

New book paints skeletons galore in Nepal kings' cupboards

A new book, just out of the press and scheduled to be launched formally Wednesday, deals a fresh blow to the image of Nepal's controversial royal family, laying rape, womanising and intrigues at the door of generations of kings.

'Rakta Kunda', which means 'pool of blood', written by Nepali journalist Krishna Bhattarai, who uses the pen name 'Abiral', meaning continuous, has already sold over 2,000 copies before its official launch - a remarkable feat in the Himalayan kingdom where buying books is not a popular culture.

The 32-year-old author claims all the sensational happenings described in the book are real, based on his conversations with a mother and daughter pair, who worked in the palace, and then cross-checked with palace and security officials.

The genesis of the book goes back eight years ago when as a reporter with a Nepali weekly, Bhattarai began researching an article on why the then crown prince Dipendra was not getting married.

The reporter went to a palace official's residence where by chance he met a woman, in her 70s, who had come with her daughter to enquire about their allowances. The old woman, Bhattarai realised, was the maid of the queen mother, Ratna, who as part of Nepali custom had accompanied the queen to the palace as part of her dowry when she married King Mahendra.

The maid, who as per tradition, had to stay inside the palace premises, later had her daughter serving as the present queen Komal's maid, and Bhattarai realised that the pair were privy to many palace secrets.

'But I couldn't write the book immediately,' Bhattarai told IANS. 'The women feared for their safety if the scandals came out. It was only after they immigrated to the US and gave me permission that I could proceed.'

'But even then, I had to take precautions for myself. As one measure, I have called the book a novel though every word is true.'

This is probably the most sensational book about the Nepal royals who captured the imagination of the world since 2001, when Dipendra allegedly killed his parents for opposing his marriage.

Then four years later, the interest was renewed as Dipendra's uncle and present king Gyanendra seized power with the help of the army, triggered fresh violence and set in motion a process that changed Nepal from the world's only Hindu kingdom to a secular nation that may soon decide to axe monarchy as well.

'Rakta Kunda' discounts the allegation that Dipendra killed his parents, siblings and other relatives.

While the old maid, who was in the queen mother's room during the shootout in the palace, does not dare to name anyone directly, only saying it was a pre-planned conspiracy, Bhattarai uses excerpts from depositions made before an inquiry commission to prove the point.

Though Dipendra is alleged to have shot himself after massacring most of the guests, his aide de camp Gajendra Bohra tells the enquiry commission that there were no firearms near the prince's body and that the firing continued even after he fell.

Also, about two weeks before the massacre, the prince had commissioned just a pistol and several rounds of cartridges from the arsenal in the palace. But he had not taken out any machinegun, which is said to have been the weapon of destruction.

A palace official mentions in his deposition that he saw a man running away from the banquet hall. Though the novel doesn't say it outright, the veiled implication is that the man - son-in-law of Dipendra's uncle Prince Dhirendra, who too was killed in the massacre - knew more about the shootout than has been acknowledged.

While skirting the royal massacre, the novel however is brutally direct about royal dalliances.

It says how a play, to have been watched by the then King Tribhuvan, the present king's grandfather, was delayed by two hours because the then crown prince Mahendra had driven away to a tryst with the lead actress in his car.

It also attributed Mahendra's death to his tussle with the then Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.

Mahendra dismissed the elected prime minister, banned parties and imposed a repressive government system known as the panchayat rule, headed by royalists.

India opposed the move and put pressure on the king to undo what he had done, the book says.

When India's growing clout became clear from the merger of Sikkim with India and the liberation of Bangladesh from east Pakistan, the troubled king, fearing Nepal could be annexed by New Delhi, chose to take his own life, the novel says.

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