a less peripheral country than Nepal had been concerned.

### **What were the stories that were told?**

Apparently, testimony of ordinary persons who may have been witnesses to the killing was not recorded, and continues to be ignored even today. Rather, the following stories were circulated in the aftermath of the assassination:

[a] When the Crown Prince and his cousin, Prince Paras, 27, arrived at the palace for the royal family's regular Friday dinner, they were dressed casually in Khaki slacks and polo shirts and had already had a few drinks. The two were notorious prowlers of the Kathmandu night-life circuit, regulars at the X-Zone nightclub and the Bakery Café, where they were at the centre of a swirl of hip kids and young adults whose preferred mode of transportation is a Lexus SUV, and whose favoured intoxicant is locally processed hashish. [<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,128973-2,00.html>]

[b] Nepal's crown Prince has shot and killed his parents, the King and Queen, and several other members of the royal family before killing himself. [<http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/south/06/01/nepal.palaceshooting.03/>]

[c] In a wholesale killing of royalty not seen since the deaths of the last Czar of Russia and his family in 1918, the Crown Prince of Nepal shot the King and Queen and several relatives in their palace in Kathmandu last night, then killed himself, Nepalese officials said. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/02/world/02NEPA.html>]

[d] It is believed that the Prince fired after a quarrel with his parents over the choice of the lady he was to marry. The King and Queen are said to have not approved of the Prince's choice. This is said to have inflamed the Prince. [<http://www.zeenews.com/links/articles.asp?aid+14148>]

[e] Queen Aiswarya is believed to have disapproved of [Crown Prince] Dipendra's choice of bride and had called a meeting of family members on Friday evening to discuss

the issue. [<http://asia.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf.south/06/02/nepal.palace.shooting/index.html>]

[f] Devyani had studied at Mayo college in Ajmer and was constantly seen with the Crown Prince, a favourite haunt of theirs being Fire and Ice, a pizza joint not far from the palace. Devyani had initially not wanted to marry, said her friend. She did not fancy herself as a queen. But she gradually fell in love and agreed. It is not clear why [Queen] Aishwarya opposed Devyani. Some say she did not like the Rana family, others that there were astrological objections. But [Crown Prince] Dipendra was apparently told in no uncertain terms that he would not be able to marry her. [<http://www.timesofindia.com/today/03home1.htm>]

[g] That evening [Crown Prince] Dipendra had been drinking, according to several accounts, and he left the meal in a fit of anger only to return with at least one - perhaps two - semiautomatic weapons. Dipendra sprayed the room with bullets, and then he went out and got dressed in military fatigues before coming back to finish up. According to other accounts, the prince had changed into the military garb - becoming dressed to kill - before he fired any shots. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/03/world/03NEPA.html>]

[h] Officials said that [Crown Prince] Dipendra remained in a coma in critical condition. Media reports said that he was clinically dead and being kept alive on a respirator. [[http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20010603/ts/nepal\\_claim\\_dc\\_1.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20010603/ts/nepal_claim_dc_1.html)]

[i] [T]he murderer of Vishnu ascends Vishnu's throne. This legally valid, though morally repellent, succession - along with widespread disbelief of the official version of events that has the Crown Prince acting alone - has precipitated a constitutional and societal crisis in an already fragile democracy. [<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,128973-2,00.html>]

[j] Government officials initially blamed [Crown Prince] Dipendra for the killings but then - as he lay in coma last weekend after being named as the new King of Nepal, palace officials claimed they were accidental. [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25279-2001Jun5.html>]

[k] In keeping with a Hindu tradition of swift cremation, the bodies of the dead were cremated on Saturday. [[http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20010603/ts/nepal\\_claim\\_dc\\_1.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20010603/ts/nepal_claim_dc_1.html)]

[l] On Tuesday, a palace official said that Gyanendra's youngest brother had died from wounds sustained during the shooting rampage, raising the death toll from the incident Friday to 10, the Reuters news agency reported. [<http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19611-2001Jun4.html>]

[m] The Commission faces the tough challenge of investigating members of a monarchy that is revered by millions of Nepalese. According to the Nepalese Constitution, neither the government nor any other body can interfere in or question the acts of the palace, but King Gyanendra has departed from that tradition. [<http://asia.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/south/06/05/nepal.shooting.02/index.html>]

