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The Prediction

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The Prediction

Sushma Joshi

The astrologer was a pleasant young man, with worn down cloth shoes and a dust-colored set of clothes. Mohan Shamsher was surprised. He had expected someone older, someone more commanding. More authoritative. This man, with his humble cotton outfit, could not have been more than thirty, at the most.

He was from Pokhara, and famed throughout Nepal. His predictions, people said, were never wrong. He had studied for twelve years at the Benares Hindu University, and his knowledge of Vedic astrology was beyond dispute. Everyone went to him, from the Prime Minister to the lowly guard who stood by the gate. Mohan Shamsher sat there in his room, watching the man from behind the curtain. It wouldn’t be good to be seen in public consulting with such a man, for his question presumed the downfall of another man.

When will I become Prime Minister?

The astrologer cleared his throat, and began. “Please give me the time of birth, the date of birth, the year of birth, and the place of birth.”

Mohan Shamsher had sent the Khardar to consult the astrologer on his behalf. Because he was curious, he had stayed in the same room, though out of sight, behind the thick wine-red velvet curtains. The inch of space in between the two halves gave him a clear view of the young man who sat on the white cushion in front of him, only a few feet away. He appeared ordinary, surprisingly nondescript. He wasn’t at all what Mohan Shamsher had been expecting.

The astrologer looked around, almost as if he knew the man whose fortune he was about to predict sat a few feet away, but couldn’t tell from where he might be watching.

The hall stretched out in all directions, a curtain here, a staircase there, a wall thick with paintings in one corner, a wall of books in the middle. On the floor was a tiger rug, with the head of the animal raised in a snarl. Every nook and cranny was filled with shadows, and he imagined that invisible people were watching him from the darkness.

The astrologer knew he was in the house of a man of great importance. The horse-drawn carriage that had brought him in the dusk had driven at such speed, however, he couldn’t tell which area of Kathmandu he was in.

The Khardar reeled off the time, date, year and place of birth.

Hesitating slightly, the astrologer cleared his throat again and asked: “And the name?”

The Khardar said: “It starts with ‘mo’.” Then, with some reluctance, he pushed across a tightly rolled scroll. “Here’s the chart.”

The astrologer, who came from a village, didn’t presume to guess whose chart was unfolding in front of him. The daphne bark paper was marked with the same elegant hand he had seen on the charts of other Rana generals. He assumed the man whose chart he was viewing was a Rana. Given name: Mohan Shamsher Rana, the script said. The astrologer had no knowledge of the hierarchies of the Rana family, and therefore had no idea who this was.

About a year back, he had been taken with great secrecy to a building with many rooms. He had gone up and down steep, narrow wooden staircases, leading deeper and deeper into inner courtyards. He’d seen small ceramic models of dogs perched on marbled top tables, golden medals displayed in glass cages, expensive watches still in velvet-lined cases, and hundreds and hundreds of...
photographs on the walls. He’d been charmed by the photographs – it was the first time he had seen so many of them, clustered on the walls. The people appeared in them as they appeared in real life, except there was no color, as in a painting. In the room where he had been made to sit on a white cushion, he had looked long and hard at the photograph of a man with curly hair and a mustache, his hands resting on a sword, with three little boys around him. One had his hand folded, and was sitting on what appeared to be a high table. One was standing in front, while the last one also sat at a lower table. All three boys were wearing berets, like Angrezi men. Over their spotless white suruwals, they wore coats like those worn by Army generals, with many metal necklaces. Who were they? It was only later, after he’d read the charts that were brought to him, and he had left with a fat bag of silver coins, that the man escorting him in the horse-drawn carriage informed him that he had been inside the Hanuman Dhoka palace of King Tribhuwan himself. The King had his own astrologers, the man had explained, but the young man’s fame had reached so far and wide the women in the palace had begged to have him brought there, so his words could be heard. “You did not see them,” his heavy-set escort had said to him, smiling in a patronizing manner, “but they were all sitting behind the curtain listening to your every word.”

The astrologer knew from the opulence that surrounded him now that he was in the house of someone whose importance rivaled that of the King.

He started to write down figures. He drew three charts. For a moment, there was silence as he bent down, intent on his calculations. He used his thumb and counted on his fingers, silently adding and subtracting. Behind the curtain, Mohan Shamsher shifted. The plush velvet chair with the curved, painted legs creaked under the weight of his body. The astrologer seemed to lift his head, and listen for an instant, as if he’d become aware of the location of the hidden man. But then he looked down again and started to add the numbers up on his fingers, moving his lips as he multiplied. Mohan Shamsher thought perhaps he’d imagined that moment of alert attention. The stars and planets whirled around the astrologer, before they settled again in the proper places on the chart.

