

Historical:: The Sen Kingdoms

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The Sen Kingdoms

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When Prithvi Narayan Shah was engaged in his campaign of building up a new Nepal, deep unrest was spreading in the Sen Kingdoms of the Kirat region. Makwanpur, which had broken away from the Kirat Kingdom of Vijayapur, was being ruled by King Manik Sen. He was succeeded by his own son, Hemkarna Sen. Mahipati Sen then King of Vijayapur. He was the younger brother of Manik Sen. He was also called Mandhata Sen. The Kings of Vijayapur styled themselves Hindupati or "lord of the hindus", because they regarded themselves as rivals of the Mughals. They appointed their ministers, who were also known as Chautara, exclusively from among the Limbus. The Limbu ministers had their line of succession just like the Kings. King Mahipati had to flee his State and go Lhasa a refugee as a result of his conflict with his Limbu minister, Vichitra Rai. The Limbu ministers, even though not Kings themselves, carried on the administration of the State independently. In 1730 A.D. the then Limbu minister invited Jagat Sen, younger brother of Hemakarna Sen, and proclaimed him King of Vijayapur. Just at this moment, Mahipati Sen returned from exile. The minister, therefore, retained the upper Kirat region, situated to the east the Arun river, and the Tarai area of Morang, in Vijayapur State and made Mahipati Sen its King. At the same time, he created a new State comprising the Central Kirat region, situated to the west of the Arun river and the Tarai areas of Saptari, with Chaudandi as its capital, and made Jagat Sen its King. Thus two Sen Kingdoms were established (1753). Jagat Sen was succeeded by his brother, Mukunda Sen IV. As Mukunda Sen was childless, Vikrama Sen another younger brother of Jagat Sen, became King, and ruled for some years. He was succeeded by his son, Karna Sen, whose minister (Chautara) was Ajit Rai.

After the death of Mahipati Sen, Vishwantar Sen became King of Vijayapur (1751). Srikanta Rai was his minister during the reign of Kamadatta Sen, who acceded to the throne in 1756. In 1760, Srikanta Rai alone ruled the country, because Kamadatta Sen had quarreled with him and left the country. However, he became back in 1763 and resumed power after removing Srikanta Rai. Thus effective powers alternated between the King and his minister for some years. This situation lasted still the time when Jashakarna Rai succeeded by Buddhikarna, who was dismissed by King, Kamadatta Sen on the charge that he, in collusion with Ajita Rai, minister of Chaudandi, had tried to assassinate the King. But Buddhikarna, mustering all his strength, eventually forced Kamadatta Sen to run away. Kamadatta Sen relying on his own resources, drove out Buddhikarna and killed his brother, and this regained power in Vijayapur (1766). In 1769, a rebellion broke out in Vijayapur, in which Kamadatta Sen was assassinated. He was succeeded by his uncle, Raghunath Sen. But Buddhikarna Rai soon removed Raghunath Sen and proclaimed King Karna Sen of Chaudandi as King of Vijayapur.

Kamadatta Sen was the son of Prithvi Narayan Shah's aunt. On account of this, he was on good terms with Prithvi Narayan Shah. It was therefore natural for Prithvi Narayan Shah to feel perturbed over the murder of Kamadatta Sen. Following this incident, he looked forward to an opportunity to annihilate Buddhikarna Rai and occupy Chaudandi.

Karna Sen had become King of Chaudandi some days after the fall of Makwanpur. Since Prithvi Narayan Shah's dominions extended from the hill region west of Chaudandi to the Tarai region, Karna Sen apprehended an eminent attack by the Gorkhalis on his State. He was therefore planning, along with Ajit Rai, his minister, to help the enemies of Prithvi Narayan Shah. He assisted the British to the best of his capacity when they attacked Nepal exactly at that time. He also sent presents to Jaya Prakash Mall in Bhaktapur and even sent there some Khambu troops. Prithvi Narayan Shah too was getting ready to invade Chaudandi after consolidating his hold on Bhaktapur. However, he realized that he could not secure Saptari, the Tarai territory of Chaudandi, as long as the British remained in the Tarai region. He was,

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therefore compelled to turn towards the western (hill) region. Latter, the British withdrew from the Tarai, and Prithvi Narayan Shah, taking advantage of this, started making military preparations to invade Chaudandi. He appointed his brother (Dalajit Shah ?), as minister, since Minister Vamsha Raj Pande was a captive at Vemisahar. Kahar Simha Basnyat was replaced by his younger brother, Abhiman Simha Basnyat, as commander with the title of "Bakshi". Abhiman Simha Basnyat was subsequently given the rank of Kaji and vested with full ministerial powers.