It was also said that the shocking massacre of the Nepalese royal family carried undertones of a grim prophecy that was handed down to the country's ruling Shah dynasty more than 230 years ago. The dynasty was founded in 1768 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, who was credited with uniting various Himalayan polities into a single kingdom. According to legend, the King was about to march on the Kathmandu valley when he encountered the Hindu god, Gorakh Nath, disguised as a holy sage. The King offered some curd to the sage, who swallowed the gift and then regurgitated it and offered it back. Disgusted, the King threw the food to the ground, covering his feet with the curd in the action. The sage criticised the King's pride, telling him that if he had swallowed the curd he could have fulfilled his every wish. Instead, the sage said the curd covering the King's toes meant his dynasty would fall after the 10 generations following his own rule. King Birendra, who was killed on Friday night with his Queen and other family members - apparently at the hand of his eldest son and heir, Crown Prince Dipendra - was the 11th generation of the Shah dynasty.

All these stories were spread around the world without testing their truth. The World Press, of course, reported on the thousands of citizens who shaved their heads, stopped taking salt, and who protested in the streets against the explanations given. It was also reported that barbers offered their services free, and that Kathmandu began to look like a city of off-duty monks. But the international press did

not comment on why these grieving people were so wild, why they were so shattered and what they wanted to tell the world. The voices of these liliputians of the Himalayas were not heard. The way the story of the Crown Prince killing his family members was repeated looked like flagrant misuse of the power of communication, at least in utter disregard to available facts, Nepalese sensibilities and the hard facts of life in this Himalayan country.

### Questions Ignored by the Media

We discuss here many of the questions that the international media might have posed but did not.

[a] Who informed the PTI (Press Trust of India), which broadcast the news of the incident first, that the Crown Prince was responsible for the massacre, and that the Crown Prince shot himself after killing the others? What made the western media believe that it was not a coup d'état or that the massacre was not political? In the case of regicide, or some other offences of that gravity, investigators must fully consider every aspect of criminal conspiracy against the available facts. In the setting of a tightly secured palace, more ambitious, sophisticated and complex crimes become possible, and the likelihood of successful execution increases only when more minds and bodies lend themselves to the task at hand. Had any other head of the state in the region been killed like this, would there have been the same type of response by the media?

[b] Why did the Western media ignore the fact that the political ramifications in Nepal changed the moment the King and his family were assassinated? The King of Nepal represented certain well-identified values; they were all brought to nought in the half-hour of the dreadful royal bloodbath. Even though the Constitution remains the same, there seems to be a perceptible change in the spirit of the constitutional functionaries and political parties. According to the Constitution, the King does not rule; he only symbolises the nation and national unity. The political developments appear to have gone beyond this.

[c] The Western media did not report what the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) had to say on the constitution of the Probe Commission and the reasons behind the refusal of the General Secretary to take part as its third member:

The Constitution of Nepal envisages constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy. The basic spirit of democracy is the supreme respect of the Constitution and the rule of law. Our Party is committed to respecting the Constitution. In this context our Party feels the formation of the Commission to investigate the abnormal and unprecedented incident at the Royal Palace on June 1 is not in conformity with the Constitution and the prevailing laws. The Commission should have been formed as per the provisions of the Constitution and law. Our party asks all that work should be conducted in a transparent manner and within the framework of the Constitution and law. We politely want to convey that we disagree with the procedure of the formation of the Commission. To steer the country to the right direction under the present grave circumstances, we appeal to all to respect and uphold constitutional norms. [<http://www.nepalnews.com.np/archive/2001/june/arc228.htm>]

[d] Where were the so-called twelve survivors of the massacre and why were their statements not taken immediately? Why was the information suppressed? Did the media not attribute their reports to one of these survivors?

[e] According to rumor, 10 cooks and several other servants were serving the dinner program. If this was indeed the case, are they all accounted for, and if not, where have they gone?

[f] How was it possible for the Crown Prince to eliminate only his family members, and a few others, while sparing the rest of the people who were in the same hall?

[g] Assuming that the Crown Prince himself did it, why were no attempts made to identify people who aided, abetted, counselled or procured the commission of these assassinations? Apart from the Crown Prince as the principal offender, one can identify on a conceptual level two general classes of individuals who might be so involved. First, there were those who solicited or encouraged the Crown Prince to commit the crime. Such persons are guilty of the independent offence of incitement, but they may also be liable as an accessory to the substantive crime committed by the person whom they incite. Secondly, there were those who assisted or in some other way helped the Crown Prince to commit the crime. The term 'accessory' or 'matiyar' is used to refer to these individuals.

