

## BOOK REVIEW

*Muna Madan. A Play in the Jhyaure Folk Tradition* by Laxmi Prasad Devkota. Translated from the Nepali by Ananda P. Shrestha. Nirala Publications, New Delhi and Jaipur, 1995. Pages 56.

The title of this book is misleading: although it is certainly a narrative, *Muna Madan* is not a play. This 40-page poem is the best-selling and most widely-known work in the whole of twentieth-century Nepali literature. Devkota, the greatest writer Nepal has yet produced, declared from his deathbed in 1959 that everything else he had written might be burned so long as *Muna Madan* was spared. Sixty years after its composition, Nepali literature has changed beyond recognition, and *Muna Madan* is one of a handful of key texts that mark decisive turns in the course of its evolution. It is a work of great charm set to the musical rhythm of the *jhyaure* metre of folksongs: the texture of its language is rich but wholly colloquial, and the messages it conveys, whether overtly or implicitly, tell us a great deal about the inner mind of Devkota and the outer realities of Nepal. It is in fact highly significant as a marker of the prevalent trend of cultural change in 20th-century Nepal. Devkota took a Newari folktale that sprang from an essentially Buddhist context, and reworked and embellished it. He 'Nepali-ised' and 'Hindu-ised' it so that it no longer spoke only to its Newar Buddhist constituency, but held a wealth of meaning for Nepali-speaking Hindus too. The poem richly deserves an audience beyond the confines of the Nepali-speaking world as well, and in fact this is the third English translation to appear.

*Muna Madan* tells the story of Madan, a young man from Kathmandu who has resolved to travel to Lhasa to seek his fortune. He is driven by his desire to grant his aged mother her final wishes and pay off his family's debts. His wife, Muna, fears that he will never return and begs him not to go, but he sets out none the less. Madan does indeed make a fortune in Lhasa, but stays longer than intended before heading for home with his bags of gold and musk. On the way home he falls ill and is rescued by a humble Tibetan, a kind of 'Himalayan Samaritan', to use David Rubin's words. When he does eventually reach home he finds his mother on the point of dying and discovers that his wife has already died of a broken heart. Unable to face life

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without them, he too passes away at the end of the poem. Most Nepalis will know the plot well, and will also be aware of the marvellous way in which Devkota paints in the detail.

Having read the first page of the 'Foreword' by Yuyutsu R. D. several times, I still am not sure what it is that Yuyutsu R. D. is trying to describe:

'An awe (sic) enveloped the gathering. Beyond the solemn sea of innocent faces, my eyes reached for some blue hillrange to avoid a breakdown....'

'...Somewhere in the gathering of emotionally surcharged (sic) students sat my own Sriju, sullen. "What am I to speak now?" A terror seized me.'

My guess is that Yuyutsu R. D. is describing an occasion (real or imagined?) on which he (or some one else?) unveiled a bust or statue of a poet (possibly Devkota?) But this is not at all clear, and before we can gather our wits we are on to a eulogy of the book in question: *Muna Madan*, Yuyutsu R. D. tells us, 'guides and controls the moral and social lives of the Nepalese people', whether in 'battlefields of Folkland, restaurants of New Delhi, lice-infested wine-shops of Kathmandu...' As we pause to wonder where 'Folkland' is, or which Kathmandu bar the publisher is maligning, we are informed that 'some mediocre hacks from the London School of Oriental Studies might call it a romantic tragedy. It's not!' Who are these second-rate journalists? Where, indeed, is the 'London School of Oriental Studies'? Shame upon them all, anyway. Once Mr. Yuyutsu R. D. has finished with the purple prose and the airing of odd and inexplicable grievances, he provides us with a few helpful comments about the poem, although a great deal is left unsaid. His remarks about the significance of dreams and omens in the poem are well-placed, and his point about love not being its major motif is valid. His arguments might actually be aimed at my own description of *Muna Madan*, in which I stated that the poem was 'primarily a romantic tragedy', but then went on to detail all the features which made it rather more than that (*Himalayan Voices* (Berkeley 1991), p. 42). If so, Yuyutsu R. D. seems not to have read the rest of my paragraph, because he goes on to make exactly the same points I myself made about the poem's philosophical content, and ends by saying that Devkota made 'tragedy intense and inevitable'. A narrative poem in which three of the four characters lie dead at the end does seem rather tragic to me, and part of Devkota's significance is that he took the influence of the English Romantic movement and transposed it to an authentically

