

REVIEW ARTICLE

B.P's Orality: Challenging Political Myths¹

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Atmavrittānta. Bisweswor Prasad Koirala. 2055 v.s., Jagadamba Prakashan. Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal. (In Nepali)

B.P. Koirala's orality in his recorded memoirs published under the title *Atmavrittānta* or self-narration has challenged some of the most widely held beliefs about some historical events and personalities in the most established written culture called contemporary Nepali history which is a curious blend of orality and *écriture* or writing. History assumes the role of a fundamental document of facts about persons and events with little room for questionings and revaluation. In Nepali history spheres are fixed, and each sphere is kept by a guardian angel. But orality has played an important role in shaping the nature of this strongest genre in the field of social science studies in Nepal. Politicians' personalities and historical events are reproduced on the basis of the orality recorded in the written history.

In reality, Nepali history is made by the tension between orality and *écriture*. People's oral accounts have given shape to the written history of Nepal, and the written history has created the oral myths about some persons' characters and events. The creation of myths about heroes in written history is buttressed by orality; the orally romanticized events have gone down in the written history of Nepal on more than one occasion. The stories of contemporary political heroes are orally written.

Most of the heroes who used their backgrounds to create oral myths about their characters have court backgrounds. But the position of B.P. Koirala is unique. He emerged as the plebeian's hero during 1950s for which reason his personality posed a challenge to the court heroes. They could not take it much longer. So under the leadership of Bharat Shumsher Rana a group of the counter-revolutionaries attacked his residence with an intention to kill him, but, as his colleague, the late Ganesh Man Singh, who was present there said on TV interviews, he was able to defend himself

very courageously. This incident was condoned by the Rana lame duck prime minister, Mohan Shumsher Rana. B.P. went to him directly to demand explanation, and asked for his resignation at the cabinet meeting chaired by King Tribhuvan. According to B.P., if Delhi had not saved him Mohan Shumsher would have to quit immediately. He says, "From that very evening when they attacked me I became the most powerful man of Nepal. The only difference was that I did not have an army. From that day onwards India always wanted to finish me. As such I was not on good terms with them. From that day India began to take the side of Mohan Shumsher" (p. 161).

What emerges from the written history and the orality is that B.P. was the only plebeian who effectively shook the positions of the rajas and maharajas in this country. He clashed directly with the ruling Rana personalities, demanded the resignation of Mohan Shumsher, the last Rana prime minister, on his face, and engaged King Mahendra into heated arguments.

He made his way into the world of the Shah-Rana courts as a young revolutionary in 1950. The privately guarded palaces opened for him; the crown prince Mahendra and prince Basundhara torn by love and loyalties came to seek his help; he looked at close quarters the agonies of the last dictator of the 104 year-old Rana oligarchy, spent months in cells, visited almost all the districts of this country, entered the private offices of the Indian political leader Nehru and others, made friends with the renowned socialist heroes of Europe and Asia and resisted attacks against him both by his own friends, his elder brother Matrika, his countrymen and the political leaders and governments of India. He has become a folk hero of those people who have revolutionary zeal and fought for democracy. The young communist leader C.P. Mainali calls him as one of his favourite heroes.

Atmabrittanta is the written reproduction of an orally rendered account of the times and events that B.P. saw, created and lived through—an oral account of the history of a politician already writ large in the history of Nepal. But B.P. Koirala's orality has deconstructed some well-written, deeply entrenched beliefs about himself, some well-known political personalities and his times. These accounts and confessions immediately capture the attention of the readers of these memoirs.

1. The famous Delhi Agreement of 1950 signed between King Tribhuvan, the Congress party and the Ranas was not B.P. Koirala's creation. He never supported its political methodology and implications from his heart and never liked the idea of choosing Delhi as the venue for an agreement between the parties who were all Nepalis (pp. 139-41). He had made serious efforts to choose a venue inside Nepal but failed. What

becomes clear from the orality of B.P. is that India's use of this agreement whenever any problem between the two countries arises is an absurd phenomenon and the irony of history. About the structuralism of the Delhi Agreement B.P. says, "We never had any discourse with Mohan Shumsher's group about the procedures of the agreement. Jawaharlal Nehru arbitrated through all these dialogues. Even Jawaharlal Nehru had not made any serious discussions about it. The King had not participated in any of them. If dialogues were made with the others I do not know. The so-called Delhi Agreement is a hypothetical thing. But whenever anything came up the Indian side always said to me 'it is done according to the Delhi Agreement' "(p.146).

