

AN INTELLECTUAL IN THE CORRIDORS OF POWER

■ **Jaya Raj Acharya**

Introduction

A reviewer of my book *Yadu Nath Khanal: Jivani ra Vichar* (*Yadu Nath Khanal: Life and Thoughts*) wrote: “Prithvi Narayan Shah unified Nepal, Bhanubhakta Acharya standardised Nepali language and Yadu Nath Khanal intellectualised Nepal’s foreign policy”. Indeed Professor Yadu Nath Khanal made outstanding contributions in explaining Nepal’s foreign policy to the international community in modern terminology. His thoughts on Nepal, Nepali literature and Nepal’s foreign policy are compiled in a book *Nepal’s Non-Isolationist Foreign Policy* (Kathmandu: Satyal Prakashan, 2000) that has 100 articles divided into five sections. Professor Khanal was a scholar, literary critic and successful practitioner as well as a thinker of Nepal’s foreign policy. But above all, he was an intellectual par excellence. I will begin this biographical sketch of Professor Khanal with his birth and academic career and conclude it with an extract from Professor Kamal P. Malla (1936-2018), himself a great scholar, who described Professor Khanal as “an intellectual in the corridors of power”.

Life and Career

Born in 1913 in a middle-class family in a village called Manung in Tanahu district, Yadu Nath Khanal was the youngest of the three sons of Naranath Khanal and Tara Devi Khanal (né Acharya). He got his primary education in Sanskrit from his father at home. At age 12, he went to Kathmandu for further education at Sanskrit High School at Ranipokhari. When he went back home during the winter vacation of 1926, his parents got 13-year-old Yadu Nath married to nine-year-old Kamala (1922-1990) as per the orthodox tradition of the upper caste Hindu society in the villages of Nepal.¹ Even then, young

¹ Professor Khanal is survived by his three children: Vijaya Gyawali married to Kumar Gyawali, who was also a career diplomat (Foreign Secretary and Ambassador), Shubha Baskota married to Dr. Narottam Baskota and Dr. Udaya Raj Khanal (Professor of Physics in Tribhuvan University). They also have two children each.

■ He served as Nepal’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1991-94). Fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands and at the Weather head Center for International Affairs at Harvard University (1995-96), Dr. Acharya was also a Randolph Jennings Senior Fellow at USIP Washington DC (2006-07).

Yadu Nath continued his studies in Kathmandu and passed his Madhyama (Intermediate in Sanskrit) in first division in 1931. Then he left his Sanskrit education and joined Durbar High School for an English education and passed the School Leaving Certificate standing first in first division in 1935. He did his I. Sc. from Tri-Chandra College (1937), and B. Sc. (1941) and M. A. (English) in 1943 from the University of Calcutta.² Then he earned a post-graduate diploma in English Educational Thought and Practice in 1953 from the University of London. He also took the opportunity to visit some European countries the same year.

Professor Khanal taught English at Tri-Chandra College from 1943 to 1955. He was then nominated as member-secretary of the Nepali delegation to the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung (Indonesia) April 18-24, 1955, and wrote the speech for the leader of the delegation, Shobhag Jung Thapa, the Foreign Secretary of Nepal. It was the first international conference that Nepal had attended after the country emerged from the century-long Rana family oligarchy that kept the people deliberately in educational darkness and isolation from the rest of the world. Thus, the year 1955 saw the beginning of Professor Khanal's career in international relations so to speak. It was a happy coincidence for him since this year (1955) was the beginning of a new chapter of non-isolationism in Nepal's foreign policy as it also took membership of the United Nations and established diplomatic relations with China.

Professor Khanal was, of course, a keen observer of international affairs as he grew intellectually during the momentous period of World War I and II and the Indian struggle for independence led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. He had met Nehru even as a student in Calcutta in the early 1940s. He was also aware of some Nepali leaders participating in this struggle.



Yadu Nath Khanal

Photo courtesy: Avidit Acharya

² Professor Khanal said that he walked four or five days straight to Kathmandu and back home twenty times during his student life when there was no other mode of transportation than walking. He often said that getting an education was indeed a tapasya, or penance.

