

Massacre at the Palace



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by Jonathan Gregson

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On June 1, 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra of Nepal shot and killed his father, mother, brother, sister and five other members of the royal family, including himself. For most observers, the massacre was an unfathomable atrocity. But as Gregson shows in this labyrinthine analysis of Nepal's monarchy, the catastrophe was wholly in keeping with the family's bloody history. The Shah dynasty first consolidated power over Nepal in the late 1700s, and the succeeding generations saw courtly intrigues, exiles, executions and palace bloodbaths (including the 1846 Kot Massacre, in which over 30 aristocrats and extended royalty perished). More than one junior queen was forced to perform sati (ritual immolation) so that she could not provide an alternate line of heirs to the throne. The weight of this tortured ancestry, Gregson maintains, came fully to bear on Prince Dipendra. Prohibited from marrying the woman he loved, he became increasingly frustrated and infatuated with alcohol, hashish and guns; eventually he decided to destroy his "dysfunctional family" with a shotgun and an M-16. Gregson, a British journalist born and raised in Calcutta, knows his subject well. Unfortunately, many readers will find themselves lost in the first half of the book, which meticulously tracks 200 years of obscure dynastic politics. The concluding sections are more intelligible and dramatic, however, especially the massacre scene itself. Overall, this is a fine resource for anyone with a serious interest in a terrible royal tragedy. 8 pages of b&w photos not seen by PW.