B.P. never liked the roles the Indian ambassadors played in Kathmandu. He says, "And India had its own design on us. The Indian ambassador considered himself as bigger than the King here. I do not know what the King or the prime minister discussed with him. He called them all to his residence and made them do what he wanted" (p.152) at a time when B.P. was the fiery home minister, embodiment of the spirit of the revolution, hence a target of attacks from the reactionary forces. He openly clashed with the Indian envoys especially with C.P.N. Sinha and later with Bhagawan Sahaya. B.P. was especially irritated by the diplomatic highhandedness of the Indian diplomats. His feelings about Nehru are divided between extreme respect and bitterness.

2. The relationship between B.P. Koirala and King Mahendra were very personal and were based on very good understanding. B.P. had helped the crown prince when he was thinking of renouncing his right to the throne for the sake of his love, had taken extreme care not to offend King Mahendra when he was the prime minister of the first elected government and had held open and frank discussions about political and constitutional problems with him. After several days of the stay together with the King outside Kathmandu, B.P. says, "The King must have realized that this is an honest person. I used to discuss every problem with him." He travelled with the King for about 20 days in the Western region. He became a personal guest to the King and Queen Ratna in their cottage in Pokhara where the King confessed that B.P. was his first ever friend; the Queen wearing an ordinary shawl worked in the kitchen and cooked special meal for Koirala. The King confessed at that time that as he was born and brought up in a palace he never had met anybody who could suggest him how to find a means to express his feelings. He had a very lonely life. The King said, "No, that is not true, I have not read Camus or Sartre. And, I have read a few ordinary books

in Hindi. How could I get a chance to read them all... then he sang for me. He sang a little by playing the instrument called harmonium. I did not think it was very effective. He did not seem to have been practising singing very much. He said, "I haven't sung for quite a while. I am singing now only because you requested me to do so" (p.224). The King accepted B.P.'s suggestion to use poetry as a medium to express his feelings, and the suggestion pleased the King.

He sums up his relationship with King Mahendra as one of love and enviousness.

B.P.'s relationship with the King suffered as a result of the dubious role played by younger party colleagues of him such as Biswabandhu Thapa and Tulasi Giri. He always looked at Surya Prasad Upadhyay's role as suspicious. In his account he never sounds comfortable with his activity and sincerity whenever he mentions his name.

B.P.'s orality presents a writer's assessment of the political characters. To him a person who is committed to any ideal or has been harbouring thoughts about acquiring powers is an important landmark of the times. A character is important because his role makes an impact on the country's political, economic and cultural history. The main focus thus of this oral accounts are individuals and what roles they had played for restoring democracy and throttling its neck. King Tribhuvan, King Mahendra, his elder brother Matrika Koirala, Ganesh Man Singh, Subarna Shumsher Rana, poet Vyathit, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, Nehru and Gandhi, the last Rana prime minister, his brothers and nephews, intelligent and beautiful women, priests and soldiers, party cadres, all form the fabric of B.P.'s memoirs, and some of them appear as important characters in this country's history of the struggle for democracy. B.P. remembered, as the editors say by citing evidence, even the very ordinary incidents that happened under different conditions of individual inspiration and circumstances of the past. In this book he assesses an individual's role as very important.

B.P. presents his own individuality as a subject of historical interest. In fact, this oral accounts of his history projects his image as one of an untiring, determined and courageous albeit little self-admiring hero whose role in creating awareness among the illiterate and semi-literate people is very important. His self-criticism is equally worth noting.

B.P.'s continuous search for arms, subsequent ascendancy to the chair of Nepal's prime minister, imprisonment again, freedom and the resumption for the arms with the same fervour as in the earlier phase of his life shows the towering party leader Koirala's image as multidimensional—a messiah, a fighter for democracy, a Sisyphus who had to repeat the same rhythm

from square one again, a lonely hero with very few colleagues who would understand him, a politician whose charisma and vision had earned strong enemies both in Nepal and India, as well as friends and admirers. Ironically, the other person who underwent quite similar destiny was King Mahendra himself. B.P.'s later saga covers a period in time in Nepali history when these two lonely heroes in contemporary Nepali history with different views entered various phases of their individual and political lives.

