

# Rishikesh Shaha: A Historical Perspective

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## Background

We must reflect upon the historical background of Nepal's foreign policy and diplomacy, particularly at the United Nations (UN), to properly understand Rishikesh Sahah (1925-2002) as a diplomat and politician. Shaha's main contribution of public interest is related mainly to his role as Nepal's permanent representative at the United Nations.

During the Rana period, Nepal had the policy of keeping the country isolated from the rest of the world for fear of meddling by the British. Janga Bahadur, the first Rana Prime Minister, had himself led the troops to assist the British colonialists in India to quell the police munity of 1857 and firmly expressed his assurance that there was no need for them to enter Nepal for any reason as they could benefit from Nepal without the need to colonize the country. Both the Ranas and the British colonial rulers in India had a common interest in keeping Nepal isolated from others but in close contact with British India for their own reasons.

It is said that Nepal lost a total of about 60,000 soldiers in World War I and II. But, even as a sovereign independent state, Nepal did not participate in the San Francisco conference in 1945 to draft the Charter of the United Nations although it could have legitimately participated and become one of the founding members of the world organization. It was a missed opportunity.

## Nepal at the UN

In view of the new international situation after the Second World War, particularly the impending independence of India in 1947, Nepal applied for the membership of the UN in 1947, which it was unable to secure owing to the Cold War politics. According to Shaha, Nepal's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1956-1960),

“In 1947, even the question of Nepal's admission to the United Nations became a part of the greater Cold War issue which completely dominated the thinking of great powers at the time. However, in December 1955, eight years after she first applied for membership, Nepal was admitted to the United Nations with twelve other countries as a result of the so-called ‘package deal’. Even the Soviet Union, which had doomed Nepal's previous membership application

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by veto in the Security Council, made it clear that she had had no objection individually to the admission of Nepal. Her objection had been that other similarly qualified countries were not allowed membership.” (Shaha, 1978:148).<sup>1</sup>

Nepal had three main objectives for membership in the world organization. Firstly, Nepal wanted to leave the era of isolationism that kept the country almost unknown to the international community for a century despite its active involvement in the two world wars. Secondly, Nepal wanted to project its image as an independent sovereign nation especially in the context where it looked as if it was a part of India during the British colonial rule. So, Nepal, and its nationalistic and proud people, wanted to dispel any doubt about its independence. Thirdly, Nepal wanted to play a role in its own modest capacity to build its image as a responsible member of international community through the UN, which it did.

**Shaha’s Education and career.** Rishikesh Shaha was born in a noble family on 26 May, 1925 as the first son of Raja Tarak Bahadur Shaha and Madan Dibyeshwari Shaha (daughter



*Photo Credit, The White House Photo*

*Rishikesh Shaha, the first Permanent Representative of Nepal to the UN and first resident Ambassador to the United States, with President John F Kennedy at the White House*

<sup>1</sup> Nepal was admitted as a member of the UN together with Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Laos, Libya, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sri Lanka (Ceylon at that time)– all on the same date (14 December 1955).

of Pratap Shamsher Rana) in Tansen, a hill city in Palpa district. Tarak Bahadur was a descendant of a Raja or chieftain of a principality of Bhirkot (now a village in Syangja district) in central Nepal. Educated in Kathmandu and Calcutta, Shaha had a bachelor's degree and was rewarded with a job as an aide to his father-in-law Pratap Shamsher Rana, the Bada Hakim (Chief Administrator) of that region.

Shaha's family was well-off thanks to its relationship with the ruling Ranas that helped him get a good education in Darjeeling, India. After completing high school, Shaha returned to Kathmandu in 1939 and pursued an intermediate degree in humanities at Tri-Chandra College, Kathmandu, and later obtained a B. A. degree from Calcutta, India. He obtained his M. A. degree in English from Patna University in 1945 and began teaching English and Nepali at Tri-Chandra College. He was married to Siddhanta Rana in 1946 and his only son Shri Prakash was born in 1948.

Shaha discontinued teaching and was appointed as the Chief Inspector of Schools, which he also left to begin his political career as a founding member of Nepali Democratic Congress. He was also one of the founding members of Nepal Council of World Affairs in 1948. Shaha was nominated as the leader of opposition in the First Advisory Council (a nominated legislature formed by King Tribhuvan) in 1950-1952. He served as General Secretary of Nepali Democratic Congress in 1953-1955.