Nepalese context. *Muna Madan* is not just a romantic tragedy, it is much more: there is really no need to contrive an artificial disagreement about this.

The biographical sketch of Devkota contains many errors: Devkota went into exile in Banaras in 1947, not in 1934 as stated; the 'advent of democracy' occurred in 1950/51, not in 1957; and the supposed 'influence [on Devkota] of great Nepali poet Gopal Prasad Rimal' is given more prominence than it deserves.

The translator of a poem such as this faces a daunting task. There are I think three elements that ask to be transposed from the Nepali into (in this case) the English. The first is its actual *meaning*. Obviously, this can be translated mechanically as long as the translator has a thorough command of both languages. But the text in question is a work of poetry, and readers of the translation should be aware of this; they might also like to know that it is in rhyming, metrical verse. So the second element is the translation's *form*. Finally, it should be clear from the *tone* of the translation that the poem is not a mere ditty, and that it makes forceful social comments and asks profound questions about the nature of life, love, duty, faith and patriotism. In my view, it is impossible to preserve all three elements and thereby recreate *Muna Madan* in its entirety in English. To produce a rhyming, metrical translation, one has to take liberties with the literal meaning and content, either by adding extraneous words and phrases, or by leaving out parts of the original. If one decides that the meaning is all, there can be only an occasional rhyme or half-rhyme. The tone is the subtlest element. It was possible for Devkota to write in rhyming metrical Nepali and still to sound profound. But English rhyming couplets run the risk of making the poem sound childish: a subtler rhyme scheme is required. Ananda Shrestha writes a short introductory note in which he describes the difficulties he faced with refreshing honesty, saying 'I have ambitiously attempted to maintain both the sense and sound of the original', while admitting that he has at times 'interwoven' words to aid him in this. Having recently completed my own translation of the poem, I have the greatest sympathy for Shrestha. But I am afraid that what he does rather more than one would wish is to cut the content of lines, or extend them with irrelevant or redundant words and phrases, in order to make them rhyme and scan. It does not matter that the syntax required of the English is sometimes tortuous, nor that some of Devkota's most memorable phrases are lost in the process: the rhyme and the scan are all.

The omissions rob readers of much of the richness of the Nepali original. For example, Madan uses many epithets for Muna in the dialogue between them that precedes his departure for Tibet. In the line '*he merī munā! nabhana tyaso, jūnamā phulekī!*' he addresses her as *jūnamā phulekī*, a

flower that blooms in the moonlight—a rare and unique thing—but the translation gives us only the bland ‘dearest’, in order that ‘fret’ (‘Don’t say that my Muna, oh dearest do not fret’) can rhyme with ‘forget’ in the next line. Later, Madan calls her ‘Nāgakanyā’ (*‘he nāgakanyā pahād nādī!’*) but this is ignored and the redundant words ‘my love, my dear’ are introduced instead to help the line scan (‘Muna my love, my dear, come not to mountainous land’). Madan also asks Muna to stay behind with his mother, so that his mother can enjoy the sight of her ‘moon-face’ (*‘tī herī basun yo candramuhāra’*), but the translation only gives us ‘Stay with her my dear, do not leave her side’.

