

Translating a Life: B.P. Koirala's *Atmabrittanta* ¹

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Introduction

Bishweshwar Prasad ('BP') Koirala was the figurehead of Nepali democratic politics for over three decades, from the birth of the Nepali Congress party in newly independent India to his death in 1982. For long stretches of this period he was imprisoned or exiled. And out of power: his brief stint as home minister in the first post-Rana government ended in disaster, while his promising Prime Ministership was cut short before it had run two years by the palace coup of December 1960.

Yet his political influence prevailed and, along with King Mahendra, his was one of the decisive voices in a formative period of Nepali political development. Much of the earlier part of his political career is well described in *Atmabrittanta*, a remarkable work that has recently been translated into English. Consideration of the production of *Atmabrittanta*, memoirs recorded onto tape in BP's dying days, now transcribed and translated, forms the latter part of this article.

More than a mere political memoir, however, what *Atmabrittanta* forcefully reminds us is that BP was a multidimensional personality. A striking and, to many, magnetic character himself, considerations of psychology and creativity, and of the individual, informed his eclectic socialist political outlook. Such considerations also lay at the heart of his literary work.

For BP is remembered almost as two separate personalities: the political leader and the writer. These aspects of his life's work are, by implication, conveniently divisible into discrete units. For the political scientist or historian interested in, say, intra-Congress intrigues or the struggle against the Panchayat system, the flights of BP's imagination in a novel such as *Sumnimā* must seem abstract, far removed

¹ B.P. Koirala, *Atmabrittanta*, translated by Kanak Mani Dixit. Lalitpur: Himal Books, 2001.

from the day to day cut and thrust of the political chess game.² For the literary critic, perhaps concentrating on BP's innovative and intense psychological short stories, his political life and Congress associations are unwelcome distractions.³

So we have been left with two distinct BPs. And, on the face of it, *Atmabrittanta* does little to revise this, focusing as it does largely on BP's political career. Indeed, direct reference to creative writing is limited to mention of the excitement of having his first short story published (p. 18)—in Hindi, in Premchand's journal *Hansa*—and of a productive period in Darjeeling where he wrote 15 to 20 stories after Suryabikram Gyawali persuaded him to switch from Hindi to Nepali (p. 24). Although accounts of his imprisonment make clear that writing, keeping a diary or journal, was essential for BP, here he does not choose to remind us of his fiction writing in the same period.⁴

Yet it is the contention of this brief article that if one is to understand BP as an individual, leader or writer one must start by integrating the various aspects of his life and appreciating that they may be more closely intertwined than is often assumed. And for such an understanding *Atmabrittanta* provides an excellent starting point, in particular for a non Nepali-reading audience.

² For example, one of BP's biographers does include a brief allusion to BP's literature:

In his democratic thought a current of deep humanism is flowing *which could be seen in his literary writings* and political speeches. The real problems for him were the problems of individual and social life... Koirala's whole philosophy of life revolved around the individual. He attached great importance to the growth and all-sided development of individual in society (Mishra 1985: 12, emphasis added).

Yet the reference to literary writings is not elaborated by Mishra, and indeed not a single literary work of BP's finds its way into his bibliography, much as his political publications are covered.

³ We should remember that BP himself stated that "I am one person in politics and in literature I am quite another, it seems to me that inside me there are two beings doing two different things" (quoted in Acharya 2053: 173; ironically Acharya is both a literary scholar and senior Congress politician). I do not believe we have to take this statement at face value. Hutt (forthcoming) demonstrates, for example, that the composition and themes of *Sumnimā*, composed while BP was imprisoned in Sundarijal, relate both to BP's immediate political environment and to fundamental questions about human nature that shape his political philosophy as much as his artistic sensibilities.

⁴ BP's *Jail Journal* was published shortly before the original Nepali edition of *Atmabrittanta*, and has now been translated into Hindi.

Reading *Atmabrittanta*

Above I described BP's socialism as 'eclectic', but perhaps 'idiosyncratic' would be a better choice of adjective. Here *Atmabrittanta* provides the major clues we need to piece together BP's determinedly individualistic approach to political ideology. First and foremost, we can feel the influence of his fiercely non-conformist and outspoken father. Krishna Prasad Koirala was an early member of the Indian Congress and an exile from Nepal following a clash with Chandra Shamsher. It is of more than passing interest to observe how BP's love-hate relationship with Mahendra, characterized apart from political differences by insurmountable pride and stubbornness, echoes his father's long-running stand-off with Chandra.