[h] When Crown Prince Dipendra reappeared, around

9:30 PM, he was said to be clad in battle fatigues. He was also said to be carrying two assault rifles and a pistol was tucked inside his pockets. He was said to have locked the bodyguards of the King and Queen in their quarters within the palace before shooting. Why did no one take any preemptive step? He could have been followed, the information could have been given to the King or Queen, or at least the security system could have been alerted.

[i] Who killed the Crown Prince? Is there any eyewitness to corroborate, in public, that she or he saw the Crown Prince killing himself? Since the Crown Prince was so drunk (or was he sedated?) that he had to be carried to his room, how could he come back within half an hour, Rambo style, with heavy submachine guns, and mow down most of the royal family? Could it be that he was shot while he was trying to escape from the perpetrators of the crime? Crown Prince Dipendra is reported to have left the dinner room around 7:30 p.m. Could it not be that when he came back around 9:30, all others were already killed, and when he tried to escape, he was shot dead? That could explain the many bullet wounds said to be in his back. Note that the medical staff, including Dr. Devkota, who testified that the Crown Prince had only two bullet wounds in the head, were not subjected to expert cross-examination. What was the bodyguard of the Crown Prince doing while all this was happening? Why was he not arrested immediately for interrogation by professional investigators?

[j] Is it true that Prince Nirajan, the Crown Prince's younger brother, was compelled to come to Kathmandu from Chitwan where he was on tour?

[k] Why were those injured rushed to the Birendra Military Hospital instead of Teaching Hospital which is closer and better equipped?

[l] Why are there so many conflicting accounts of Prince Paras' whereabouts? Why is the Probe Commission report silent on this issue?

[m] Several people had heard about the incident around 10:00 - 10:30 PM on Friday night (June 1), but Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala was informed about this only at 1:30 AM, some 4 - 5 hours after the event. What is the explanation for this?

[n] No post-mortem examination was conducted on any

of the dead royal bodies by civil surgeons, according to the law. Why was this compulsory legal process not followed? For example, the government had taken the viscera of the late Madan Bhandari, the General Secretary of the CPN (UML), for examination, and this was even sent abroad for reconfirmation of the findings. Why was the King of Nepal not accorded the same treatment?

[o] Why was the late king not accorded a proper state funeral, with enough notice to enable foreign heads of state or their representatives, as well as ordinary Nepalese from outside the Valley, to attend? Why were the dead bodies not handled with respect (it has been reported that there was no one to remove flies on the face of the dead King)? It is strange that the notice to attend the funeral was broadcast at 3:10 PM but the funeral started at 3.00 PM.

[p] Crown Prince Dipendra had earned a reputation in the country as a very responsible man. Is there any evidence to show that the late Crown Prince was mentally unstable enough to mow down his own family, and then kill himself?

[q] Why did it take a week after the event for Prince Paras to be depicted as a hero for saving the lives of some members of the royal family?

[r] Why did Nepali officials, who had initially blamed Crown Prince Dipendra for the killings, later retract the story - while he lay in a coma - and say that the killings were an accident?

### **Comments on the Unfolding of the Story of the Royal Massacre**

The massacre of their late Majesties and most of the royal family in one fell swoop came as a rude shock to Nepal. The most important fact, which will have an impact on the future of Nepal, is that the late King has been found to be very popular - more than people imagined him to be! He stood for certain identifiable political, diplomatic and universal values. His contribution to the cause of the nation during the later years of his life was immense. His assassination means that these values are under attack. Because of his popularity, and the popularity of the late Crown Prince Dipendra, the Nepalese people cannot and will not accept the story that Crown Prince Dipendra could so cold-bloodedly kill his parents and his siblings and spare the lives of others present in the room, at least until all

theories are tested.

Because of the way the news has been manipulated, from day one, the truth may never emerge, and it may well be that the truth will be more bitter and harmful to the stability of the country than the many lies and half-truths that are clogging the media. Recent stories that Crown Prince Dipendra was an alcoholic and a regular cocaine user have succeeded in enraging the populace even more. Stories will definitely emerge to contradict this characterisation. What is abundantly clear is that from day one, Crown Prince Dipendra has been branded the killer and the Probe Commission has, without proper investigation, simply reiterated this view.