“Now listen, Hajur,” he said, then cleared his throat, rather shly. “I am about to tell you about the man whose chart is in front of me. There are some good aspects and some bad aspects. I will start off by telling you the bad aspects, then I will tell you the good ones.”

He talked about each of the twelve houses, and which planet resided in each. He reeled off, rapidly, the names of those that were exalted and those that were debilitated. He talked about the dasha his hidden client was going through at that moment – the all-determining time period which took a man from one moment of his life to the next. He talked about his character. Mohan Shamsher, sitting behind the curtain, was startled to hear his foibles described with such accuracy. The astrologer talked about his parentage, his wealth, his marriage, his children, his health, his enemies, and his public standing.

Then he paused. He said: “And do you want to ask me any specific questions about this chart?”

Mohan Shamsher felt an intense desire to get up, walk out, look the man in the eye, and ask him: “When will I become Prime Minister?”

He heard the Khardar say these same words, in a low, muted voice: “When will he become Prime Minister?”

The man consulted the chart again, counted some numbers on the fingers of his little finger, and said: “He has a Raja Yoga in his chart. He will become Prime Minister on...”

And here he gave a date that imprinted itself in Mohan Shamsher’s mind.

As soon as the astrologer left, clutching a little cloth bag which clinked with gold coins, Mohan Shamsher asked his Khardar: “What date did he say?”

The Khardar faithfully repeated the date.

Shukrabar, Baisakh 18, Bikram Sambat 2005.

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On Friday the 30th of April, 1948, Mohan Shamsher was crowned Prime Minister of Nepal.

As he ascended the steps to his coronation, he couldn’t help thinking about the humble man in white clothes who had stated this day and time with such quiet confidence and finality. As the crown was placed on top of his head, this thought crossed his mind: “Does this mean the astrologer knows the day when I will no longer be Prime Minister?”

Were events already destined? How could this young man have known otherwise? True, Mohan Shamsher had played a part in the shifting hand of politics that had landed him in the Prime Minister’s position, but the timing had not been his to dictate. The Ranas had pressured Padma Shamsher to quit, but he had left for India and then refused to resign. It had taken a team from Nepal to get him to finally sign the papers.
What had Padma Shamsher been thinking? A Constitutional Reform Committee that was to draft a constitution! A Government of Nepal Constitution Act, written with the help of Indian advisers! It was to change the Rana system, and a Panchayat system of local self-government was to be inaugurated in the villages. The Constitution guaranteed freedoms of speech—freedom for enemies to say whatever they wanted! A free press those rascals could print whatever they liked! Freedoms of assembly and worship—Hinduism would be destroyed! Equality before the law! Free elementary education for all! Universal suffrage—now even women and cows could vote! Newfangled Western ideas that worked well for Belayat and perhaps even India, but would never work in Nepal. Padma Shamsher even brought outlaws like BP Koirala into the Parliament, which many people found intolerable. Of course, he has to resign, Mohan Shamsher had said to his assembled men as he twirled his moustache. There is no other way. His brother Kaiser had agreed with him and said Padma Shamsher must be stopped. Kaiser owed a palace full of leatherbound books—books that were underlined, showing he had read each and every one of them. Young people were terrified to meet him—he would lend them his books, then quiz them about what was on such-and-such page of the book. Everybody considered him a learned genius. If Kaiser said Padma Shamsher had to go, this proved Mohan Shamsher’s suspicions of democracy were correct. Mohan Shamsher knew the British had, and always would, support him. So would the Indians, with a little persuasion.

There had been a large margin of error for the astrologer for his prediction. But he had stated the date with perfect accuracy. Did this mean then that the end of his Prime Ministership, as well as his death, was also predestined and knowable with the same certainty?

The astrologer sat in the rows of officials who stood formally, watching him pass as he walked towards his throne. Mohan Shamsher had asked the Khardar to issue a special invitation to the young man. Amongst all the bureaucrats wearing their pagari, he appeared thin and out of place. But then, as Mohan Shamsher turned his head, he saw the young man’s face. It was calm and serene. A small smile seemed to play on his lips as he watched Mohan Shamsher’s coronation.

This same question – whether everything is predestined and therefore knowable – now crossed the mind of the newly crowned Maharaja’s brother. Babar Shamsher stood there stiffly, in his brocaded splendour, watching his brother. When, he wondered, will I become Prime Minister? Could this be known? In the hereditary system of prime ministers, he was next in line.