Then there comes the influence of Marx, followed by Gandhi, Nehru and, closest personally and politically, socialist leaders such as Jayprakash Narayan. Yet this heritage did not restrict him: he was quite happy to be impressed by Maoist mobilization of labour with minimal capital in China as opposed to Nehru's Soviet-inspired fascination for impressive technology and infrastructure.

Throughout *Atmabrittanta*, however, one factor remains clear and constant: it is the individual, not ideology, that captures BP's attention and imagination. Much as there is genuine passion in his fundamental political beliefs, it is when he speaks of people that *Atmabrittanta* comes alive and the words on the page become compelling. BP was never a satirist—he had too much sympathy for his subjects to make that reduction—but speaking extempore onto tape his brief character sketches of colleagues and acquaintances are revealingly direct and gently humorous. Take his depiction of the young Ganesh Man Singh (p. 34):

He had escaped from jail and by the time he arrived in Benaras he was already a romantic figure... [he] dressed in blue trousers and a blue cardigan, and always had bits of paper and newspapers stuffed in his pockets. With unruly hair, he used to rush around on a bicycle. You could barely catch a glimpse of him before he was gone.

Or his amusing but affectionate memories of imprisonment alongside Manmohan Adhikari following the Biratnagar strike (p. 45):

We had arranged to take turns making the tea and when it was Manmohan's turn he invariably spoilt it. Sometimes he would cut himself in the kitchen and be holding his bloody finger as he brought in the tray. He was someone who could neither make good tea nor take good care of himself. He was completely unreliable about anything he had to do. But he was very personable company.

This is a good example of BP's style: frank, entertaining and candid but also characterized by almost always having something good to say even of political rivals. (In fact, as a child he had been greatly impressed by Manmohan's father, who "liked to look for hidden meanings in news reports and to interpret them" (p. 7).) Indeed, the lack of bitterness in his recollections of his foes is amazing. He certainly makes clear that he was frequently under attack by many factions, but to understand the harshness of the criticism he faced one must look to other sources.⁵ In *Atmabrittanta* he gives fair mention to the achievements of other individuals and parties: he goes out of his way, for example, to make it clear that the Nepali communist party did not develop after Congress but rather alongside it (p. 39).

This marked lack of score-settling, the hallmark of too many political memoirs, sets *Atmabrittanta* apart. Indeed, BP is often at his most touching when speaking of his one true rival for power, King Mahendra. We have no outpouring of bitterness for the years of imprisonment or the long cold war in exile: instead we find poignant recollections of time spent as the royal family's personal guest, sympathetic glimpses into what he saw of Mahendra's inner feelings, and warm memories of the friendship between their two wives.

For, just as BP's literary imagination and most powerful descriptive skills tended towards the intimate, so were many of the great political battles of Nepal played out almost as family tragedies. Despite the appearance of a cast of thousands on occasion, *Atmabrittanta* shows us political history as the interaction of personal histories. The chronic Congress schism between BP and his elder brother Matrika Prasad was a genuine family affair; BP grew up in Banaras with the family of Manmohan Adhikari, communist leader for five decades; both Nehru and King Tribhuvan, ultimate arbiters of the secretive 1951 Delhi agreement, were at different stages intimate with BP, their personal characteristics as familiar to him as their public political faces.

One recurrent feature of *Atmabrittanta* is BP's open-minded approach to individuals and deeply human eagerness to engage with and understand people and their varied experiences. This attitude perhaps comes across most clearly in his comments on women, sexuality and morality, again inspired by his father's progressive outlook (p. 54):

My uncles were old-fashioned, but Father used to maintain a modern

⁵ For example, see Tanka Prasad Acharya's lengthy correspondence to Jaya Prakash Narayan, in which he rails against BP, and also his direct letter to BP: "You appear to me to be a great materialist who does not have the slightest regard for truth and seeks to fulfil his selfish interests by any means" (reproduced as appendices in James F. Fisher's *Living Martyrs*).

attitude about everything, be it religion, relationships, rituals or tradition. I too have always held a modern worldview, which is the result of the various events that overtook my family. This outlook is also due to the women of our family, who would be called immoral from the traditional point of view, but whom I was able to view first-hand. My third, aunt, my second aunt who eloped, and Sahili Didi and her secret sojourn— these women forced my standard of judgement about who is immoral and who is not to be entirely different.