Both the cultural and political forces inside the country rallied behind the King, who had the power and military strength, in a pattern as Gramsci says that a government adopts to wield power. But despite the hostility of some Indian leaders intoxicated by their annexation of Sikkim to the charismatic personality of this Nepali political leader whom even Mahatma Gandhi, J.P. Narayan and Nehru treated as a politician of high stature and calibre, the imprisonment and isolation inside the country, B.P. remained influential in the political scene. His power was his charisma, revolutionary spirit, his vision of democracy, and a strength to fight against the adverse political destiny, and above all, the support of the people and his party men for him. His Nepali communist compatriots too, about whom curiously enough he mentions little in his recollections, considered him as an important personality, that becomes obvious from both their appreciation and critique of his political operations and perceptions at different modes of their political activity.

He does not make a secret of his displeasure with the attitudes and working methods of his colleagues. He considers Ganesh Man as an honest and self-disciplined person. But he recalls his non-compromising nature, and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai's religious nature with particular poignancy because these were his closest colleagues and their nature stood in the way of working out a political solution to the political problems that the party was facing. He recalls his loneliness in the Sundarijal jail for that reason. He is full of admiration for Subarna Shumsher. He only recalls without colouring it with any particular feelings and judgement the departure of Subarna for Calcutta just a few days before the royal coup.

B.P. emerges as a fictional hero through his own recollections. His orality is a continuous conversation with Ganesh Raj Sharma and Shailaja Acharya with little control of the protagonist on its shape and style. The chapters in his story are not divided neatly as in his novels. Reading through the oral memoirs we can feel that B.P. Koirala has tried on a number of occasions to give his orality a shape like that of his novels. But he fails. Only his personality, his own persona lends unity to this order of events bandied about by the speaker. But events in this country and India revolve round him. His father Krishna Prasad Koirala's personality emerges

as very strong and significant in the first section of his memoirs. His father looks like his previous avatar in his accounts. He himself goes through the cycles of various avatars. His field of action is Nepal and India. He presents himself as a lonely hero in search of freedom in his own country, going around in India organizing, trying to pursue Nehru to give him arms, purchasing arms, making clandestine entries into Nepal, meeting people and organizing the party units.

B.P.'s Kathmandu experience is worth mentioning. He came to Kathmandu because there was no effective party organization there, and not to have any dedicated party workers in Kathmandu was a big drawback for the party. He recalls difficult discussions, dingy toilets, good food, and hospitality of beautiful women. But he also had a particular observation about Kathmandu that is negative. He recalls with poignancy the Kathmanduites' attitude towards Ganesh Man Singh which had not been one of co-operation (p.84). Recalling in retrospect, the Kathmanduites rejection of Ganesh Man's wife, the freedom fighter Mangala Devi, and his son Prakash Man Singh in the elections adds special significance to that displeasure of B.P. though he did not live to see the reality of the new times. But he too seems to have a certain attitude towards the Kathmanduites. His caveat is that "I was disappointed then with the Kathmandu intelligentsia and that impression has not changed even today. They continued to give unnecessary importance to trifling matters and did not let me sleep all night. Their arguments were big, but they did not give any co-operation.... I think that element is still very much entrenched in Kathmandu; it does not accept democracy; it only indulges in arguments and keeps creating difficulties by giving priority to meaningless matters" (p.83).

Many other curious and debatable points emerge in the recollections. One very important point other than the negative aspect of the Indian attitude towards Nepal and its political leaders, most importantly himself, is the British attitude towards democracy in Nepal. If Nehru had not threatened to pull out of the Commonwealth the British would have given recognition to Mohan Shumsher Rana (p.137). The outgoing British ambassador Scopes tried to convince B.P. at Sundarijal jail to accept the King's Panchayat constitution, and showed his readiness to mediate if he had wanted him to do so. B.P.'s condition was that the King should release him first. The British diplomat did not think that would be a possibility (pp.301-302). B.P. sounds disappointed by the tone of his presentation of this incident. The very fact that without working out about his release from prison the British diplomat should come to convince him to accept the King's Panchayat constitution had disappointed B.P. Koirala.