**Ambassador to USA and the UN.** Shaha was appointed as the first resident ambassador to the United States and the permanent representative to the UN by King Mahendra in October 1956. He served in the capacity until December 1960. Just as Shaha began his tenure at the UN activities in 1956 he was required to engage on issues such as the Suez Crisis and the Soviet action in Hungary. Probably, nothing can be a more vivid and honest description of Nepal's initial exposure to, and its position on the serious issues of the day at the UN than the autobiographical reminiscence of Rishikesh Shaha himself. His meeting with Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld was scheduled at 2:30 p.m. the same day of his arrival in New York. Shaha (1997:3-5) wrote:

The secretary general received me informally in his office on the 38th floor of the UN Building and told me that I could not have arrived at more exciting time! He sent for the UN chief of protocol and the formality of submitting my credentials was soon dispensed with. Immediately after this, we went to attend the Security Council meeting which had been called to deal with the Suez flare-up triggered by the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt.

Great Britain and France, two of the major world powers and permanent members of the Security Council, clearly seemed to be on the defensive. Arab countries, which had sought permission to be heard at the Security Council meeting, took turns in castigating Israel (for providing the pretext for intervention), Britain and France for intervention. Britain and France pleaded that they had only resorted to armed intervention to prevent the two warring sides – Egypt and Israel – from fighting each other, and claimed that by their bold action they merely sought to promote the UN goal of stopping war and promoting peace. The pleas of Great Britain and France did not seem to cut ice with either of the superpowers.

That very evening, a major issue related to the holding of the immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of the invading troops under the UN supervision came up for a vote. I had the privilege of seeing the US and USSR representatives raising their hands on the same side of the issue, a memorable sight, which even the old-timers at the UN had seldom before witnessed.

Because Great Britain and France had used their veto, the Security Council became paralyzed. With the failure of the Security Council to take action in the urgent matter, Secretary General Hammarskjold elected to convene the first emergency special session of the General Assembly. Under the procedure provided for by the famous “Uniting for Peace Resolution”, adopted in 1950, during the Korean crisis, matter for war and peace could be referred to the General Assembly for action if the

Security Council could not reach a decision on them. The secretary general’s initiative received a good deal of criticism but was entirely justified by the concrete results it produced in the end.”

The purpose of quoting such a long passage from Shaha is to show not only how quick, efficient, and principled the action taken by its illustrious Secretary General was, but also how Nepal’s fresh new Ambassador was, upon arrival, exposed to very serious and historically significant issues and had to take a decision of vote on them. To explain this point further and reinforce its implication Shaha (1997:6-7) wrote:

“The first emergency special session of the UN General Assembly convened the next day to consider the Suez crisis. It was followed by a second emergency session called to deal with the armed Soviet intervention in Hungary. We had to cope simultaneously with the two emergency special sessions. And there we were a two-man Nepali delegation with no previous experience with the work of the UN or in that of any diplomatic mission; with no office, no secretaries no typists and no means of communicating with our government except through letters and telegrams. All that I can say now is that we survived the ordeal. We made our statements on behalf of the government of Nepal like representatives of other like-minded governments did condemning the Anglo-French-Israeli armed intervention in Egypt and the Soviet armed intervention in Hungary. But I got into trouble with both my home government and my Indian friends when I chose to vote for the U. S. resolution condemning Soviet armed intervention in Hungary. Although India abstained from the vote, Burma and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) went along with me in voting for the U. S. resolution. My explanation of my vote gained publicity for Nepal, and the other powers saw that even India could not always take Nepal for granted. My statement was brief and merely explained that our vote was guided by the consideration that what had happened in Hungary might happen to other countries, including my own.”

Shaha had begun his statement on the Hungary issues in the following way:

“We know that the United Nations remains yet to be perfected as an instrument of protecting legitimate freedom and the interests of the small nations against being encroached upon by the



mighty and the rich. But however imperfect an instrument the United Nations may be, for this purpose it is the only one to which small nations like mine can have recourse in their times of their trial and distress. The price that Hungary had to pay for the profession of her neutrality and freedom had yet, in another way, a special significance and meaning to a country like mine that believes in a policy of non-alignment and no military pacts of any kind and seeks to pursue an independent foreign policy of judging every international issue on its merit, without committing itself beforehand to any course of action for or against anyone.” (8 December, 1959.)

This statement had articulated the most notable points of Nepal’s foreign policy: (1) Nepal’s faith in the UN, (2) freedom and security of small nations like Nepal, and (3) non-alignment and its meaning, namely, “judging every international issue on its merit, without committing itself beforehand to any course of action for or against anyone.” What is notable is that Shaha was espousing the policy of non-alignment in 1959, well before the first summit of the group of countries that was held in 1961.