Here too we find pointers to the inspiration for some of BP's later literary work. Questions of natural sexuality and its repression through social or spiritual laws forms a recurrent theme, evident in BP's *Jail Journal* and discussed at length in *Sumnimā*. His aunt who eloped to find happiness must have made him think about the right for women to seek fulfilment in marriage, a need that drives the desperately dissatisfied heroine of his celebrated short story *Karnelko ghoḍā* ('The Colonel's Horse'). Lastly, there is 'Sahili Didi', who had fearlessly confronted bandits with a sword and mysteriously run away from her husband. The combination of danger, love and seduction that she represented to BP is surely a model for one of the most memorable characters in his later short stories: the wild but irresistible maid of *Śvet Bhairavī*. In this way BP's childhood recollections help us equally to understand the politician and the writer.

Translating *Atmabrittanta*

It is worth now considering the conditions under which *Atmabrittanta* was produced. It is the result of direct recordings onto tape in numerous separate sessions with little chance for planning and no opportunity for the author to edit afterwards—nor even to complete the memoirs, for the narrative breaks off tantalisingly in mid-flow just as BP is about to describe the RNAC hijacking that the Nepali Congress decided to resort to.

The recording took place during the final weeks and days of BP's struggle with lung cancer. His body was not only wracked by the disease but also occasionally overwhelmed by the side effects of harsh chemotherapy. The only people present at the daily taping sessions were Ganesh Raj Sharma (a lawyer who defended BP from the 1960s onward) and his niece Shailaja Acharya. We can assume that others who were close to BP personally and politically may have been piqued to be excluded from these closed door meetings, but the lack of distraction was surely essential to the project.⁶

⁶ Sharma is particularly emphatic in the foreword to the second Nepali edition (following queries by readers of the first edition) that no one else was ever present at any recording session (Koirala 2055). It might have been helpful had the English version made clear that its translation of the original Nepali foreword by Sharma is in fact an abridgement.

In any case, BP's physical state, the lack of time, and the audio medium unfamiliar to a writer make for unpromising circumstances for literary endeavour. Yet the final text is a triumph, albeit *sui generis*, and one that has transcended the translation(s). The distance from BP's thoughts to the printed English page is considerable: they pass through the recording, the transcribing by Sharma, the editing into consistent Nepali (retaining some of the original Hindi conversations but removing BP's frequent lapses into English), and the translation from Nepali into English.⁷ This was a process which was fraught with pitfalls for accuracy, and enough transpositions to dampen the directness of the telling. But this has not happened to *Atmabrittanta*: BP's voice rings clear and true, some of the bedside intimacy of the first narration remains, and the tale is absorbing and compelling.

BP always consciously strove for a degree of emotional openness that he himself compares to Gandhi's 'experiments with truth', a subtitle BP felt would also be appropriate for his own autobiography (a comparison the hubris of which his detractors would not be slow to point out). In *Atmabrittanta* he traces the roots of this outlook to his childhood (p. 7):

All these were very emotional events that were taking place in the world and around me, and perhaps this is one reason I also developed a sentimental personality. And I do believe that it is good to be emotional, because then you are transparent. People given to too much realism are not that clean.⁸

It is reasonable to speculate that BP's awareness of his imminent death could only enhance his natural candour. The effect of this refreshing frankness is to draw the reader in as fellow confidant. In general the English translation captures the force and vitality of the original and maintains a consistent, credible voice.

There are however, some details to quibble about—first and foremost spellings. Oddities range from idiosyncratic versions of place names (Benaras, Chabel) to

⁷ BP makes explicit mention of his mixed linguistic heritage twice in *Atmabrittanta*: "But even with such a large community [of Nepalis in Banaras], I still faced difficulty with the Nepali language. This difficulty has always stayed with me. The reason is that while we spoke Nepali in the house, outside it was Hindi and in school it was English. I never quite got rid of my confusion stemming from those days" (p. 8). This is echoed a few pages later where he also related the confusion caused by his friends' use of Avadhi and Bhojpuri at home (p. 20).