He recalls the seven years following his release with a certain sense of revaluation and emotion, "For seven years I lived in India, spoke and wrote there. And even after coming here after that I defended what I had done everywhere, including the court" (p.303). There is a wide speculation that Indira Gandhi had been forcing him to accept to become a chief minister of Nepal like Nara Bahadur Bhandari of Sikkim. That meant negotiating Nepal's freedom with India. The charismatic political leader of an independent country who was also highly respected by politicians in India, and who had scarified his entire life to establish democracy in his independent country could not have accepted that. Many people in this country remember this incident very well. But B.P. does not say anything explicitly about it. But this hint, which is not very clear, may provide some clues if what was believed then was true to that. He says, "I feel that the specialty of what happened when I returned would have been affected. But in any case, I did not accept it there" (p.303). It may be possible that what was said about Indira Gandhi's intention was not true at all.

B.P. does not mention about the border issue that he had settled with China to the chagrin of India when he was the prime minister of Nepal in 1960. His accounts of his dialogue with the Chinese prime ministe Chou-En lai and his meeting with Mao-Tse-tung are not quite as effective as they should have been. However, he says that Mao had made a great impact on him. One would expect that a politician and a novelist like B.P. would capture the giant communist leader's personality with greater insights. Kissinger has done that very effectively in his accounts of meeting him. But we can not expect a complete formal account of his meeting with Mao in these oral accounts. The orality has its own limitations and power.

But B.P.'s caveat about Indian intentions, the half-hearted support to democratic movement in Nepal from India and Britain only presents him as a lonely hero of a fiction that was being written and incidentally was never completed. Though B.P. does not mention about any of the novels and stories he wrote in prison and his feelings about the question of freedom and human destiny, ironically enough, he presents his own life as a novel, a saga of struggle, of loss and victory. His memoirs do not particularly mention about the other political leaders and their programmes, especially of the communist party leaders, and the activity of his own colleagues who chartered different courses in the following years. But that is very understandable because he was talking about his own search for meaning and freedom and his conflicts between the two courses open to him, of violence and non-violence, freedom and negotiations with a native government, and a neighbour like India. But this memoir provides a mirror to the geopolitically shaped nature of a small independent country in the early

years of the post-colonial era. And in these memoirs for the first time we share the pain experienced by a freedom fighter and get the spectrum of a society that was in a medieval state when he tried to open its doors to the world after an age-old isolation.

Reading his memoirs today, in the post-democracy times one can get a feel of the human dimension in the history of the struggle for democracy—its poignancy, and sense of thrill in the achievements, and share the pain experienced by B.P. Koirala after his dreams fell through on a number of occasions. Anyone whether he be a maverick, a congress or a communist party supporter who reads these memoirs enters the world of a disillusioned, sometimes overreacting and a daring freedom fighter who was carrying the burden of dreams that remained unfulfilled, and enters with him into the most tumultuous and momentous phase in the Nepali history which has come to our door today with more challenges than even perceived by B.P. Koirala himself but certainly felt and predicted by him as his memoirs tend to reveal. With these memoirs we not only enter the world of a freedom fighter, a political leader with a certain sense of aloofness, but also the society which had hardly come out of its slumber. These memoirs may leave us with mixed feelings, but not certainly without a sense of awe that we feel with him when B.P. lures us into his world shaped by uncertainties, strong hopes and faith in democracy, honesty and courage.

Note

1. This review article has been published in *Across*, a bilingual magazine with informed views, Volume 2, Number 2, August–October 1998.

Book Review

Regional Consultation on Conservation of the Kanchanjunga Mountain Ecosystem. 1998. Ajay Rastogi, Pei Shengji and Devendra Amatya, eds. Kathmandu: ICIMOD. Pages 108+x. ISBN: 92 9115 709 0.

This book is an outcome of a regional consultation conference on conservation of the Kanchanjunga Mountain Ecosystem organized by International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) with the active involvement and support of WWF Nepal Program on 31 March–2 April 1997 in Kathmandu. ICIMOD is concerned with the search for more effective development responses to promote the sustained well being of people of the Hindukush Himalayan range while WWF has been supporting Nepal to initiate Integrated Community Development Programs (ICDP) project in protected areas in order to protect their biodiversity.

The conference was participated by more than 30 scientists, conservationists, planners and policy-makers from mainly 3 bordering countries with Kanchanjunga massif (China, India, and Nepal), and few resource persons from Thailand and Swizerland representing several international organizations.

The proceedings look unique in organization of its sections and creation in its design. The sections are divided according to the conference agenda or sessions, which include an inaugural session, four technical sessions, and a concluding session followed by an annex at the end.

