

## Sāmkālīn Sāhitya and the Democratisation in Nepali Literature

Michael Hutt

The Panchayat period (1962-90) brought huge changes to Nepal. Like everything else, the world of Nepali literature changed irrevocably. When King Mahendra dismissed the Congress government in 1960, the older, more established writers were still adjusting to the atmosphere of freedom that had followed the Rana's downfall ten years earlier. Younger writers had yet to find their feet. Then suddenly new restrictions were imposed and new uncertainties came into being. Just as the first generation of post-Rana regime children entered the sixth and seventh years in the first rash of new schools, freedom of expression was curtailed.

It might have been assumed that censorship, even mild censorship, would inevitably retard the growth and development of literature that was still comparatively young. But in the case of Nepali literature the need to express dissent opaquely led to a kind of disciplined restraint, and the development of rich allegorical writing. This was especially true in the poetry, which remained the most sophisticated and commonly-published genre. Nepali literature's most serious shortcomings were the scarcity of full-blown novels, the lack of a developed tradition of criticism and a failure to reach an audience beyond the tiny urban minority.

The Panchayat governments tried to encourage the development of Nepali literature and to extend the scope of the language in every sphere of national life. This they did to the exclusion of Nepal's other languages: Newari, Hindi and Maithili disappeared from the official media. The Royal Nepal Academy, established by King Mahendra, became devoted almost entirely to the promotion of Nepali literature, particularly poetry. But the

quality of the literature its members produced was severely compromised by the culture of sycophancy that developed within its walls. The poet Bhupi Sherchan's huge popularity was due to his searing indictments of the Nepali establishment, but once he had become an Academy member these no longer appeared. It may seem to be a contradiction, but the increasing richness of Nepali literature during the Panchayat period was due more to the regime's censorious tendencies than to its attempts to foster development.

After the end of the Panchayat system, the freedom has been bewildering. Nepal's writers and poets are in the process of finding a new direction. As one poet put it in summer 1992, "if you have been kicking against a wall (*parkhāl*) for thirty years, what do you do when the wall falls down?" There seems to have been a weakening in the spirit of Nepali poetry. Verse genres were the principle medium for the expression of dissent, after all, and in a multi-party democracy the issues are less clear-cut, though the scope for expression is broader. On the other hand, writers of prose seem to have gained in confidence. This might reflect the continued westernisation of the educated urban class: having modernised poetry, there now seems to be an urge to modernise by moving the emphasis away from verse altogether.

These are subjective impressions and they would be misleading. However, they are supported by the content of *Sāmkālīn Sāhitya* (Contemporary Literature), a quarterly published in Nepali by the newly-constituted Royal Nepal Academy. In 1990, the interim government was strongly criticised when it appointed a new Academy membership that consisted almost entirely of allegedly pro-Congress male writers. Nevertheless, these members remain in

place and *Sāmkālīn Sāhitya* (chief editor Krishnachandra Singh Pradhan, editors Bairagi Kainla and Ishwar Ballabh, assistant editor Avinash Shrestha) represents a major advance.

The first issue of *Sāmkālīn Sāhitya* is dated *Māgh, Phāgun, Cait* 2047 (the first quarter of 1991), and was published just a few months after the promulgation of Nepal's new democratic constitution. Pradhan's purpose as editor-in-chief is clear from his first editorial:

"Now we are in the pale light of multi-party democracy after a political change. Democracy is not merely a release from constraints: it is also a system, an opinion, a profound responsibility and an open invitation to construct a future. We ourselves must change radically if we are to accept democracy and establish it in our minds, customs and conduct. If we oppose it, if we do not resolve contradictions such as "we have not changed, only society has" or "we have changed, but society has not", there will be an imbalance."

The most striking feature of *Sāmkālīn Sāhitya* is the total absence of Nepali poetry. No explanation is offered for this: Pradhan simply states that the journal is *gadya-pradhān* (mainly prose), though it does sometimes include Nepali translations of poetry from other languages. The emphasis on prose may stem from Pradhan's own preferences (he is a respected essayist and critic, with a major study of the Nepali novel to his credit), or from the fact that the Academy also publishes *Kavitā* (edited by Mohan Koirala), which is devoted entirely to poetry. Two other features of *Sāmkālīn Sāhitya* are notable. First, there is a regular section on foreign literature, headed *deśbhā-hira*:

"So the world is shrinking, countries are coming closer to each other. The sun that shines in one place filters through to other places too. When one country suffers an earthquake, others are shaken too... We, our countries and our democracy, are all shores onto which the new waves of revolution and

change will wash... National and international developments have their own backgrounds and contexts. Contemporaneity will not be the same everywhere... We need to understand the changes, trends and experiments that are taking place in contemporary literature."

