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Obituary | Kumar Pradhan (1937–2013)



Kumar Pradhan in his Kurseong College office. Pradhan was Principal of the college.

(Purnima Pradhan, 1986)

Dr. Kumar Pradhan, a contemporary historian of the Eastern Himalaya, was born on May 7, 1937 in Kurseong, during the Indian Nationalist movement. He grew up in a moderately affluent *Arya Samajist* family, developing a liberal outlook at an early age. His early education was disjointed due to his father Maniklal Pradhan's job with the Indian Postal Service. He moved from Nagarpalika Vidyamandir (Municipality High School), Darjeeling to the well-known convent of Kurseong (St. Alfanso School), and then to a government-aided school in Darjeeling (Ramkrishna Siksha Parishad). Pradhan graduated from the Darjeeling Government College as a History Honors student in 1959. In 1973, he started his career as a history lecturer at the College.

The most important moment of young Pradhan's life took place when he fell in love with a young, non-Nepali

woman, Purnima Prasad, who he knew from his school days and who later became his life partner. Marrying outside the caste/community was not unusual among the *Arya Samajists* in Darjeeling. Suryamani, Pradhan's younger sister, married a *damai* man (from the supposedly 'low' Nepali tailoring caste). Thus, Pradhan's decision to marry a Bihari woman was not considered by his parents to be radical.

Pradhan moved to Calcutta to pursue his Masters in History soon after he married Purnima in 1960, and continued his eventful life as a post graduate student until 1963. He failed to secure hostel accommodation, living instead with his other friends from the Hills who were studying law in Calcutta (Dawa Norbu, Prem Alley, Bal Dewan, and Jagat Chhetri among others). This comradeship was so productive for Pradhan that he successfully ran a monthly Nepali

journal (*Hamro Sansaar*) for two years (1964-1966). Inspired by his friends, he decided to pursue a Bachelor of Laws degree course at the same time as his Masters but had to discontinue his studies when his father, who was approaching retirement, called him back home.

Before joining the Darjeeling Government College in 1973 as Lecturer in History, Pradhan spent a few years as an assistant teacher of history at St. Robert's School, Darjeeling. Then, after more than a decade (1973-1984) at Darjeeling Government College, he became the head of the institution. As principal of Kurseong College, forty-seven-year-old Pradhan acted as a competent administrator and an able collegiate educationist. He published several pioneering works during this period (1984-1997), although he was equally productive during his early career at Darjeeling Government College.

Pradhan's natural inclination towards the world of scholarship brought him closer to higher studies in history. He began his Ph. D. in 1975 with Nirmal C. Sinha, the Centenary Professor of International Relations at Calcutta University as his research supervisor. His short spell of school teaching enabled him to understand the dire need for (and regrettable absence of) school level history textbooks written in vernacular languages. Needless to say, Kumar Pradhan took up the challenge and worked hard to fill the void singlehandedly. His first textbook of history for Class IX was published in 1974, and thereafter school level history textbooks in Nepali were published for Classes VI to X. Reprints and new editions of these textbooks were regularly published until 2008. In this way, Pradhan pioneered a movement to address the need for school-level history textbooks in Nepali. At the same time, by writing Indian history in Nepali, he actually accelerated the process to Indianize Nepali at a time when the Nepali language movement for (Indian) constitutional recognition was emerging.

Beyond popularizing the Nepali language as a historian, Pradhan took active part as an Indian-born Nepali citizen in the Nepali language movement. The movement began in the mid-1970s and continued until 1992 when Nepali received the designated status of a Scheduled Language of Indian Constitution (Eighth Schedule). During this phase of mass mobilization, Pradhan took active part in the activities spearheaded by the Akhil Bharatiya Bhasa Samiti (All India Language Committee), Darjeeling. Later, when factionalism arose in the movement as to whether Nepali should be recognised as the language of Indian Nepalis/Gorkhas, he allied with the Nepali language movement. By this point, the epicentre of the movement had shifted to the Bharatiya Nepali Rastriya Parishad (Indian Nepali Na-

tional Council), Sikkim. As a patron of the Nepali language, he represented several national, regional, and local bodies in different capacities. Pradhan was a member of the Nepali Advisory Committee of the Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, a member of the Nepali Academy, Government of West Bengal, and also Vice President of the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan, Darjeeling.

After retiring from his formal academic career in 1997, Pradhan devoted his time to his passions for journalism and literature. Primarily, he focused on *Sunchari Samachar*, a Nepali news daily, that he initiated and sponsored beginning on the auspicious day of *Bhanu Jayanti* (13 July) in 1993. *Sunchari* later became much like his family; he even decided to leave his ancestral place, Kurseong, to settle down in Siliguri, the place where *Sunchari* was born. The most painful part of his life came in January, 2007, when he was forced to put his golden bird—*Sunchari*—to rest.