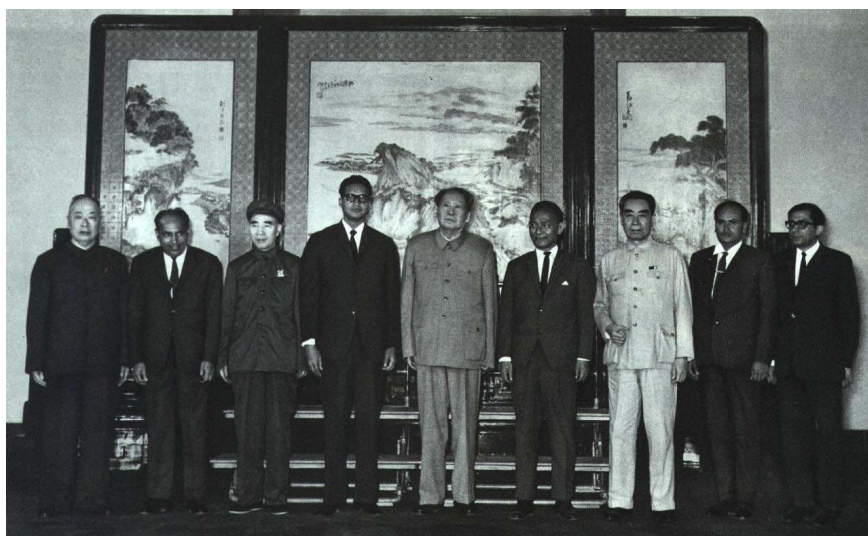
In 1956, Professor Khanal was invited to Singh Durbar as Home Secretary and Private Secretary of Tanka Prasad Acharya (Prime Minister, January 1956-July 1957). In the meantime, Professor Khanal was sent to University of Oregon, USA to be trained as the Vice-Chancellor of the proposed Tribhuvan University. On his return from the US, Professor Khanal found that the Acharya cabinet and the subsequent K. I. Singh cabinet had been dismissed by King Mahendra. But the King appointed him Member of the Yojana Mandal (Planning Commission) headed by Prince Himalaya (January 6, 1958). When the first general elections were held in February-March 1959, the Nepali Congress emerged as the largest party with two-thirds seats in the parliament to form the government, and Professor Khanal was sent to the UN as a member of the Nepali delegation by the new government. He contributed in drafting the speeches of the delegation leaders Surya Prasad Upadhyaya (1959) and B. P. Koirala (1960).

Upon his return from the UN in December 1960, Professor Khanal was appointed Foreign Secretary by King Mahendra in early 1961. His intellectual contribution as an explainer of Nepal's foreign policy is particularly remembered as he wrote the highly appreciated speech of King Mahendra for the first summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) held in Belgrade in 1961. The speech laid the fundamental guidelines for all practical purposes of conducting Nepal's foreign policy in the future. His job as Foreign Secretary of Nepal was not easy as the India-China border war erupted in October-November 1962.

When the Nepali Ambassador to India, Nar Pratap Thapa, died in a plane crash, Professor Khanal was appointed ambassador to succeed him in 1963. Again, it was a trying time in Nepal-India relations following King Mahendra's dismissal of the first parliament and imprisonment of Prime Minister B. P. Koirala and his cabinet colleagues. So Ambassador Khanal, seeking to improve relations between the two countries, worked on many diplomatic and intellectual fronts, and gave lectures and interviews explaining Nepal's position and published a book *Reflections on Nepal-India Relations* (1964) *Stray Thoughts* (1966). It is said that Professor Khanal, during his tenure as Ambassador to India, was instrumental in getting the Letters of Exchange between India and Nepal regarding the import of arms by Nepal signed on January 30, 1965. Of course, he signed it as Royal Nepalese Ambassador to India, but it was a Nepal Army-initiative endorsed by King Mahendra and signed in the presence of Kirti Nidhi Bista, Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers and the Foreign Minister of His Majesty's Government of Nepal in New Delhi. Mr Bista was

on a visit to India from January 25 to February 7, 1965 ostensibly to participate in the Indian Republic Day celebrations on January 26, but the real purpose of his visit was to witness the signing of the Letters of Exchange as the King's confidant and representative. According to Rishikesh Shaha, King Mahendra was really worried about India's intention against him, especially under Indira Gandhi. So he took this initiative to remove the Indian apprehension that Nepal in collusion with China would not pose any security threat to India. The letter was kept secret until it was published by the Indian government in *The Statesman* (May 27, 1989).