Certain developments in the media may be recounted here. When the news broke, the people were all shocked to be told that Crown Prince Dipendra had killed everybody in the room and turned the gun on himself. If he was so unstable, why was this not noticed before? For the sake of argument, let it be assumed that he did go berserk. After all, people do sometimes just snap and commit heinous crimes. In such a situation, the first version that he killed everybody and turned the gun on himself would have to be accepted, no matter how unpalatable. The question then arises as to who witnessed the crime and who leaked this story to the outside world, while most Nepalese were kept in the dark. The questions became more troubling. In the quest for witnesses, the people suddenly found that there were other royals who were either critically wounded or escaped unhurt. Suddenly, the people had not one witness but many witnesses — but all of them royals! And the story emerges that different people were killed in different places. The natural question is, were they shot while they were running away, and if so, by whom? Crown Prince Dipendra was so drunk that he had to be carried away and, the story goes, after some time, he came back in army fatigues, presumably high on cocaine, having lost all his sensibilities, but retaining the sharp-shooting skills to kill his family in a matter of minutes. This story is odd, to say the least. In a show of solidarity, those Royals who survived have not spoken out. This is understandable, but others spoke on their behalf. When questioned, they took refuge in statements that they were not present, but got the information from eyewitnesses - no names mentioned as to who exactly told them. All of this gave rise to even more rumours. The rumour mill was hyperactive the first ten days.

Questions also arise as to what happened to the entire royal household. Most importantly, where were the ADCs, whose primary duty is to safeguard the lives of the royal



personages? The people were told that they were locked in a room. When all this carnage occurred, what happened to all the other security staff? Why were the palace and the Government quiet on this issue? For the sake of truth, and to get over the massacre more quickly, all the people in the palace on that fateful night must be accounted for. It is not enough to confine the questioning to the royals; all those who were in the palace that night should be questioned as well. Did the Probe Commission have the time to do all of this? The answer is no. Did the royal household and other survivors recount the true story? If there is a conspiracy/grand design/coup (whatever one chooses to call it), the survivors will be too much under threat to say anything to the contrary. But the people need to at least know where the entire royal household and the security personnel were on that fateful and tragic night and what their movements were. The report of the Probe Commission failed to answer these questions.

While the Commission inspected the scene of the crime and drew certain conclusions, it was not comprised of investigators, skilled in the art of investigation. How can people rely on their investigation? If there were professional investigators involved, the Nepalese people would like to know who they were.

Many of the findings of the Commission are based on the reports of the 'Palace' and 'army hospital' and so on. There was virtually no cross-examination, and the dialectical process of finding the truth - the Nepalese legal tradition of 'bakapatra' - was ignored. Moreover, the report has categorically stated that it has no opinion; it is only recording what it was told. Above all, the question is, can the Commission say anything definitive without being able to examine the main evidence - the dead bodies! The bodies have already been consigned to the flames, and this too was done in so much of a hurry that, to many, it looked highly suspicious. Why were the loyal subjects not given the opportunity to pay homage to their Monarch? The late King deserved that much! If Crown Prince Dipendra had really killed his parents, why were the people not allowed to say farewell to their King and why was Crown Prince Dipendra proclaimed King? Even if post-mortems could not be conducted, were the doctors allowed to examine the bodies? If so, what was the result of the examination? One can understand that the turn of events must have been shocking in the first few hours, but the benefit of this argument cannot be extended too much. They had enough time to come to their senses. After the first version was found unpalatable, the second version - that it was an accident - was even more preposterous.

The manner in which the news was leaked, bit by bit, strongly suggests that it was being orchestrated. Just to cite some examples: After the Probe Commission was set up, why did Dr. Rajiv Shahi come out with his statement in a military hospital? He should have given his version to the Commission. Presumably, it was done on somebody's behest. Along the same lines, the late King's uncle, Maheswar Kumar Singh, also told the international media that Prince Dipendra had opened fire on them with a machine gun. Suraj Shamsher, brother of the slain Queen, who was not present at the gathering, also joined this process, on the basis of his talk with several witnesses and survivors. His account was again confirmed in an interview on independent Star TV by Neer Shah, whose brother was married to Princess Shruti, Crown Prince Dipendra's sister. On June 4, Dhirendra Shah, the younger brother of the late King, was declared to be dead of injuries he suffered in the shoot-out at the palace. He had been the most important witness to the incident and had survived it, however briefly. Note that his statement, which would have been taken as the 'dying declaration' under the law, was not recorded, nor was he or anybody being treated at the army hospital shown to the people. Once Dhirendra was declared dead, all the royals came out one by one. Immense pressure was created, compromising the environment in which the Probe Commission had to work. It is simply not a coincidence. All of this adds to the confusion. The doctors have yet to make definitive statements. As the legal process has already been blocked, they will never be cross-examined.