Babar Shamsher had come to know of the startlingly accurate prediction of the astrologer through the palace grapevine. The whispers of the servants had soon reached his ears. Then his elder brother Mohan Shamsher, unable to hold himself back, had told him that morning in a disjointed manner: The astrologer told me about the day and time, precisely. He told me the exact day on which I would become Prime Minister.

So then, thought Babar, why won’t he be able to tell me my date of ascension?

After the coronation, Mohan Shamsher placed the humble astrologer in a humble post in the administration, under Babar Shamsher’s purview. Babar, the Babu Saheb, governed the administrative section. Babar knew where the man sat, talking to the other Subbas. The room was now well known because it was always crowded. People surreptitiously pushed birthcharts and little pieces of paper with names and birthdates written on them across the desk to the nondescript young man on his little white cushion. The astrologer was famous – everyone knew why Mohan Shamsher had put him there. They knew that it was a reward for an accurate prediction. But he was also there so he could be available for immediate consultation, should such a need arise.

Babar Shamsher wondered how he could best approach this man. After a month of speculation, he could no longer resist. He went to the Khardar and said: “Khardar, can you get the astrologer to come to me? I would like to consult him about an important matter.”

The Khardar knew the ways of the world, and how the minds of the young worked. He knew without being told what Babar Shamsher wanted to ask. But since he was a courtier whose job it was to do as he was told, he folded his hands behind his back, and said with deference: “Yes, Sarkar. I will go to the astrologer immediately, as you have requested.” He wondered if he should inform the Prime Minister. But then he realized it was better to say nothing. One day this young man would become Prime Minister. The Khardar did not want to lose his favor. So he went off to the small, dingy office where the astrologer sat. “You are wanted,” he said. “Someone wants to consult you.”

The astrologer looked at him. The Khardar was disturbed, he could tell.

“And who wants to consult me, Khardarji?”
This is a private matter. Don’t ask too many questions, and you won’t get into trouble.”

The astrologer realized he was in the same room as he had been when Mohan Shamsher had consulted him. This time, he darted a quick look towards the heavy red curtains, and for a moment he thought he saw a movement, like the silhouette of a man, in between the two wine-red halves.

“Time of birth, day of birth, year of birth, place of birth?”

The Khardar pushed across the daphne paper chart. “It is all written here.”

The name on the chart said: Babar Shamsher. “Ah, the brother,” thought the astrologer. “He wants to know when it is his turn.” Then he started to do his calculations.

The astrologer raised his head. He cleared his throat. As before, he started to talk about the twelve houses, the nine planets, where they were located, and which one was strong and which one weak. Which would show results, and which wouldn’t. Which would trouble the man who owned the chart, and which would be beneficial. He talked about the weaknesses of the man whose chart he was examining. He talked about his health, his enemies, his marriage, his children, his home life and his family. All of which Babar Shamsher, behind the curtain, listened to with an impatient frown. He didn’t want to know about his weaknesses. He wanted to know when he would become Prime Minister.

Finally, the astrologer became silent. Then he said: “Do you have any questions you want to ask me about this chart?”

And in a strange re-enactment, the Khardar asked in a low tone: “When will he become Prime Minister?”

The astrologer consulted the chart. But there was no Raja yoga to be seen. Not even an Adhiraja yoga. He consulted again. Perhaps he had made a mistake in his calculations. But there was nothing.

He raised his head, cleared his throat, and said: “He will never become Prime Minister.”

Babar Shamsher hissed angrily, and exited the room. That stupid Brahmin! He was in his brother’s pay. Of course he would say something to please the Prime Minister. He should never have consulted him. What a mistake believing in these Brahmins who said whatever pleased their patrons. He felt humiliated, and furious.

The next morning, he wrote a chit ordering the Khardar to relieve the young astrologer of his post. There was no reason for this man to be in the administration, he said. He didn’t contribute anything. He had to go.

The Maharaja came to hear about the dismissal of the astrologer immediately. He also learned of what the astrologer had said to Babar Shamsher. A troubled look crossed his face as his old retainer whispered what the astrologer had said. “He will never become Prime Minister.” What did this mean?

Mohan Shamsher looked outside at the gloomy June day, wet with monsoon rain. He thought about the response that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had sent them, when asked for support. He had promised to help. A deal seemed imminent. With Indian support, it would be easy to keep the regime intact, everyone agreed. And yet the Nepali Congress would not stop its agitation. That outlaw BP Koirala seemed determined to topple the Ranas. An armed uprising in Biratnagar, some whispered, had already begun.