Ambassador Khanal was called back to Kathmandu to take up the post of Foreign Secretary again. He accompanied King Mahendra on his visit to the US and the United Nations and wrote the King's speech in which he said, "The only alternative to the United Nations is a stronger United Nations." Earlier in the same year (1967) tensions were high in Nepal-China relations following an incident at Bhrikuti Mandap where the Chinese stall was vandalised by some youngsters on the ground that a bigger picture of Mao stood next to that of King Mahendra. Following the incident, the Chinese Ambassador had left Nepal without informing the government. So, Professor Khanal suggested sending a high-level visit to China to resolve the issue. He then went with Foreign Minister Kirti Nidhi Bista to China in 1968 and was successful in removing the misunderstanding between the two governments.



From left to right: Chen Yi, Y. N. Khanal, Lin Biao, Kirti Nidhi Bista, Mao Zedong, Ranadhir Subba,

Zhou Enlai, Mani Raj Upadhyaya, Basudev Toofan, 1968. Photo courtesy: Brajesh Upadhyaya

In 1969 Professor Khanal, as Foreign Secretary, led the negotiating team of Nepal to get the Indian Military Liaison Group (IMLG) and Wireless Operators to withdraw from the Nepal-China border. They had come to Nepal in 1952 for a limited period of time with three mandates: (1) modernising the Nepal Army, (2) building the Tribhuvan International Airport and (3) monitoring the Nepal-China border with its wireless operators.

Foreign Secretary Khanal also worked with great diplomatic tact to get Nepal elected in 1968 as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for a two-year term (1969-1970). He was however not as happy with the pace of social and economic development of Nepal, and resigned from his position as Foreign Secretary to go to the Harvard University as a fellow (1970-1971). He wrote a long paper “Nepal between India and China: An Aspect of Evolving Balance in Asia” analysing the evolution of Nepal’s foreign policy. When he returned home in 1972, he was a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA). In 1973 King Birendra appointed him ambassador to the United States and Canada.

Professor Khanal was also recognised as an outstanding scholar in the US and was conferred an honorary degree of Doctor of Law by Claremont University of California in 1974. He returned to Nepal in 1975 without completing his term as ambassador owing to the health of his wife. In December that year, he was appointed by King Birendra as Chairman of the Public Service Commission. Then an intellectually ever-productive Professor Khanal published a collection of 33 articles on various topics in a book *Nepal: Transition from Isolationism*, (Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan, 1977).

In 1978, Professor Khanal was appointed ambassador to China and served there until 1982. It was a time when China was passing through a crucial period of transition from the era of Mao Zedong to that of Deng Xiaoping. But he said that it would be wrong to attribute change in China’s foreign policy to an individual leader as the great country was propelled primarily by its national interest more than any personal preferences of a leader. In this context, his observation on China’s policy towards Nepal can be useful to the Nepali policy-makers and diplomats. To quote him,

“The Chinese are realists. They recognise that the relations between Nepal and China, between Nepal and India and those between China and India are basically independent. Each of them has its own logic of development. Each must be pursued on its own merit. To my

knowledge, they value Sino-Nepalese friendship and respect our independence and sovereignty. They are not likely to pursue their relations with other countries at the expense of Nepal. Their leaders are very particular about this. Again, however, with much value to Sino-Nepalese friendship, they are realistic enough to recognise that this friendship cannot be a substitute for either Indo-Nepalese friendship or Sino-Indian friendship. As they are working independently to improve their relations with due respect to the sensibilities of their friends with a hard look at their own national interest, so they expect us to do the same in our pursuit of relations with India.”(Khanal, 1998)³

In 1982, Professor Khanal came back to Kathmandu from Beijing and retired from government service, but the country needed the service of his wisdom, so he was nominated member of the Raj Sabha (Royal Council) in April 1983. He was appointed advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in early November 1984 in the wake of the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984 as King Birendra was naturally concerned about the fallout of the ghastly incident in its close neighbourhood, which could influence virtually all major political developments in Nepal. It was only Professor Khanal who is said to have had the wisdom and experience to assess the grave situation and advise the government. So he was sent to Delhi to attend the funeral of Mrs. Gandhi.⁴