The nine volumes of *Sāmkālīn Sāhitya* that have appeared so far have included Nepali translations of stories and poems from Bangladesh (vol. I), Pakistan (II), Sri Lanka (III), India (IV), China (V), Japan (VI), Africa: Senegal, Sudan, Kenya, Angola, Congo, Cape Verde and Mozambique (VII), Latin America: Colombia, Mexico and Puerto Rico (VIII) and the USA (IX).

Each issue also includes a section headed *deśbhītra* which features Nepali translations of contemporary works originally written or published in another language of Nepal. This is a significant sign of a change in the establishment's attitude to Nepal's linguistic and cultural diversity. It was evident in the revolutionary poetry of the Democracy Movement itself, and is also reflected in the new constitution. In his preface to volume I, Pradhan wrote:

"In this *deśbhītra* column this time, the literature of Nepāl Bhāṣā is presented. It would be an exaggeration if we were to claim that such a brief account could provide a full acquaintance with the literature of any language. Nor is that what this journal is trying to do. What we do intend is that the readers and writers of one language should have at least an inkling (*ābhās*) of what is going on in the contemporary literature of the country's other languages... We should not claim too loudly that this will create a new culture... But we do feel that this will provide a taste of parallel experiences, sensibilities and sufferings, even as we keep our own ethnic characteristics and cultural authenticity in perspective."

Translations of Newari literature (Headed "Nepāl Bhāṣā" in volume I, then "Newari" in other issues) have featured in four issues:

Vol. I: Stories by Cittadhār 'Hṛdaya', Rāmeśvara and Kedār 'Situ'; poems by Durgālāl Śreṣṭha and Sudah Khusaḥ.

Vol. III: Introduction to Newari literature by Keśavmān Śākya; stories by Sūryabahādur Pivāḥ and Bhūṣanprasād Śreṣṭha; poems by Ānanda Jośī, Buddha Saymi, Sureś Kiraṇ.

Vol. V: Stories by Pūmadās Śreṣṭha, Dhusvām Saymi and Keśavmān Śākya; poems by Śyāmbahādur Saṃyajū, Sundar Madhikarmī and Pratisarā Saymi.

Vol. VIII: Stories by Jagdīs Citrakār, Āśārām Śākya and Darveratna Śākya; poems by Pūma Vaidya, Rāmeś Madhu and Triratna Śākya.

Translations from Maithili literature have also featured in four issues:

Vol. II: Essay on modern Maithili literature by Yugeśvarprasād Varmā; stories by Rājendra P. Vimala, Rāmbharos Kāpaḍi Bhramar and Surendra Lābh; poems by Bhuvaneśvar Pāthey, Mathurānanda Caudhari Māthur and Revatīraṃaṇ Lāl.

Vol. IV: Survey of Nepalese Maithili literature by Rāmbharos Kāpaḍi Bhramar; play by Mahendra Malaṅgiyā; story by R.N. Sudhākar; poems by Dhīrendra, Hariścandra and Ayodhyānāth Caudhari.

Vol. VI: Stories by Rājendra Vimala, Bhuvaneśvar Pāthey, Surendra Jhā Śāstrī; poems by Dharmendra Jhā Viḥval, Digambar Jhā Dinmaṇi, Śyāmsundar Śaśi and Rameś Jhā Bhāvagra.

Vol. VIII: Stories by Dhūmketu and Dhīrendra.

Volume VII contained works translated from Limbu: a summary of the development of Limbu language and literature by Bairāgī Kāilā; a story ("the first modern short story written in Limbu") by Kājīmān Kandaṅgbā; poems by Mahāguru Phālgunanda Liṅgden, Thāmsuhāṅg Puṣpa Subba Asita, Yir Nembāṅg, Yehāṅg Lāvati and Virahī Kāilā.