On other occasions, Shrestha chooses to replace metaphors and similes that are unmistakably Indo-Nepali with formulae which he perhaps imagines will make more sense to the English reader. Again, this robs the poem of some of the Nepali flavour for which it is famed, and undermines Yuyutsu R. D.’s reference in the Foreword to the importance of ‘natural images central to the Nepalese brainscape’. For instance, when Madan assures Muna that he will return, using the metaphor of the *cakhevā* bird (unpoetically, the ‘ruddy goose’ in English) whose devotion to his mate is proverbial, Shrestha gives us ‘And like a homing pigeon I’ll be home some day’, which misses the point completely. Similarly, when Madan asks Muna to smile as she bids him farewell, (*‘anāra-dānā dāmīkā lahara kholera hāmsana’*) he likens her teeth to pomegranate seeds. But Shrestha cannot scan his line with pomegranate seeds, and opts for ‘Let me see the rows of pearls that glitter when you smile’.

Sometimes, Shrestha over-interprets, making prosaic in the translation what was poetic in the Nepali. One of the most potent images of the poem is of the sun setting while Madan lies dying of cholera, alone in the forests of Tibet, (*‘paścimatira dinakā āmkhā ragatamā dubechan’*, literally ‘in the west the eyes of the day have sunk in blood’). This is rendered ‘The day ending in the west, had turned a bloody red.’ Devkota did not use the word ‘red’ here, but conveyed an image of the sun sinking into the blood-red colours of sunset, overlaid in the use of the word *ragata* with intimations of death and ending. One would not know this from the translation.

Although some terms and references that might be obscure to non-Nepalis are half-explained in very brief footnotes, many are not. For instance, no care is taken to identify the various monuments of Lhasa that are mentioned in the poem. The line ‘Amban, Linkor, and Yutok Shyampa all had a lovely gleam’ does not enlighten the reader as to what these are. Are they buildings? people? subspecies of a particularly glimmery yak? As regards the first, the Nepali actually reads *ambānko mahal* : ‘the Ambans’ palace’, the Ambans being representatives of the Chinese emperors.

The most famous lines of the whole poem deserve careful and accurate translation, but Shrestha gives us the following travesty: 'Dirt of the hand's, a bag of gold, what use is it in kind? It's better to eat nettles and greens with a peace of mind.' It is not clear at all that wealth is being equated with the dirt on one's hands in the first line, in the sense that it is of no real value, and is quickly gone. The words 'in kind' are wholly redundant, serving only to achieve the rhyme, and 'a peace of mind' is simply bad grammar, hinting at what this publisher might expect to receive from his more discerning readers.

This review comes from one who has grappled with the same problems that Ananda Shrestha has faced but has arrived at different solutions, and is therefore more greatly concerned than the average 'charmed tourist' to read translations that are both accurate and sympathetic. I disagree with Shrestha's approach to the translation of *Muna Madan*, because I believe that he has tried to achieve the impossible, and has inevitably failed rather more than he has succeeded. This is a personal point of view, and is perhaps a matter of a taste as much as anything else, for there are things to praise in this translation too. The occasional verse from Shrestha's translation does spring out at one as an example of skillful translation within these metrical constraints:

'T'd love to see your hands adorned, in ornaments of gold,  
And build our crumbling house anew, for debt has made it old'.

– Michael Hutt

## BOOK REVIEW

*Bhutan: A Movement in Exile*. D.N.S. Dhakal and Christopher Strawn. Nirala Publications., Jaipur, 1994. Pages 631. Price: ICRs. 495 IC.

Except for articles in journals and newspapers and some pamphlets put out by human rights organisations, there has been no exhaustive publication to date on Bhutanese refugees as such that effectively publicizes and promotes their cause in the camps of Jhapa, Nepal at the international level. Though Bhutanese refugees now number some 90,000 plus, almost as much as the Tibetan refugees in Nepal, they have yet to receive the political support of the international community anywhere matching the economic support they have been receiving from various social service organisations the world over. The book under review entitled *Bhutan: A Movement in Exile* by D.N.S. Dhakal and Christopher Strawn is probably the first exhaustive publication on the Bhutanese refugees crisis which could well provide the much needed publicity and information to the world at large as to what triggered the crisis and what the probable solution to it could be. The book is published with the firm intention of filling this information void and making heard "the anguished cry of a vanquished population rendered homeless by an unjust system."