In May 1985 Professor Khanal represented Nepal at the ministerial meeting in Thimphu (Bhutan) to finalise the Charter of SAARC that held its first summit in Dhaka (Bangladesh) in December 1985. It is said that Professor Khanal conveyed to the representatives of the SAARC countries in Thimphu the wish of King Birendra to establish the headquarters of SAARC in Kathmandu and that it was readily accepted. The same year Professor Khanal went to Bandung to participate in the 30th anniversary of the Afro-Asian Conference that he had attended in 1955.

So although Professor Khanal had formally retired from his career as a diplomat, he did not retire intellectually. He himself wrote:

“I have retired from service. But I have found it difficult to retire from an intellectual interest in Nepal’s social and cultural conditions. I am deeply worried at the confusion and erosion of values in Nepal. I have reflected a great deal on these matters and, in many cases, shared my reflections with others. In this small way I have tried to serve the community in which I live. Though I am conscious that I have been a sort of a rolling stone, a homeless vagabond, in respect of my intellectual and cultural

3 Khanal, Y. N. 1988. *Essays in Nepal’s Foreign Affairs*. Kathmandu: Murari Prasad Upadhyay, p. 125. This book has 26 articles (besides the introduction) that he wrote between 1978-1988 indicating how intellectually active he was even in his retired life.

4 Incidentally, Professor Khanal had attended the funeral of three consecutive Prime Ministers of India: Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi.

pursuits, I have settled as my base at international affairs in general and Nepal's foreign policy in particular.”⁵

Professor Khanal's advice was felt necessary even after the 1990 changes in Nepali politics, which witnessed the overthrow of the partyless Panchayat system, or the direct rule of the King, and restoration of the multi-party system that was disbanded by King Mahendra in 1960. The interim government formed under Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai sought Professor Khanal's advice, so he was appointed advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁶ The elected government headed by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala also made him advisor of ministerial status in 1991-1993. But then he resigned pleading old age. However, he was still active intellectually, publishing a number of articles while addressing seminars and graduate convocations of Tribhuvan University (TU). Twelve articles of his came out in the form of a book that was his penultimate publication.⁷ TU also conferred a degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) on him in 1997 when he was 85 years old, and he gave an acceptance speech that was the talk of the town. It was a sincere and critical view on the contemporary social (dis)order and the loss of values in Nepali politics.

His Advice

Regarding Professor Khanal's advice to the new generation of Nepali politicians and diplomats, it will be most useful to reproduce the following paragraphs prepared as notes by Professor Mohan P. Lohani, former Ambassador to Bangladesh. Professor Lohani, who was a student of Professor Khanal in Tri-Chandra College, was Executive Director of the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) that had organised a training programme for young Section Officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) at Shital Niwas. He had invited Professor Khanal to share his thoughts and experiences with the young officers. Professor Lohani summarised in the following way the thoughts expressed by Professor Khanal at the meeting that was also attended by some senior officers of MOFA. Professor Lohani wrote that everyone listened, with pleasure and pride, to the learned professor who did not mince words about how Foreign Service is related to the very survival of a country like Nepal. So Professor Khanal called for seriousness on the part of all concerned- politicians, policy-

5 Khanal, Y. N. Essays in Nepal's Foreign Affairs, Introduction, pp. 1-2.

6 Professor Khanal's appointment as Foreign Secretary by King Mahendra immediately after the dissolution of the multi-party political system under the elected government in 1960 and Foreign Policy Advisor by the interim government of Prime Minister Bhattarai after the restoration of multiparty political system in 1990 indicated his indispensability or acceptability even to the opposite ends of the political spectrum of Nepal.