The original Nepali content consists of new short stories, plays, essays, criticism, travel reminiscences and sometimes 'contemplations' or a writer's profile of another writer. Some of it is challenging and controversial; little of it could have appeared in an Academy publication before 1990. *Samkālin Sāhitya* is one of the best and most interesting mirrors currently available of the changes that are taking place in Nepal's intellectual culture as a result of democratisation.

## INTERVIEW

### Reflections of a plant-hunter in Nepal: An Interview with Dr. Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha

Charles Ramble

Dr. Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha is currently the coordinator of Nepal's National Heritage Programme in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). During his distinguished career as one of Nepal's foremost botanists he has published "not very much really: just four or five books and twenty or so scientific articles." In the late 1980s Dr. Shrestha headed the task force responsible for conducting the

research that culminated recently in the creation of the Makalu-Barun Conservation Area. At that time the present interviewer had an opportunity to work with him, and was struck by his breadth of knowledge and interests. In the course of a lengthy interview, some extracts of which are printed here, Dr. Shrestha attributed his advocacy of a wide perspective to a decade in the Royal Nepal Academy, where he held the post of

Member Secretary for a year. Frustration at the oversimplification of complex situations was a recurrent theme during our conversation: for example, the eclipsing of governmental legerdemain by the conspicuous Tanakpur dispute, or the upstaging of Nepal's most pressing ecological concerns by issues such as the Himal Cement factory and Godavari Marble, currently two of the arch-fiends in the demonology of Kathmandu's ecologists.

Early in his career, after a period of teaching in high schools and in the Amrit Science College, Dr. Shrestha joined the Department of Medicinal Plants. The initial task of assessing Nepal's wealth of medicinal and aromatic herbs launched him on a trajectory as a plant collector that would eventually take him throughout Nepal.

TBS: The first trip I made was to Trishuli in 1962-63, travelling through Dhading, Gorkha and so on. We found that people were very dependent on medicinal herbs for their cash income. For commodities such as oil, kerosene, thread, cloth and suchlike they relied on the sale of herbs. We collected samples without knowing the scientific names for them. One of the plants that are sold is *bikh* [Aconitum], but there are seventeen or eighteen types of *bikh*, and we didn't know which one was which. In fact we don't know some of them even today. Scientifically speaking, it was essential to make a thorough collection, so I gradually became a plant collector. I found it fascinating, travelling and collecting plants. I've been a plant collector ever since. I collected everything I could see, as far as my resources would allow me. At that time we were permitted only two porters, because the budget was limited. Later I travelled with John Adam Stainton [author of *The Forests of Nepal*, etc.], who died recently. I travelled with him all over Nepal between 1965 and 1968 in extended tours. At that time our main interest was to discover new species, especially since

there was no constraint on the number of porters. He could afford it. The only constraint was my own physique. If I was strong enough I could collect as much as I liked, and Stainton was very supportive.

CR: How many districts have you collected in?

TBS: Most districts. The districts I haven't travelled in are... let me think... No, I've collected in all districts of Nepal.

CR: Do you think there are still many plant species to be discovered?

TBS: Among the lichens and fungi, and even the ferns, there certainly remains a lot to discover. But I don't think there are many undescribed species among the angiosperms [higher plants]. On the other hand, there is much scope for discovering the medicinal and other chemical properties of the plants we do know. That hasn't been done.

CR: Your doctoral work focussed on Western Nepal, didn't it?

TBS: Yes. The thesis was entitled "The Ecology and Vegetation of North-west Nepal". It was later published by the Royal Nepal Academy [1982]. In 1972 I had met Dobremez, who had a plan to make a vegetation map of the whole of Nepal. I put together all my previous collections, and since one set was in the Natural History Museum in London, I spent most of my time and money while in France - my doctorate was from Grenoble - travelling to England. And happily my wife was in London at the time, in 1978, doing her Ph.D.

CR: In 1979 you became a Member of the Royal Nepal Academy. How was it to be a natural scientist in an institution dedicated primarily to the arts?

TBS: Originally the Academy was a home for arts and literature, but under the patronage of the present king, in 1975, Lain Singh Bangdel was asked to reorganise it. The new vision was to have a single Academy that would accommodate all the different branches of knowledge, and the constitution also included science. They had *kalā*, art, *saṃskṛti*, culture, *sāhitya*, literature, *gyān*, knowledge or philosophy,