“We need to put B. P. in jail,” he said that evening to his brother. “We cannot have him agitating against us. I hear he has started to contact Jawaharlal to support his own cause. If Nehru agrees to support him, we will lose. We must retain Indian support at all costs.” Babar scowled.

He was still smarting from the astrologer’s prediction. As his brother started to talk to the generals about ways to reign in the Nepali Congress, Babar Shamsher looked out and saw something out of the corner of his eye. The young astrologer was walking with a swift stride towards the gate, with a phalanx of people he recognized as officials from the land registration section.

Mohan Shamsher, discreetly, had sent his men out to find the disgraced Brahmin. Then, without telling his brother, he had given him another position at an outlying administrative post. “This man is not a liar,” he had said. “We cannot dismiss him because my brother is angry.”

On a cool November evening, when the dusk lit up the sky with its blue light, the Khardar came running to the Prime Minister in a panic: “Sarkar, sarkar…” He gasped for breath, as if he couldn’t speak anymore.

“Speak, Khardar.” Mohan Shamsher knew at once something crucial had occurred.

“His Majesty King Tribhuwan has…”

“Has…? What has that idiot done now?”

“He has…fled to the Indian Embassy…”
It took Mohan Shamsher a moment to grasp this. “You mean he fled the country. Is everyone gone?”

“Prince Gyanendra has been left behind at his mamaghar.”

“Let Tribhuwan go. He is a troublemaker. He was always meeting with the agitators. We will crown the young prince King.” Later that night, discussing it with his courtiers, Mohan Shamsher said: “This is good for us. This boy is only three years old. We have him in our grasp, he cannot rebel.”

The news about the coronation of Gyanendra brought Babar Shamsher a measure of relief. “That idiot Tribhuwan and his sons will stay in India in exile, and the Ranas will rule with a child king on the throne, as they have done in the past,” Mohan Shamsher assured him.

Looking out of the window into the courtyard below, Babar Shamsher saw the little prince walking with his old nanny. He was crying disconsolately. The nanny couldn’t comfort him, despite her best efforts. His sobs rose up through the air, into the room where Babar was sitting.

Despite his astrological reading, Babar felt fairly certain that one day he would take over the post of Prime Minister.

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The young child was lost amongst all the men. He wondered where his grandfather, father and brothers had gone. They had told him that they would come back soon. They had told him he was going to become King, and wasn’t it exciting? They said he was a big boy, and that he would enjoy sitting on the throne and wearing a crown and carrying a scepter. But the little boy couldn’t help but feel betrayed. They had left him behind. They had left him behind with men with giant moustaches, who looked at him with sinister eyes. All of his family was gone, and only he was left behind. He felt lonely and afraid.

Then the old man with the big moustache came, and smiled at him. He told him he was going to be King. There was to be a coronation. He was to wear the crown and carry the scepter. He would enjoy that, Mohan Shamsher said to him with a smile. “Yes, Sarkar,” the child whispered. His lower lip trembled, but he had to stiffen his face to stop himself from bursting into tears.

They took him to Hanuman Dhoka, where the goat sacrifices to the goddesses were also made every Dashain. He knew this because one of his young Rana playmates had whispered this in his ear just as he was about to leave the palace. They took him into the inner courtyard. He looked around. There were thousands of men around him. His nanny hushed him, and told him not to cry. “A King doesn’t cry, Baba,” she said. He stuck out his lip, and tried to hide his fear.

Mohan Shamsher looked down at him, smiling a thin smile. “You are a good boy, now. Remember,” he said, echoing the nanny’s words. “A king cannot cry. No matter what happens, you can never cry on the throne because that will bring disaster to the country.” The little boy knew crying would bring on great punishment. He made his face look as stiff and stony as he knew how. His lips fell down in an unhappy sneer. A heavy weight fell onto his head, and he instinctively put his hand up to keep the crown from slipping.

When would everyone come back? They had promised to return, but the little boy did not trust them. That stubborn look continued to haunt his face - the look of a three-year-old holding back his tears, abandoned by his family. Everybody was gone, except for him. He sat in the midst of a thousand strangers, holding a sceptre and trying to keep a crown from slipping.

As he pressed the crown down on the child’s head, Mohan Shamsher stared at him grimly, saying: “Good boy, your Majesty. You are a good boy, aren’t you?”

But the excited whispers started that very evening. “Thousands and thousands of people are protesting the coronation!” his nannies whispered excitedly amongst themselves. “The crowd is gigantic, all over Kathmandu!”