The book is basically divided into five major sections. The first section, heavily drawn from the literature of Michael Aris and Leo Rose (who the authors feel are critical and relatively impartial compared to other writers on Bhutan) highlights Bhutan's ethnic mosaic, the history of Bhutan and the evolution of modern political institutions. The second part, as the authors themselves state, "is an amalgam of documented trends and personal accounts which form a basic, but not scrupulously precise history of Southern Bhutan and the Southern Bhutanese." It deals with Nepali migration to Bhutan, Nepali Bhutanese political activity, and the integration of Southern Bhutan. The third part, a crucial section of the book, is basically the refugees' side of the story drawn from interviews with them and reports by various organisations. It graphically brings into focus the seeds of dissent, the genesis of the Bhutanese refugee crisis, the government strategy, the crackdown, refugee problems and political parties and human rights groups. The fourth section provides an insight into the perceived fears of the Nepalese

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Bhutanese, elites, traditionalists and bureaucratic politics, the king in the crisis, and the foreigner's impact. The fifth section examines Bhutan and hill politics, Nepal and Greater Nepal and Bhutan and Indian policy. The volume includes full references, bibliography and end notes.

Though the publication comprises documentation and analysis of Bhutan and the empirical data on the subject so far available, along with the nature of the democratic movement, one cannot help doubting the objectivity of the work as one of the authors is a full-time executive of a dissident organisation. Therefore it is possible that he is more sympathetic towards the cause of the refugees and dissident viewpoints. No doubt, Bhutanese government sources, especially the *kuensel*, the country's only newspaper, the dialogue and resolutions of Bhutan's National Assembly, and books and pamphlets published by the government have been used; but these are relatively scanty and thus gives the impression of being deliberately downplayed to present the refugees in a more favourable light. Moreover, why the authors refrained from analysing the reasons behind the Bhutanese government's Southern policy, could for the wrong reasons add further strength to this argument.

The fifth section of the book, however, is a scholarly piece of writing and provides a critical and analytical glimpse into regional politics which encompass Nepal, and parts or the whole of Nepali dominated Indian states and the Indian Union. This includes the 1975 merger of Sikkim with India, the violent 1986-88 Gorkha National Liberation Front uprising, and the difficult situation that the whole crisis has put Nepal into vis-a-vis the "Greater Nepal" bogey now being ruthlessly whipped up by Bhutan. There is however, a great deal of truth in the argument that India is capable of intervening and influencing the crisis and bringing it to at least some kind of resolution. But why India has refrained from doing so until now and has maintained instead a pregnant silence on the issue, knowing fully well that the "quiet" diplomacy it suggested to Kathmandu and Thimphu is bound to fail, is mystifying to say the least. Right now India is playing its cards very close to its chest, and both Nepal and Bhutan must realise that if they bring India to play mediator, it will do so only with its vital interests in mind. The book deftly brings home this point and it will be worthwhile for both governments to remember this and come together – no matter how difficult – when they meet for the next round of talks. The proposal of course requires sacrifice from both sides, and the authors correctly point out that it will be to Bhutan's disadvantage if the crisis remains unresolved or partially resolved. An unconventional approach to the refugee crisis – no matter how long or tedious – could be the only permanent solution, and the countries involved will have to pursue it religiously with both political and diplomatic finesse.

In a publication of this nature photographs could have played a vital role in promoting the viewpoints propounded within its pages. But the photographs provided are not only drastically insufficient but also of poor washed-out quality which can hardly reflect the plight of the refugees in the camps of Jhapa. Moreover, the abundance of errors – grammatical and otherwise – seriously mars the quality of a volume which is otherwise a goldmine of information for policy makers, diplomats and scholars interested in Bhutan; its socio-political crisis and the impact that the democratic movement is likely to have on the politics and peace of the South Asian Region.

