

Nepal's Prince Paras: Hero? Rogue? It Depends on the Rumor of the Day

By **JESSE PESTA**

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

June 11, 2001

KATMANDU, Nepal—Is the presumed heir to Nepal's throne a big-hearted hero who saved young royals during the recent palace massacre? Or is he a reckless driver who caused the death of a popular Nepalese singer?

These two public faces of Prince Paras Bir Bikram Shah, son of the newly crowned King Gyanendra, are not easily reconciled in the politically charged rumor mill Katmandu has become after the king, queen and eight other members of the royal family were gunned down over a week ago. But how the image of the prince fares this week is crucial to what happens next in the royal saga taking place in this remote Himalayan country.

A palace-appointed panel charged with investigating the shooting is due to issue its report by midweek. Palace accounts have blamed the deceased Crown Prince Dipendra, describing a shooting spree in which the drunken prince sprayed bullets into the royal family, then shot himself in the head. But many Nepalese refuse to believe these accounts, preferring conspiracy theories, that often revolve around Prince Paras.

The prince was reviled by the populace even before the shootings, a result of his bad reputation. Now, royals say their dynasty may depend on Prince Paras changing his own reputation. "I have asked him to personally save the monarchy," says a senior palace figure.

The rumors about Prince Paras bob along on the gossip sea that floods Katmandu even in more placid times. Few ordinary Nepalese get their news firsthand from the media or government. Newspapers are unreliable, and more than 70% of Nepalese can't read, anyway. More than a week after the killings, television broadcasts consist almost wholly of still shots of past kings and of religious images. Radio airs poetry and memorials.

Misinformation flourishes. There are revisionist rumors (Dipendra was seen in town after the massacre!); alarmist rumors (the royal doctor was kidnapped!); even rumors about rumors (people inside the palace walls are writing rumors on pieces of paper and throwing them over the wall!).

"The main news was so unbelievable, you could believe anything," says C.K. Lal, a columnist at a local English-language newspaper.

On Friday afternoon, G.P. Sharma, a social studies teacher living in Katmandu's outskirts, hadn't heard media reports that Prince Paras had saved four women during the massacre, even though that was the big news of the day. The local news "doesn't give much news," he says. But he had heard that the municipal water supply had been poisoned.

More than innocent gossip may be at work here. Young toughs, many with their heads shaved to show mourning for the dead king, describe a loose network of rumor-mongers available for hire by politicians and others who might hope to influence public opinion. A half-dozen young men sprawled on wooden chairs in a dilapidated shack last week said that they've spread rumors themselves in the past.

One youth, lounging between portraits of rock-music icon Jim Morrison and the Hindu god Vishnu, even names the price: He says putting several thousand rumor mongers into tea houses and on the streets costs as much as 200,000 rupees (\$260).

The fellow at the bottom of this gossip pyramid might only get a can of Coke or a cup of tea, but it's something he may not have money for otherwise. In return for the beverage, he talks up the story.

While denying they've spread any rumors recently, they are hardly silent regarding Prince Paras, whom they admire as a Robin Hood figure who they say take on thugs. In fact, they sit idle now, they say, because their leader has disappeared after being beaten up—by Prince Paras.

It happened a few months ago, says one. No, just a few weeks ago, says another. A third has yet another explanation: "I don't think he's been bashed," he says, using their term for a beating. "He went to India to buy some go-carts."

Getting at the truth behind the accusations against Prince Paras isn't easy, even for those who try hard. A representative for King Gyanendra declined to comment. "Rumors come and go," he says. A spokesman for Prince Paras didn't return calls.

Police are of little help. Asked about the Prince Paras's driving record, the superintendent of Katmandu's main police post confirms the accident involving the singer occurred, but declines to say whether the prince was involved. "One man came in and he took responsibility," he says. "I don't want to talk about his case anymore."

Privately, some palace officials say Prince Paras was involved but wasn't to blame. Indeed, one official says, it was the singer whose vehicle hit Prince Paras's, while racing back to the bar after dropping his mistress off at home. "That's what really happened," he says.

Many royals paint Prince Paras as the black sheep of the family, a trouble-prone but good-hearted man who's been misunderstood. One young man who attended school with him recalls how the prince once stood up in the schoolyard against a housemaster at

Katmandu's elite Budhanilkantha School who disciplined students with the dread "quarter-past-six punishment"—making them till his garden at 6:15 a.m.

"Everyone was clapping," says Anup Bhandari, who is a few years younger than the prince and who says he witnessed the confrontation.

The former housemaster, Mr. G.R. Shakya, reached in his garden, says he doesn't recall any confrontation with Prince Paras, although he allows that "it's been many years." He says he never made the students work in his personal garden, only on the school grounds. He also clarifies that it wasn't the "quarter-past-six punishment" but the "6:10 punishment."

Now, royal family members who witnessed the June 1 palace killings say Prince Paras played the hero. One says he shoved four young women behind a sofa, allowing them to escape the hail of gunfire.

But public skepticism runs deep. Asked if he believes the various rumors about Prince Paras, taxi driver Krishna Karki says: "I haven't seen it with my own eyes." Does he believe the prince saved the four girls? "I haven't seen it with my own eyes," he repeats.