⁸ Here the translation perhaps does not serve us well: 'transparent' and 'clean' are both translating the same Nepali original, *saphā*, which here may also carry a connotation of 'healthy'.

aesthetically displeasing deviations from basic Nepali transcription (madhisay, bajey) to the plain erroneous, such as the bizarre ‘Breach Kandy’ whose ‘k’ implies an overhasty and unthinking transliteration from Devanagari. Given the sheer number of Nepali terms and proper names it would have made sense to stick to a simple but consistent pattern of transliteration.

Indeed, the use of Nepali words, scattered liberally through the translation, perhaps raises further questions. For a largely bilingual readership this will pose no problems, but there seems to be some editorial confusion as to the readers’ likely level of understanding. So while terms such as *thuldaju* and *saili* are explained in parentheses at their first appearance, others (such as *pirka* or *thekis*) are left to be guessed at from context. Some readers may miss entirely the significant derogatory connotations of the shouted order to a Bahun addressed only as bajey (p. 186). The local terminology, judiciously deployed, certainly provides flavour and cultural location. But is there any significant stylistic purpose to be served by saying *shikar* instead of ‘hunting’, or ‘bubu nurse’ instead of ‘wet nurse’? Sometimes the tension between leaving original vocabulary and choosing an unsatisfactory English substitute is more acute, visible through the translation. For example, allowing the Nepali *Jindabad! Jindabad!* (p. 187) is surely wiser than opting for a blander ‘viva’ or ‘long live’. Yet a few sentences later the opposition cry of ‘Murderer! Murderer! B.P. Koirala!’ loses in English the essential rhythm and rhyme of the original *hatyārā ! hatyārā! BP Koirālā!* (which cannot help but subconsciously suggest itself to Nepali-speakers).

Of course, difficult decisions such as this dog every translation, but readers in English should be aware that they do occasionally lose something. For example, the translator understandably throws in the towel when confronted with the cruel children’s rhyme that BP and classmates used to shout at a lame teacher. The English simply mentions ‘a derogatory ditty’ but that BP can remember the actual words (*laṃgaḍ dhin, ṭakekā tīn, māro jutā sādhe tīn*) is both interesting and entertaining. Also, one feels that the occasionally stilted English of dialogues is probably not a fair reflection of BP’s spoken words. In a conversation with the departing British Ambassador, would he really have said: “There is nothing riding by a name. As Shakespeare has said, you may give the rose any name, its aroma remains the same” (p. 274)? Or is this ungainly rewording again just the result of rapid translation from the Nepali?

More serious than these minor points (which, given the overall quality of the translation it seems almost churlish to dwell on) is the lack of an index, glossary and

any explanatory notes on the characters who appear and disappear (often without second names) alarmingly frequently. Just as every fellow reader I have spoken to is gripped by the book, so are they baffled by some of the less obvious references. A brief discussion of the fascinating narrative will inevitably turn to a conspiratorial “But who is ‘Surya Babu’?” or similar question. And indeed, I think it is true that despite his central role in Congress and constant appearances in the text, Surya Prasad Upadhaya’s full name is never revealed. Equally, statements such as “Tarini had already left his editorship, and Kishori Raman Rana used to work at the paper” (p.211) become frustrating when it is clear that ‘the paper’ is an important part of a story but is never specified.

Those who want an index of names will for the time being have to stick to the Nepali edition (which includes both full names and nicknames). Hopefully, this much and more in the way of explanatory aids will be provided in future English editions. In the meantime, however, whatever occasional confusions a reader unfamiliar with the context may have to cope with, *Atmabrittanta* is as involving and exciting as any political memoir. BP covers a grand sweep of events that explain the formative period of Nepal’s modern political history, yet he never loses his human touch or his writer’s eye for detail and skill at conveying it. Overall the translation deserves praise: it is flowing and vigorous, engaging and entertaining. It allows the reader to feel that BP is speaking to them directly, personally. This is the lasting impression of reading *Atmabrittanta* and the great achievement of BP, his transcriber, and his translator.

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