– Ananda P. Shrestha



## BOOK REVIEW

*Social History of Nepal*. T.R. Vaidya, Triratna Manandhar and Shankar Lal Joshi. Anmol Publication, New Delhi, 1993. Pages 336. Price NC Rs. 400/-.

Until a couple of decades back, Nepalese history was virtually based solely on political affairs, where a few foreign scholars wrote the history from literary sources that considered history as only the work and lineages of kings and chieftains. Thereafter, Nepalese history and in its every aspect is being rediscovered by the efforts of Nepali scholars regarding the reading and translation of inscriptions and written documents. The very ancient period, however, remains obscure because we are forced to sketch our imagination solely from the literary sources and legendary traditions. Many Lichchhvi, Malla and Shah inscriptions are being recovered and published by Nepali scholars to endorse the various aspects of our past. The existing narrower view of our past history is now being expanded to embrace the social aspects and different life styles of the people. The social history of Nepal allows us to know our present condition and its cultural and social behaviours. Nepali society is heterogenous, where various groups and their behaviours are reflected in each of the country's unique languages, dresses, food habits and cultural traditions. It is, therefore, important to observe the historical view of our own society.

The book under review *Social History of Nepal* is written by three scholars, presenting an important theme out of their long experience in teaching history. The authors of the book candidly admit that this work was a project report submitted Research Division, Tribhuvan University in 1986. But, it is no doubt the only book ever written in English about the social history of Nepal. The book is divided into ten chapters including the conclusion. The first chapter is an introductory which deals with the different ethnic groups of Nepal stretching from the ancient times of the Gopals, Mahispalas, Nagas, Kiratas, Koliyas, Mallas, Vajjis, Lichchhavis, Guptas, Shakyas, Khasas, Magars, Gurungs, Tharus, Chepangs, Kushandas, Derails, Newars, Muslims and Tamangs. The second chapter describes the social structure. Here the authors have laid emphasis on the change of the social structure after the penetration of Hindu values and institutions and their impacts on the autochthonous communities. The third chapter is about the

family system based on historical documents, and it sheds considerable light on the nuclear and joint family systems. The fourth chapter elaborates the habitational sites of ancient Nepal, narrated by various inscriptions and other literary sources. The fifth chapter descriptively debunks the position of women from the Lichchhavi to Rana period. The subsequent chapter deal with food habits, dresses and ornaments social entertainments, and finally, a brief discussion and conclusion of their whole analysis. Almost all sections of society, such as people, food habit, dresses and ornaments, position of women, entertainments and education are described here in detail based on available documents.

Only the inscriptions tell what the Lichchhavi society looked like, while the society of the medieval period has plentiful sources like copper plates palm leaves, *vamshavali*, and accounts of foreign visitors for unraveling the social, cultural and religious life of the people. Similarly, many documents of Rana period are found even in the government offices that make easy to sketch the social condition. That probably explains why the book is heavily concentrated on Rana period with relatively less description of Lichchhavi and least of the medieval period in its developmental stages. The makes it seem that the book is imbalanced in the combination of description of available sources.