7 Khanal, Yadu Nath. 1996. Nepal after Democratic Restoration, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar. His final book was Nepali Bhaminivilasa (1998), a verse-to-verse translation of Pandit-raj Jagannath's Sanskrit work on rhetoric which was remarkable. Thus Professor Khanal lived an active and productive life as aspired by the Ishopanishad that said, "one should aspire to live an active life for a hundred years."

makers and even academics in dealing with both foreign policy and Foreign Service. To quote Professor Lohani's notes,

“Professor Khanal, the only diplomat who had the distinction of serving as Nepal's ambassador to India and China, our immediate neighbours, and the United States, underscored the strategic location and importance of this country. The vital interests of India and China in Nepal and the latter's similar interests in its immediate neighbours can neither be minimised nor overemphasised. Professor Khanal is of the view that there is nothing unusual if a small country comes under pressure from a big neighbour. He distinguished pressure from threat with a different connotation. But what is important is the strength or ability of a country, however small, to withstand the external pressure. This leads one to question whether Nepal, sandwiched between India and China, has the requisite strength, resilience and assertiveness to stand up to the pressure no matter where it comes from.

“According to Professor Khanal, a primary objective of Nepal's foreign policy in the fifties and sixties was to establish and maintain the country's international identity. He admits that progress in this area has been achieved over the years. The learned scholar and diplomat also reminded the participants that various games are played in conducting a country's foreign policy. Such games vary from tolerance to submission and even to threat. Nevertheless, each society passes through the stages of pattern maintenance, adaptation, goal orientation and integration. How to adapt international norms and principles to Nepali condition is a challenge, opines Professor Khanal. He, however, hastens to add that in order to accelerate economic progress Nepal must be prepared to sharpen its competitive edge.

“Asked to express his views on the future of Nepal's foreign policy, Professor Khanal would not view foreign policy in isolation from variables such as the growth rate of population, availability of food, energy supply and transfer of resources or capital, which determine the very existence of mankind in the next millennium. He does recognise the importance of values in international relations. It is distressing to note that the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which initially enabled Nepal to assert its international identity, had to sacrifice values in order to accommodate some of the worst tyrannies of the world. The seasoned diplomat cited the instance of the European Community which did not accept within its fold countries like Spain and Portugal so long as they were under dictatorship. As regards SAARC, Professor Khanal considers India and Pakistan as vital countries that must be prepared for a give and take attitude if regional cooperation is to move

forward and yield results. The region could have been spared the pangs of nuclearisation. It is a missed opportunity, he regrets.

“Professor Khanal, by way of recapitulating his experience, reiterated his viewpoint that Nepal must skillfully play the game of diplomacy to serve its vital interests. There is tremendous goodwill towards Nepal from major donors like USA and Japan. Nepal must be able to utilise it.

“According to Professor Khanal, reliability and consistency factor in foreign policy of smaller countries such as Nepal is very important. He attached great importance to domestic policy, which forms the basis of promoting the objectives of our foreign policy.

Finally, emphasising the need for professionalising the Foreign Service, Professor Khanal advised the young officers to take Foreign Service seriously, to broaden their intellectual horizon and to increase their ability to take decisions on important issues of national and international concern.”

A Tribute

Throughout his career as a diplomat or an administrator, Professor Khanal maintained his personality as a scholar or an intellectual rather than just a bureaucrat. So, there cannot be a better way to evaluate or pay tribute to Professor Khanal than to extensively quote Professor Kamal P. Malla, who was also a student of Professor Khanal in Tri-Chandra College. In an article “An Intellectual in the Corridors of Power”, Professor Malla, reviewing Professor Khanal’s book *Stray Thoughts*, wrote the following:

“Singha Durbar is like a sponge. It has an immense capacity to absorb men of all sorts. Inside its porous and spacious offices individual identities and distinctions tend to get blurred. Names tend to be lost in the shady lobbies of an impersonal organisation. The administrative services of the country have in the past decade or two absorbed some of the finest intellects Nepal has produced. Yet in one significant sense of the word these men are a colossal intellectual loss to the rest of the nation. Once they embark on an administrative career, they are more often than not bogged down with an eternal round of executive obligations and trivialities. Above all, a civil servant qua civil servant has little leisure and less freedom to choose and cultivate creative or critical interests which may be within or outside the orbit of his office. These inhibitions are deeply entrenched and have in turn bred a crippling indifference among the administrative elite of the nation. The quality of life led by a teeming section of the nation’s conscious population is intellectually inhibited. Besides, for the last half of a century, the educated and privileged Nepalis have always found the civil service, together with teaching, as the only alternative avenues of employment