Historian of the Eastern Himalayas

Dr. Pradhan was one of the few historians who not only devoted a major part of his life to the 'search' for regional history but also left a mark of distinction by the way he practiced it. It was only after the publication of a reworked version of his Ph.D. dissertation, *The Gorkha Conquest: The Process and Consequences of the Unification of Nepal, With Particular Reference to Eastern Nepal* (Oxford University Press, 1991), that the wider academic circle came to know the name Kumar Pradhan. His views of history and his approach towards practicing history remained consistent in his work. In his erudite writings, Pradhan reflects on the temporality of 'desire' and 'expectation.' He captured the progression of time as the balancing between 'achievement' and 'non-achievement' with history appearing more as an explanatory footnote of these acts of balancing and reflections.

In his attempt to historicize the political history of Eastern Nepal since the mid-18th century, Pradhan illuminated Nepal's past in an unconventional manner. The conventional approach to Nepali historiography centers on biographies of great men or conquerors. In his attempt to organise the historical consciousness of Nepal in relation to the temporality of desire and expectation and as the act of balancing between achievement and non-achievement, Pradhan found the *vangsavali* (i.e. the narratives of different ruling dynasties, their genealogical details, and the important events of each regal year) to be unsuitable as the primary source for the reconstruction of Nepal's past. Instead of glorifying the history of unification, Pradhan raised serious

questions for those who attempted to project 'the unification of Nepal' and 'the creation of Nepali nationality' as two sides of the same coin.

Situating the history of the region in the broader context of South Asia and India (both Mughal and Colonial), and through exploring source materials other than *vangsavali*, Pradhan painstakingly developed the thesis that forceful political unification does not necessarily lead to spontaneous nationalism. Pradhan continued to emphasize that the political unification of Nepal initiated by the Gorkha rulers was successful in creating a ruling class hegemony, but without practical participation by the people in general. Rather than being a biographer of rulers, the conventional trend in Nepali historiography at the time, Pradhan underscored the tension between *tagadhari* (wearers of the sacred thread) and *matwali* (those who drink alcohol) as the unresolved issue in the progression of Nepali nationalism that hegemonized the lower orders throughout history. He was actually hinting at the subalternity of Nepali history overshadowed by the puritanical traits of Hinduism that silenced non-conformists through the continuous punctuations of *Divya Upadesh* and *Panchakhat*.

Besides the nationalism-induced amnesia popular amongst Nepali historians and some foreign scholars (such as Madhab Raj Pandey, Krishna Kant Adhikary, Tulsiram Vaidya, B. R. Bajracharya, John Whelpton and Adrian Sever), there was another trend of historicizing Nepal. The history of Nepal and of Gurkhas made its appearance as an offshoot of diplomatic purchase. Initiated by the colonial officials, issues like Indo-Nepal relations and recruitment became the common thread of analysis by a host of Indian scholars (such as B. D. Sanwal, Asad Hussain, Kanchanmoy Majumdar, and Sushila Tyagi, among others) in the post-independence period for obvious reasons. If the 'nationalist' history glorified the ruling class, the 'diplomatic' history valorised the military prowess of Nepalis who served in foreign armies. On both counts, Nepali historiography has been the abstraction of realism in absentia. Neither the glorification project nor the valorisation venture pursued by the historians working on Nepal has reflected the authenticity of a real life canvas—situations in which people act neither in isolation (as a ruler or as brave soldier), nor are their actions simply dictated by their personal motives (of nationalist reconstruction or of brevity). Rather, social forces produced by the actions of individuals may produce results contrary to those which were intended. Inspired by these fundamentals of history as pointed out by E. H. Carr, Pradhan enabled us to comprehend the version of the 'multitude,' which was often ignored and suppressed in the available discourses of Nepali history.

Narratives on the great men of Nepal did become visible in Pradhan's account too, but he considered so-called great men and their deeds merely as actions undertaken by social beings in tune with existing social relations. Articulating the processes and consequences of political unification for Eastern Nepal in this way, Pradhan neither offered a free hand to the ruling class nor discounted its role in the organization of historical consciousness of the Eastern Himalayas.

Perhaps Kumar Pradhan's greatest contribution lay in his efforts to connect the royal history of Nepal with the life experiences of the subaltern. The sensibilities of a pragmatic past enabled him make the historical prognosis that the political unification and consolidation of Nepal based on conquest and annexation would not help achieve the foundation of a true national state. This was a very significant observation, particularly in the context of contemporary *janajati* politics that have jettisoned the earlier *bahunbadi* discourse of Nepali nationalism. Pradhan arrived at this position through his careful analysis of 18th and 19th century historical sources. As a matter of fact, while Pradhan was documenting the social history of the 'multitude' in the Eastern Himalaya, some senior historians at Tribhuvan University such as B. R. Bajracharya (*Bahadur Shah*, 1992) and Tulsiram Vaidya (*Prithvi Narayan Shah*, 1993) were still actively producing 'biographies of great men.' It is no exaggeration to say that Pradhan's vision of history was a leap forward compared to the otherwise sincere efforts of his contemporaries.