One big problem is that the authors do not give a clear view about word 'Aryan' and 'Hindu'. In one place they specify the Aryan in the manner "in fact Aryan is one sense meant a group of tribes in an ancient world" (p. 23) and they also noted, "the Vedas also have mentioned the Anarya (non-aryan) worshipping the phallus. If we follow it those Gurungs, Magars, Mahispalas, Gopals, Kirates were not Hindu" (p.22). This seems to indicate a lack of serious consideration. In fact, Arya comprises physical character whereas the Hindu term is used by British India to distinguish and specify particular kinds of religious practitioners (e.g. idol worshiper) from other communities. If the Vedic text described the Kirat as a phallus worshippers, they could be bracketed into the ancient concept of Hindu culture. If the Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Kiratas, Bhotiyas and many other groups were non-Hindu and the process of Hinduization was started from south, the writers fail to explain about the stages of Hindu penetration in northern hilly regions. Even the authors argument that up to the early medieval period these communities (Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Kirat, Bhotiya etc.) continued to adapt their own traditional religious faiths, "the concept of Hinduization did not have much impact on them" (p. 33), are not well coordinated. In the early medieval period the influx of different communities and religious thinkers actually made a great impact on the social structure of Nepali society-the one from the south, Simaraunagarh, and other from western Nepal, thus enriching

the Hinduism in the Kathmandu Valley. Moreover, during the 14th century A.D. a Muslim invasion occurred in the Kathmandu Valley and consequently distorted the social traditions of both Hindus and Buddhists; but at the same time it provided the opportunity to accumulate two religious traditions into a single stream of tantrism. Following the Muslim invasion the different communities bound themselves in their own customs for the safety of their new-found culture. The traditions of early marriage and sati in Hindu society were the consequence impact of this invasion, just to cite two examples out of many where the authors have not paid adequate attention.

Similarly, the religious worldview that shaped the social condition through the historical ages is completely omitted by the authors, notwithstanding the authors' affirmation that "one of the reasons of stability in Nepalese society was the domination of the religion in every walk of life" (331). Moreover, it is the religious practices that governed the society in its own manners. As we come across the Nepalese society in 13th century at a time when the important educational centres like Nalanda and Takshasila were targeted by Muslim invasion, many scholars had fled away towards the north with their Buddhist tantrik texts. Buddhist bihars in Nepal at that time were educational centres where many Indian and Tibetan scholars visited to learn the lore of Tantrism. These activities made a sea of change in the society, especially in the religious sector. At the same time, Buddhist social order was also embedded in the Hindu system, and some gods and goddesses were worshipped by both communities too.

One confusing reference given by authors is "Malla Youdha kara" in their note of the tax of wrestling (p. 179). But in the Lichchhavi inscriptions the term "Malla Youdha", described along the "Go Youdha" signifying the tax imposed on the sheep fighting ceremony, however, was later used in the realm of wrestling top. The term "Malla Potakara" of the Lichchhavi inscriptions concedes this fact without any argument.

On the historical perspective of different ethnic groups the authors mentioned that 'there were many communities like Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Hindu and others who enjoyed full freedom to lead their own way of life' (32), and on the other, they (Magar, Khash, Tamang, Lama, Bhotiya) were socially, economically and political suppressed people (p. 39). This is grossly inconsistent, to say the least. So far, the study of history of Nepal relates that many ethnic groups had full freedom in their cultural, social and economic life. Even the king did not impose any hard rules and regulations against the social, economic and religious freedom of different groups. Nepalese history, in fact, drew strength from its diversity.

One of the most striking things for students and researchers of general history is the deficit in footnotes and bibliography. Therefore, it is limited on

basic information only. However, the authors' prefatory remark that 'we have suppressed the footnote and bibliographical accounts, keeping in view the length of the book is less than convincing (p.vi).

Furthermore, the authors deliberately appear to be remiss in some of the examples as state "*suruwal (tunic)*" (p. 178) and "peacocks were considered as the vehicle of goddess Lakshmi" (p. 216). In fact, *suruwal* is the lower garment of typical Nepali dress and later on is the vehicle of Kumar, the son of Lord Siva and Kumari, the Shakti goddess. Beside these, the book bears some printing errors, though the readers can themselves easily correct them while reading. These pitfalls notwithstanding, the book provides some information on the basic structure of Nepali society throughout the ages in a single treatise. In this sense, the book is useful for those students and researchers interested in this field.

- Dilli Raj Sharma