The haste to consign the dead royals to the fire further fuelled speculation. We suppose this could not be avoided because of the scale of the tragedy, which must have numbed all the people present, resulting in incoherent thinking. With every explanation and answer, there are a lot more questions. The conspiracy theory has many adherents because of the way the news emerged, the way it was orchestrated and manipulated, the haste in consigning the dead bodies to the fire, the denial to the people the opportunity to pay their last respects, and finally, the failure to have well-known and respected persons inspect the bodies so that they could corroborate what had happened. While there is a need to put all this behind us and get on with the task of nation-building, there is also an equal need to get to the bottom of the story - to find out how this happened so that this sort of thing does not happen again. This onus rests on the royalty, because, only the royalty knows how a person like Crown Prince Dipendra could go berserk - if we are to believe this version of events. Sometimes, the motive is more important than the actual deed.

## Conclusion

The events that killed most of the royal family members have affected all Nepalese in different ways. All of them hold views and opinions on the matter, and all of them are capable of making their own judgements. Regardless of what the report does or does not say, people will still have their views and opinions. It is not a question of believing or not believing. That is something very personal, however all facts regarding the assassination must come before the public. The Probe Commission report is misleading. It only tries to give an official stamp to what had already been published in a calculated manner.

The debate will go on because the people of Nepal are concerned with the future of their country. They should be open-minded about the views expressed by others. None of the commoners knows the answer and we doubt whether all of the story will ever come out. There is no need, at this stage, to be opinionated, because all the details will eventually emerge. One can compare the recent events in Nepal with those in the United States following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. With all the resources of the United States placed at the disposal of Earl Warren, the then Chief Justice of the United States, the Warren report was still not able to answer all the pertinent questions. Sporadically, the question came out as to whether Oswald acted alone or with other unknown people. Nearer home, the Commission that was appointed to probe the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi took an interminably long time. In the case of the royal bloodbath in Nepal, there are many who questioned whether the Commission had access to all the people, had the resources and, more important, the skills and the time to conduct a thorough investigation in the absence of the most incriminating evidence, viz, the bodies that had already been consigned to the flames.

Our democracy is in danger; our nationhood is in danger; and our right to exist as a free people is in danger. None of the Western media had time to make this point. They became, instead, a principal channel through which to make the world believe that nothing had gone wrong in Nepal except that which was reported. In fact, nobody except the international media believed that the Probe Commission would have time to look into all the serious questions, some of which have been asked in this paper. Nobody believed that everything would fall into its proper place once the report of the investigation was published. True to their beliefs, the report has been criticised by many as incomplete and unprofessional. In so short a time, could it have been anything else? The question is not on the quality of the Chief Justice who headed the Commission,

but his independence. The big issue now is whether the people of Nepal trust their own Chief Justice and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who was the other member of the Probe Commission. If the answer is no, whom should they trust? Had the media acted honestly and professionally, raising all appropriate issues as the story unfolded, nobody would have dared to cover the truth. The forces of information technology in that case would have exposed the traitors, and saved the country and its people from a very complicated ongoing darkness.

So many people have been directly and indirectly involved in numerous activities after the royal bloodbath that the truth will eventually emerge. The question is how long will it take? The people of Nepal are closely watching the military, political, diplomatic, and civil developments going on in the country. What will happen to the country in the meantime? As far as the response of the international media is concerned, it has given its opinion in the form of a verdict. While the rationalisation process is going on abroad even now, the press and electronic media in Nepal is under strict censorship. The elected government of His Majesty the King has already terminated the case file before it was created. In a country where even a case of suicide must be thoroughly investigated according to law, a case of regicide of this magnitude has been settled forever without filing a first information report with the local police. This case poignantly epitomises the danger of the Information Age and the impact that half-truths can have on the stability of a nation and in the preservation of democracy.

Bipin Adhikari (MCL, Ph. D, University of Delhi, India) is a lawyer working in the area of constitutional law, human rights and the democratisation process. He is a member of the Supreme Court Bar Association and is also associated with the Society for Constitutional & Parliamentary Exercises (SCOPE) — a Nepalese NGO committed to the ongoing democratisation process in Nepal.

S.B. Mathe (B. Arch., Ph. D, University of Strathclyde, UK) is an architect practising in Nepal and abroad for the last 27 years.