The proceedings with the foreword by Egbert Pelinck, Director General of ICIMOD begin with an abstract of the overall contents. The inaugural session provides the basis for this regional conference and marks the beginning of the three-day intensive work. Technical sessions are the important parts, which provide detail information about Kanchanjunga Mountain ecosystem. Each of the four technical sessions was devoted to a number of issues/topics presented by conservation leaders, scientists, socioeconomists and policy makers. Interactive discussions, comments and suggestions followed the presentation. First technical session was devoted to an overview of KGA (Kanchanjunga Conservation Area) from Nepalese, Sikkimis, and Chinese perspectives developing detail background of the

area. T.M. Maskey, Gut Lepcha, and Ban Zong presented information on Status of KCA (whether it is a protected area or not), challenges and threat for biodiversity conservation, priority areas, and existing conservation programs in the KCA complex. Second technical session was set aside for biodiversity (plants and wildlife including ecosystems) and socio-economic aspects. K.K. Shrestha and Pei Shengji and Devendra Amatya presented papers on floral and faunal diversity. They suggested that approximately 300 species of flowering plants, a large number of wildlife species together with more than 251 bird species that were reported only from Nepalese side of the KCA. Eklabya Sharma summarized the KCA's rich ethnocultural diversity and socio-economic values. Third technical session explored more applied aspects including database, transboundary issues and wildlife trade, thus establishing a linkage with the issues raised during the previous sessions. P.K. Mool provided database which included land use patterns (grasslands, forests, and shrubs, other) and demography (population parameters). The forest, shrub land and grassland areas are still extensively covering more than 52% of the total areas of the KCA. Fahmeeda Hanfee provided transboundary wildlife trade issues and highlighted its gravity. The global trade in wildlife is estimated to be worth US\$ 20 million annually, which is second only to narcotics. Based on the information, recommendations were derived in the fourth technical session. Major recommendations included: (a) respective governments (Chinese, Indian, and Nepalese) should provide a policy, institutional, and management framework for their respective areas that will ensure that the Kanchanjunga Mountain Ecosystem as a functional Protected Area (PA) system by the year 2000, (b) the Kanchanjunga Mountain Ecosystem coordination forum facilitated by ICIMOD and WWF comprising of officials and experts of the three countries and NGO partners be established, (c) a common framework, methodology, and protocol for the development and documentation of knowledge and information base, ecological and monitoring assessment and socio-economic needs analysis of the area should be identified by the regional planning workshop, (d) a participatory process should be used for the planning, implementation, and monitoring phases, (e) conservation and development activities should ensure that the benefits to the local people should be maximum, (f) the respective governments should ensure institutional and budgetary provisions for the project activities in their respective territories.

The concluding session developed consensus among the participants and succeeded in getting the commitments of the concerned organizations. The Annex lists the inaugural and other addresses including the list of participants of the regional consultation workshop. The exercise was timely and relevant to biodiversity conservation through integrated community

development because (i) the area has been protected in Chinese and Indian territories for several years, (ii) the Nepalese Government declared the Kanchanjunga Mountain Ecosystem in the Nepalese territory as the Kanchanjunga Conservation Area (KCA) in March 1997 covering an area of 2035 Km², (iii) the Nepalese Government also declared KCA as the 'gift to the earth' in May 1997, (iv) WWF Nepal program initiated Integrated Community Development Programs through the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC). Considering the region's extraordinary biological and cultural diversity and socio-economical and political complexity of both challenges and opportunities, the Kanchanjunga complex has been selected as one of the four sites for detail biodiversity and socioeconomic assessments in the Eastern Himalayan, a focused region of WWF's Global 200 Ecoregion. Ecoregion-based Conservation (ERBC) developed by WWF is a new approach of biodiversity conservation that involves all levels of stakeholders, partners, scientists and key players in the process. It addresses issues beyond protected area boundaries and also political boundaries. Integrated Community Development Programs corridor/connectivity and transboundary concepts etc. are such examples.

The proceedings contain 18 high quality colour photographs of rare, endangered flora and fauna and unique ecosystems and landscapes of the Kanchunjanga Mountain, and GIS maps introducing the details of the area. The proceedings with Jenu Peak of KCA on the cover look attractive, and they are equally informative for those who are interested in protecting the mountain environment and changing paradigm of conservation.

-Khadga Basnet