The capital of Chaudandi was situated in the inner Tarai. The area surrounding the Udayapur fort, situated south of the border of between the hill and Tarai regions, was inhabited by Magars, who were responsible for defending it. Majhkirat, situated in the hill regions of Chaudandi, was inhabited also by Khasas. Prithvi Narayan Shah secretly sent Bangya Basnyat to this area and won over Khasas, who were tired of the oppression to which they were subjected by Karna Sen. Among the Khasas were Harinandan Upadhyaya of Kharpa, and Trilochan Upadhyaya, both of whom were wealthy and influential. Both men were worried over the possibility of their property being plundered in the event of a Gorkhali attack on Chaudandi. Harinandan Upadhyaya thought that he could save his Birta lands and his wealth if he helped the Gorkhalis to conquer Chaudandi. Accordingly, he came over to Nuwakot and personally requested Prithvi Narayan Shah to attack Chaudandi. He promised that he would assist Prithvi Narayan Shah to the best of his capacity if he invaded Chaudandi. Trilochan Upadhyaya too promised whatever support he could give for the invasion. Prithvi Narayan Shah could scarcely afford to lose this golden opportunity.

Trilochan Upadhyaya had made arrangements to ferry Gorkhali troops across the Dudhkoshi river, by outflanking outposts in the Kirat area. The companies of Gorkhali troops, dispatched by Prithvi Narayan Shah under the command of Sardar Ramakrishna Kunwar and Sardar Ambar Simha Thapa, crossed the Dudhkoshi river at night and entered into Chaudandi (August 1772). It was Prithvi Narayan Shah's intention to send Abhiman Simha Basnyat to occupy the capital from the Tarai area after the occupation of the Kirat region. Chaudandi did not have a standing army in the Kirat region. The local Khambus were given the responsibility of defending that region. Ramakrishna Kunwar tried hard to win them over to his side. But the Khambus refused to accept the Gorkhali domination and resolved to put up a fight. Every Khambu chief in the Kirat region was a feudal overlord, who regarded the Sen Kings as no more than a titular ruler. They apprehended that they might be subjected to the yoke of law once they agreed to accept the domination of the Nepal government. Hence their determination to fight back.

Khambus youths, who were killed archers, stemmed the advance of the Gorkhali troops at every step with their arrows. They inflicted heavy losses on the Gorkhalis, so that Prithvi Narayan Shah had to send reinforcements under the command of Subedar Shiva Narasimha Khatri. Chatim Rai of Rawa-Khola and Atal Rai of Pamakham were the principal leaders of the Khambus. However, the bows and arrows of the Khambus ultimately proved ineffective occupied Rawa, Kalesi, Majhuwa, Kulum and Dingla, thus conquering the whole of Majhkirat.

Ambarpur was then the headquarters of Saptari district, which form the Tarai area of Chaudandi state. The Tarai headquarters of Vijayapur located in Vijayapur. The King of both Chaudandi and Vijayapur used to pay tributes in the form of either cash or elephants to the Nawab of the Ben [...] through the Mughal officer in Purnea. Prithvi Narayan Shah was angry at Buddhikarna Rai, as he was responsible for the murder of King Kamadatta Sen of Vijayapur. He therefore planned to capture Buddhikarna Rai and occupy Vijayapur. He sent Sriharsh Mishra and Brihaspati Pandit as his envoys to the British Governor-General, Warren Hastings, at Calcutta to occupy the Tarai areas of Ambarpur and Vijayapur in view of the injustice done by Buddhikarna Rai. Prithvi Narayan Shah offered, in return, to pay reasonable tributes to the British (May 27, 1773). Prithvi Narayan Shah was in Makwanpur at the time. But therefore he could get a reply from the British Governor-General, Abhiman Simha and Parath Bhandari attacked Chaudandi in the middle of the monsoon, and drove out both the King and his ministers from the capital (July 16, 1773). With the flight of the King, the Magars of Udayapur handed over Udayapur fort to the Gorkhalis. Prithvi Narayan Shah wanted to avoid a conflict with the Magars. This explains why he instructed Abhiman Simha Basnyat to proceed to Chaudandi without occupying Udayapur. When Karna Sen ran away to Vijayapur, Buddhikarna invited him to occupy the vacant throne. In this manner, the hill and Tarai territories of Chaudandi were fully annexed to Nepal within a period of 11 months.