“Why are they protesting, Bubu?” Gyanendra asked, plucking at his nurse’s sleeves, but the women continued to talk amongst themselves, oblivious. They were hiding something from him. The idea that these men might come for him was terrifying. What had he done? Why were they protesting his coronation? Mohan Shamsher had told him he was a good boy, but now he felt like a very bad boy indeed. He had done something very wrong to have thousands of men protest against him.

Then four days after his coronation, he heard that his family had flown to India. They were no longer hiding at the Indian Embassy, people said. His grandfather, father and brothers had all flown on a big airplane to Delhi. He was the only one left behind. “They tried to stop them from flying out but two Indian military planes flew them out, people say,” his nannies whispered excitedly amongst themselves, and then shut up when he appeared.

Over and over for the next four months, he heard these whispered words: “Everyone rejects the new king
Gyanendra. Everyone wants King Tribhuwan back.” The Mukti Sena has attacked at nine points!, people said with a mixture of excitement and terror. Each day he could hear his uncles discussing new and terrifying marches and protests against his coronation.

Then they came back – his grandfather, his father and his brother. They were wearing fat marigold garlands. They were all smiling, and happy. He felt bitter as he saw them coming towards him. He wanted to hit them with his scepter, which was still in his hand. They had left him behind. How dare they slip away while he was sleeping, without taking him with them? He would never forgive them.

The Rana regime is at an end, King Tribhuwan said. This was repeated many times in the next few days. Little King Gyanendra did not understand. He had been left out of a great and momentous occasion that the rest of his family had taken part in, all except for him. The chatter of his family – his brothers talking about what they had seen in India, his uncles talking about politics, made him afraid – he felt that soon they would leave him again, leave him for this democracy which was so far away, days and days away, and which he would never get to see. He didn’t care about the reasons why they had all gone to India. They had left him alone. They had made him sit there alone on the throne, while they all vanished. Lost in a forest of
adult legs, he vowed: *one day I am going to get revenge on this democracy.*

“Democracy!” King Tribhuwan said gaily, holding him up and swinging him in the air. “Democracy!”

“I don’t care! Go away!” Gyanendra suddenly cried, hitting his grandfather with his sceptre, which fell to the floor with a clatter. He didn’t know where the strength came from. Young princes never shouted at the King. His grandfather looked shocked and hurt, for a moment. His gentle demeanor rose to the fore, and he tried to comfort the little boy by patting him on the back, instinctively knowing he had been hurt. His aunt Ratna hurried up to gather the little motherless boy in her arms, murmuring apologies.

“Sarkar, he’s upset,” she said in a hushed voice. “He just lost his mother three months ago. Please forgive him.”

“You were so brave to stay behind. You saved the country by becoming the King,” said King Tribhuwan, taking one little hand in his. “You saved everything.”

The little boy pulled his hand back, looked at his grandfather, and shouted: “I *hate* democracy!”

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In another part of Kathmandu, Mohan Shamsher was walking up and down the large meeting hall. The men all around him were gloomy, eyes downcast. “Jawaharlal Nehru betrayed me. He said we had a deal, then he went back on his word! That Tribhuwan,” he spat. “He’s now declaring the end of our rule. A democratic system, he says! What does he know about ruling a country?”

Babar Shamsher shook his head disbelievingly. For a moment, he caught his brother’s eye, and the two looked at each other, the same thought running through their heads. *He will never become Prime Minister.*

Babar Shamsher remembered how he had dismissed the Brahmin with angry words. “You are a liar!” he had shouted at him, before telling him to pack his books and bags and be off. Perhaps I have brought this onto myself by sinning against a Brahmin, he thought. But then the smile of the young astrologer came back to his mind. It wasn’t the smile of a man hungry for power. It was the smile of a man in perfect command of his own knowledge. No, it wasn’t his actions that had brought this onto himself. It was his destiny. The young man had merely read it.

On 12th November, 1951, Mohan Shamsher Jung Bahadur Rana left office.

Four days later, Matrika Prasad Koirala became the first prime minister of democratic Nepal. The Rana regime had come to an end.

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Mohan Shamsher died sixteen years later. Each year on his birthday, he would invite the astrologer to his house to tell him his fortunes. And each year, he would wonder if the young man knew, but wouldn’t tell him, the day of his death.

*Sushma Joshi* is a writer from Nepal. Her book *The End of the World* was long-listed for the Frank O’Connor Short Story Award. She has a BA from Brown University, and an MA in English Literature from Middlebury College. Her collection of short stories *The Prediction*, from which this story is taken, is being released this February. A novel about the civil conflict is forthcoming.

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