The two long excerpts from Shaha clearly indicate that those early votes on very serious international issues had most reasonably set the tone of Nepal’s diplomatic behavior at the UN for the days to come. Thus, Nepal had established its independent and impartial image that earned it high respect from the international community. This was further proven by the fact that Shaha was asked to chair the international commission appointed by the UN General Assembly in 1961 to investigate the circumstances of the death of Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold. Shaha (1997:7) wrote,

“I am glad that for the duration of my active association with the UN from 1956 through 1960 it continued its vigorous and dynamic role in world politics under a very able and dedicated secretary general who had a rare combination of qualities: the practical skill and efficiency of an administrator; the moral courage of a philosopher; the restraint and a vision of a statesman; and the imagination of a poet.”

Shaha was widely recognized for having done a good job at the UN. The TIME magazine on its 24 October, 1960 issue wrote the following:

“The year 1960 may come to be known as the year neutralism became respectable.... The Big Five of neutralism – Tito of Yugoslavia, Nehru of India, Nkruma of Ghana, Nasser of Egypt, and Sukarno of Indonesia – are magnetic, colorful, and messianic personalities, but too much so. The most effective work has been done by second-echelon diplomats: men like Burma’s U Thant, Nepal’s Rishikesh Shaha and Tunisia’s Mongi Slim.”

Shaha has also recounted some of his experience after he was stabbed by hoodlums in New York’s Central Park, and had to be hospitalized for two weeks. According to him, the incident had put him on the front page of New York Times. He jokingly said, “I got more publicity from this incident than any other activity at the UN.” US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles flew to New York to visit Shaha in the hospital and, of course, the Mayor of the city, Robert Wagner also came to see him and apologized for the unfortunate incident.

Shaha’s another memorable experience was his spirited exchange with Nikita Khrushchev who had banged the desk of his UN seat with his shoe. It was not an act that behoved of a

leader of such a great nation as the Soviet Union, nor was it appropriate to the decorum of the meeting of an august world body such as the UN (Shaha, 1997:15-21). Shaha had spoken against the unruly behavior. On serious questions such as the three Secretary Generals at the UN, as proposed by the Soviet Union, Shaha expressed Nepal's reservation saying it was an impractical proposition. Khrushchev did not like Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold but Shaha defended him as no one else could have done a better job in the given situation.

On the question of decolonization, Khrushchev wanted to present a resolution in his name, but Shaha told him that there was no system of passing a resolution at the UN in the name of a 'person' although the idea of defoliation was welcomed by everyone if it came on behalf of a 'state'. He was furious with Shaha but B. P. Koirala later told Khrushchev that whatever the Nepali diplomat was saying was according to the policy of the Government of Nepal.

**Subsequent political and academic activities.** When King Mahendra took over all powers from the government, imprisoned all political leaders, dissolved the parliament and banned political parties on 15 December, 1960, Shaha was asked to return and was appointed as Minister of Finance. Later in May 1962 he was appointed as Chairman of the Royal Commission to draft a constitution along the lines approved by the King. He had also served briefly as minister of foreign affairs from July 1, 1962 for about three months. In September 1962 he visited New Delhi and spent two weeks meeting with Prime Minister Nehru and other leaders of India to try to ease tensions in Nepal-India relations at the wake of King Mahendra's dissolution of elected parliament and the subsequent raids in the Tarai districts by Nepali Congress volunteers.

Upon his return from India, Shaha was relieved of his position as foreign minister. Next, he was appointed as special ambassador with ministerial rank and sent to the UN General Assembly as the leader of Nepali delegation in 1962. On this trip, he also went to Washington D. C. to meet with President Kennedy and his special assistant McGeorge Bundy and requested them to urge moderation on Prime Minister Nehru.

As Shaha was returning to Kathmandu via New Delhi, the Sino-Indian border clash had already taken place (October 20-November 21, 1962). In this new context, he found that his Indian friends were very eager to offer assurances that King Mahendra wanted from India. Nepal was passing through a difficult situation in its relations with its immediate neighbors at that time. So, Shaha visited China, starting on 22 November. There, he was told by Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice Premier Marshal Chen Yi that "China wanted Nepal to be friendly with India without being hostile to China." Thereafter, Shaha was appointed as member of the Raj Sabha (Royal Council) on 2 April, 1963 by King Mahendra. He resigned from the position and was appointed as Chairman of the Raj Sabha Sthayi Parishad (Standing Committee of Royal Council) for the period 1963-1964.