Concerns for his own society in general, and for the region in particular, became Pradhan's field of expertise. The imprint of the historical juncture in which he grew up and in which he acquired maturity as a social being had a lasting impact in the latter part of his career. He devoted his career to understanding and to making others understand the nuances of his own society and culture, reflected in the pages of *Pahilo Pahar* (1982) and *A History of Nepali Literature* (1984).

Pahilo Pahar may be the first major work written in Nepali that pinpointed the crux of Nepali ethnicity outside of Nepal. It makes us understand that Nepali is a *Rastra Bhasa* (state language) in Nepal but a *Jatiya Bhasa* (language of a nation) in Darjeeling, not to mention in wider India. Through his exploration of the processes of identity construction among Darjeeling Nepalis, Pradhan proved the distinctive differences of nation formation inside and outside Nepal. This significant point has left its imprint on the works of many national and international scholars.

The major contribution of *Pahilo Pahar* relates to Pradhan's emphasis on the history of the migration of Nepalis to India in general and to Darjeeling in particular. Pradhan took up the highly sensitive issue of the history of Nepali migration to Darjeeling in one of his later works published as the 2004 Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture. Deciphering the local annals, travelers' accounts, census records and other sources of historical data, Pradhan successfully framed the trajectory of Nepali migration to Darjeeling, Sikkim and further to Northeast India. His data revealed that Nepali migration to Darjeeling showed an increasing trend, but that the rate was actually slowing down over the years. The most striking insight was his position that *matwali* migrated more than *tagadhari*, resulting in a 'Mongoloid' majority in the Darjeeling hills. The predominance of Mongoloids in Darjeeling hills, according to Pradhan, has made the hill history take a different route altogether. Unlike the state-directed, ideologically-driven project of forging nationalism (that was the case in Nepal, where the *tagadhari* enjoyed supremacy) the idea of Nepali nationalism emerged rather spontaneously in Darjeeling through people's efforts alone. *Matwali*, being the majority, played a prominent role in the articulation of this sense of ethnic solidarity. Pradhan reasoned that this made Nepali nationalism more resilient in Darjeeling than in Nepal.

This proletarian root of community solidarity also made its impact on other fields. In *A History of Nepali Literature* (1984), Pradhan pinpoints how the literary contributors from Darjeeling made use of tea garden *coolie* line experiences, the pangs of the resourceless poor, and troubled life sketches of the *muqlane* (staying away home) as the subject matter for their narrations. These proletarian life experiences led the population of Nepali origin in Darjeeling to opt for a monolingual community identity. Unlike in Nepal, where community identity arose out of state-sponsored religious dogmatism, Nepali identity in Darjeeling was linguistically anchored. Pradhan argued that the differential roots and routes of Nepali language and literature in Darjeeling hills have contributed enormously towards strengthening the ethnic homogeneity amongst the heterogeneous *janjati*; thus, the main premise of Nepali/Gorkha ethnic solidarity in Darjeeling and elsewhere in India will remain intact as long as linguistic homogeneity survives. This important observation has ongoing significance in contemporary Darjeeling, an area that has been affected by the politics of tribal identity raised by the so-called *matwali*. Some of these groups are now enthusiastically engaged in reviving their respective *kura* (dialects) which their predecessors willingly sacrificed for the cause of imagining a Nepali nation outside of Nepal.

The contributor is grateful for the input provided by Mrs. Purnima Pradhan (widow of the late Kumar Pradhan) in a personal interview. Manasha (Kumar Pradhan's daughter) deserves special thanks for her untiring efforts to support me in compiling this biographical note. For assistance with references, I am indebted to Ph.D. students Kumar, Bebika and Prativa in the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University. This obituary note is a also a personal tribute to the late Dr. Kumar Pradhan and I am responsible for the views expressed, and the factual anomalies, if any, presented.

By Swatahsiddha Sarkar

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Major Awards

Bhanu Puraskar (1983) awarded by Nepali Academy, Government of West Bengal for his book *Pahilo Pahar*.

Kunchanjangha Puraskar (2000) awarded by Siliguri Journalist Club for his contribution in the field of journalism.

Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Puraskar (2002), awarded by Nepali Sahitya Sammelan, Darjeeling for his contribution in the field of Nepali language and literature.

Agam Smriti Puraskar (2003), awarded by Nepali Sahitya Parishad, Sikkim for his contribution in the field of Nepali language and literature.

Kunchanjangha Kalam Puraskar (2006), awarded by Press Club of Sikkim for his contribution in the field of journalism.