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The British East India Company Government was not carrying on the administration of the areas under its control, but also conducting trade. British trading firms were operating at different places along the southern borders of the Tarai region. At that time, gangs of Sanyasi bandits were harassing traders from Hardwar to East Dinajpur in Bengal. The Sanyasi bandits used to hide in the tarai forests when the troops of the Company pursued them. Warren Hastings thought that Prithvi Narayan Shah in a position to control the bandits. Hence he evaded a reply to the message of Prithvi Narayan Shah. He wrote to Prithvi Narayan Shah and Abhiman Simha Basnyat requesting them to help in suppressing the bandits (October 30, 1773). In reply to this message, Prithvi Narayan Shah asked the Governor-General to let Gorkhali troops move into Bettiah, since the bandits frequently entered into that area while fleeing towards the east after crossing the Gandaki river (January, 1774). Prithvi Narayan Shah thus expected to get a foot-hold in Bettiah. He kept waiting for a reply from the British, while at the same time continuing to prevent the bandits from infiltrating into his dominions. However, Warren Hastings thought it undesirable to let the Gorkhals enter into Bettiah. He therefore did not send any reply to Prithvi Narayan Shah. Prithvi Narayan Shah accordingly proceeded towards Chaudandi.

The situation in the Limbuwan region of Vijayapur was critical at that time. Taking advantage of the dissensions between the king and his ministers, King Phunchek Namgyal of Sikkim occupied Ilam and attacked Limbuwan from the north-west of Ilam. The Limbus of these regions were therefore anxious to welcome the Gorkhali troops. Realizing this, the Gorkhali troops commanded by Ramakrishna Kunwar crossed the Arun river from Dingla and reached Chainpur. Nobody blocked their advances. The writ of the King and his minister was confined to the areas surrounding the capital of Vijayapur, where King Karna Sen and his minister, Buddhikaran, were staying. It was the monsoon. Both the King and minister were complacent, because they thought that the Gorkhali troops would not cross the Koshi and enter into Vijayapur during his season. However, Abhiman Simha Basnyat achieved his impossible task. Gorkhali troops, riding on elephant, crossed the turbulent Koshi and launched a surprise attack on Vijayapur (July 17, 1774). Unable to repulse this attack, King Karna Sen and Minister Buddhikarna fled to Sikkim along with their troops. With the occupation of Vijayapur, the Limbu Subbas (chiefs) of the area from Islingwa to Changthapu in the Limbuwan region bordering Sikkim accepted Prithvi Narayan Shah's suzerainty. Thus the entire Pallokirat region, with the exception of Ilam, was annexed without fight.

King Karna Sen and his minister sought asylum in Sikkim. Abhiman Simha Basnyat sent a message to the King of Sikkim asking him to vacate Ilam and extradite both Karna Sen and Buddhikarna. On receiving this message, the King of Sikkim ceded Ilam to Nepal (September 1774). But before Ilam could be actually handed over to Nepal, both Karna Sen and Buddhikarna separately escaped from and headed for Calcutta. While in exile, they continued efforts to reconquer the Kirat region.

Previously, the Tishta river formed the eastern boundary of Morang. While annexing Ilam, the King of Sikkim had also occupied the area situated between the Kankai and Tista rivers. When the King of Sikkim refused to restore this Tarai area, Abhiman Simha Basnyat sought Prithvi Narayan Shah's order to occupy it through invasion. Prithvi Narayan Shah at first had some reservations on this proposal. He instructed Abhiman Simha Basnyat to cross the Kankai "if Sikkim is intent on waging a war against us instead of seeking peace and make a decision yourself." The King of Sikkim sought reconciliation by handing over Ilam, and Abhiman Simha Basnyat then occupied the Tarai regions Morang, situated between the Kahi and Kankai rivers, thus bringing an end to the Kirat war. With the occupation of Chaudandi and Vijayapur within a period of 2 years, the entire Kirat region became part of Nepal.

^xBaburam Acharya, Nepal Ko Samkshipta Vrittanta (A Concise Account of Nepal).

Kathmandu: Paramod Shamsher and Nir Bikram "Pyasi", 2022 (1966), Chapter IX: "Kirat Sen Rajyahaaruko Unmulan." (Annexation Of The Kirat Sen Kingdoms), PP. 60-65.

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