Thereafter, with no government responsibilities, Shaha took to academic work for a year and was a Senior Fellow at East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii in 1965-1966. He wrote the first draft of his book, *Nepali Politics: Retrospect and Prospect* there. Shaha participated in the Conference of South and South-East Asian experts on International Law held in Hong

Kong in 1964 and 1967. He also participated in the regional conference of the International Commission of Jurists in September 1968 in Bangalore.

Shaha returned to active politics and contested in the election to the Rashtriya Panchayat (National Assembly) from the Graduates' Constituency in 1967 and served as a member until 1971. Even as a member of the National Assembly, he was imprisoned under the Security Act during 1969-70 for his statements in favor of freedom of speech and peaceful assembly as fundamental human rights of the people. He had pleaded for his own defense at the Supreme Court. His statement in the Court was published as a booklet entitled सार्वजनिक सुरक्षा कानून र बन्दीप्रत्यक्षीकरण. Upon release, he took to the academic world again and was a visiting professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1971.

Shaha was Chairman of Nepal Council of World Affairs (NCWA) in 1973, of which he was a founding member since 1948. He was also Chairman of Amnesty International Nepal Chapter in 1973-76. At the time he was also Founding Chairman of Nepal Wildlife Conservation Trust. In 1974, however, he was arrested and imprisoned on treason charges. Upon release, he served as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D. C. in 1975, when he refined his draft of *Nepali Politics: Retrospect and Prospect*, the first edition of which was published in 1975 and the second in 1978.

Shaha continued to be active in politics. Even though King Birendra had organized a national referendum in 1980 and the results had favored the continuation of the party-less Panchayat system, Shaha founded in 1982 an organization named Rastriya Lokatantrik Samajvadi Sammelan that was like a political forum, and called for the restoration of (multi-party) democracy in the country. He was arrested on charge of organizing a political party by the Bagmati Zonal Court, and again under the Security Act and released in May 1989. When the multi-party democracy was finally restored in 1990 following nation-wide protests, Shaha formed a 71-Member National Task Force to make the general elections independent and impartial on April 1, 1991. He was also chair of Human Rights Organization, Nepal (HURON).

Shaha was decorated with Gorkha Dakshin Bahu I and Trishakti Patta I by King Mahendra. Having traveled to many countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America on diplomatic missions and for research, Shaha participated in many regional and international conferences as well.

**Shaha's publications.** Rishikesh Shaha was a scholar and prolific writer on history, politics, and foreign relations of Nepal. Some of his publications are listed below.

- *Nepal and the World*, Kathmandu: Nepali Congress, with the foreword by B. P. Koirala. 1955.
- *Heroes and Builders of Nepal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- पद्मपुष्पाञ्जली (विश्वकविताका नमुना); काठमाडौं: श्रीमती सिद्धान्त शाह, वि. सं. २०२१।
- सार्वजनिक सुरक्षा कानून र बन्दीप्रत्यक्षीकरण, काठमाडौं: लेखक स्वयम्, सन् १९६९।
- *Notes on Hunting and Wildlife Conservation in Nepal*, Kathmandu: Mrs. Siddhanta Shaha, 1970; 2nd ed. New Delhi: Nirala Publications, 2001.
- इकबाल र नजरूल: एक परिचय, काठमाडौं: पाकिस्तानको दूतावासद्वारा प्रकाशित, सन् १९७१।
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- *Nepali Politics: Retrospect and Prospect*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. First ed. 1975; 2nd ed. 1978.
- *Essays in the Practice of Government in Nepal*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1982.
- *Three Decades and Two Kings: Eclipse of Nepal's Partyless Monarchic Rule*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited. 1990.
- *Politics in Nepal: Referendum Stalemate and Triumph of People Power*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1990.
- *Modern Nepal* (2 Vols.), New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1990, (Reprinted 1996).
- *Human Rights and Parliamentary Practices in Nepal: DREFDEN Paper III*, Kathmandu: Development Research for a Democratic Nepal (DREFDEN). 1995.
- *New Directions in Nepal-Indian Relations*, New Delhi: Nirala Publications, 1995.
- *Ancient and Medieval Nepal*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1997.
- *Looking back at my own Career: Autobiography*, Kathmandu: Pilgrims Books House, 1997.

Besides, Shaha published dozens of articles in newspapers and journals in Nepal, India, and USA. He also participated in many international organizations and delivered lectures at various forums. However, his role in the United Nations was probably the most important highlight of his diplomatic career.

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