to farming and shop-keeping. In fact, Singha Durbar houses nearly the whole consequential hierarchy of public administration, rising from the grass-roots of the clerk-typists and section officers to the spires of the top civil servants. But out of this chiming machinery, operating in an architectural labyrinth, how many individual and distinct voices do we hear? How many men do we recognise who have been able to maintain their identity by a sheer inviolable quality of their personality or critical intelligence? So that people outside Singha Durbar could speak of them not just as Secretary to the Ministry of So-and-So, but as Mr. Such-and-Such or Dr. So-and-So? Walking down the corridors of power many have walked as shades and remarkably few as individuals.

“And who are these identifiable few? Without hurrying to identify and catalogue all of them, one can make an uncontroversial claim that Professor Yadu Nath Khanal is one of the intellectuals who tread the corridors of power and tread them with considerable grace and delicacy. Professor Khanal is certainly one of the few whose energetic minds have not suffered any considerable erosion through surface contacts with abrasive details of a consequential role. He has, indeed, a number of advantages in his beginnings. For one thing, he is not an old time residue: he did not begin his life in administration or as a cog in the wheel of ancien regime. Instead, he is a late-comer in Singha Durbar. His original background was academic. He had been professor of English for more than a decade and had acquired a reputation and standing in the academic world matched by only a few in the profession. Already before entering Singha Durbar Professor Khanal had acquired a critical and contemplative frame of mind. Moreover, his academic background had nothing provincial about it. He began as a brilliant Sanskrit scholar only to emerge as a keen student of English literature with a chequered interlude of honours studies in Chemistry.

“What strikes us about Professor Khanal’s personality, if I may use that inevitable word, is that his official status as ex-ambassador to India or as Foreign Secretary to His Majesty’s Government, is the least obtrusive component of his public image. To many who are outside the Establishment he looms larger and taller as a literary critic, theoretical and practical teacher, writer or intellectual, a public figure honouring public functions and celebrations with unassuming speeches or by contributing seasoned writings to the special issues of our esteemed journals in Nepali and English. What distinguishes Professor Khanal from the rest of the crowd that walk in and out of Singha Durbar every day is the catholicity of his outlook and the range of his interests and activities, both social and intellectual. A foreign secretary with a lucid

cogency of thinking about the fundamentals of Nepal's foreign relations would be a much less interesting and technical figure. Yet Professor Khanal can communicate with widely divergent strata of Nepali society, speaking now on 'The Teaching of Science in Nepal', now 'On the Role of Sanskrit Today', writing now on 'The Youth in Nepal', now on 'The Poetry of Siddhicharan Shrestha.'

As a rule, honest criticism should direct its attention, as T. S. Eliot put, 'not upon the poet but upon the poetry.' But in Professor Khanal's case it is impossible and absurd to concentrate one's attention on the writings and ignore the writer. This is so because the chief distinction of his writings is in their 'transparent sincerity.'

Some of the publications of Professor Khanal:

In English:

1. Reflections on Nepal-India Relations, New Delhi: Author, 1964.
2. Stray Thoughts, New Delhi: Author, 1965.
3. Nepal Transition from Isolationism, Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan, 1977.
4. Essays in Nepal's Foreign Affairs, Kathmandu: Murari Prasad Upadhyaya, 1988.
5. Nepal after Democratic Restoration, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1996
6. Nepal's Non-Isolationist Foreign Policy, Kathmandu: Satyal Prakashan, 2000.

This was a compendium of the first five books plus an introduction and an epilogue, but all of them are out of print.

In Nepali:

1. Samalochanako Siddhanta (First published by Nepali Bhasha Prakashini Samiti in 2003 B.S. (1946 A.D.) and then by Sajha Prakashan 2033 B.S. (1976 A.D.).
2. Sahityik Charcha, Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan, 2034 B.S. (1977 A.D.).
3. Nepali Bhaminibilas, Kathmandu: Unnayan Prakashan, 2055 B.S. (1998 A.D.).

In Sanskrit:

1. Suktisanachayah, Kathmandu: Author, 2032, 2046, 2047 editions.

