

REFLECTIONS OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN MODERN NEPALI LITERATURE

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Introduction

Nepali literature has been neglected by researchers from outside Nepal. Historical, political and sociological studies by scholars who are not citizens of the kingdom very rarely make any reference to the Nepali literature which is contemporary with the changes or events they describe. An anomaly exists between the outsider's view of present-day Nepal and that of most indigenous scholars. The Nepali intellectual tends to regard modern Nepali literature as an important element of his or her national and cultural identity and a vital ingredient of national life. The value of modern writing in Nepali, setting aside any consideration of its literary merits, is that it now represents the mainstream intellectual culture of the kingdom, addressing almost every issue which is of concern to members of the educated urban class. The intention of this paper is to alert attention to a particular aspect of the importance of Nepali literature: its reflection of the political changes which have taken place in Nepal over recent decades.

Nepali has operated as a *lingua franca* in the eastern Himalaya for several centuries and, according to the 1981 Census of Nepal, it is now the mother-tongue of over fifty per cent of Nepal's total population. Significantly, it has also been the language of the country's rulers since the modern state of Nepal came into existence during the late 18th century, and has acquired a prestige which is denied the other languages of the kingdom. Its status of national language in Nepal and the dominant language of certain parts of Himalayan India ensures that it is the medium of most of the region's modern literature. Literature in Nepali is essentially a modern phenomenon, since it did not depart wholly from its Sanskrit antecedents until its first major work, the *Rāmāyana* of Bhānubhakta, was written during the 1840s. Indeed, since the printing press came late to Nepal and this important work was not published until 1887, it would be fair to say that the most

significant developments in Nepali literature have taken place during the 20th century. Published works now exist in every literary genre; poetry is arguably the most developed and popular genre, but fiction, drama and non-fictional prose are also important. Traditionally, Nepali writers have considered themselves to be poets, first and foremost. Nepali literature's most important philosophical developments have therefore been initiated in poetry, and this genre has also been utilised rather more than others to convey political messages. Thus, poetry will loom relatively large in the following discussion.

Nepali writers have addressed almost every conceivable theme in the literature they have produced, although its content and the philosophical stances adopted have naturally been influenced by the society in which they live. To state that all creative literature is a reflection of the society from which it emanates may be to reiterate a truism of sorts, yet the validity of the assertion does vary in some important respects between societies and historical periods. Writers may vary from one another in the extent to which they address, or are able to address, social or political issues. Sometimes, literature may be regarded as a creative and aesthetic pursuit which should remain untainted by mundane or controversial subject matter. At other times, however, and particularly when freedom of expression is, or has been, restricted, social relevance may come to be regarded as the hallmark of literary modernity or progressivism. Nepali literature is an immense field, and in a land where almost every literate and educated person has tried at some time to compose poetry, there of course exists much that is politically neutral, typified by the rhapsodic descriptions of natural beauty or evocations of the patriotic spirit which fill the national media. Most of Nepal's more distinguished writers, however, have shown some concern with political matters, and during the latter years of the Rana regime a number of progressive writers came to the fore in the struggle to remove the autocracy from power.

Nepali Literature under the Rānā Regime

Until 1951, when the reigning monarch, King Tribhuvan, succeeded in installing a more democratic administration in a series of events known as the *sātsāl* revolution,¹ Nepal was governed by a succession of hereditary "Prime Ministers" drawn from a group of families who called themselves *Rānā*. The regime had been established in 1846 when a massacre, engineered by Jang Bahādur Kunwar, of most of the Kunwar family's political rivals put an abrupt end to long years of internecine strife. The power of the monarchy was effectively neutralized for over 100 years and the development of basic facilities such as schools, hospitals and roads was retarded by a government which

¹This "revolution" occurred in 1950-51, the year 2007 in the *bikram* era observed in Nepal. Hence *sātsāl*, "the year 07".

viewed any proposal for social reform or advancement as a threat to its authority.

Members of the Rānā families lived in considerable pomp and splendour in their capital, Kathmandu, and despite their almost xenophobic suspicion of any foreign influence upon their subjects, they developed an elaborate sub-culture for themselves which was clearly imitative of the royal courts of Victorian Britain, visited by Jang Bahadur in 1850.² A Nepali novelist, Diamond Shamsheer Rānā, described life among the ruling elite in a highly-acclaimed historical novel entitled *The White Tiger (Seto Bagh)*, which was first published in 1973.³ Diamond Shamsheer's story is set in the context of the political scheming and factional rivalries which took place around the time of Jang Bahadur's death in 1877, but when it was first published it was widely interpreted as an oblique criticism of the ruling order in contemporary Nepal. The following (abridged) extract from the novel describes Nepal as seen through the eyes of the British Resident of the time, who has come to the palace to present felicitations on the occasion of a royal wedding:

"Sir," said Jung Bahadur, "You have been gazing out at the goings-on in Kathmandu for ages. What have you seen that is so fascinating?"

"Maharaja, it is because I could not find what I was looking for."

"And what were you looking for, may I ask?"

"The persistence of your opponents."

"Oh, everyone supports us, we have no opponents here!" replied Jagat Jang, and Jang Bahadur backed up what he had said. The Resident had been laughing when he had spoken, and now he continued to chuckle. He had meant to be ironic, but the king and the prime minister did not realise this, and so they laughed with him. Everyone present joined in. But the Englishman, a man of democracy and freedom, saw Nepal through his binoculars: a Nepal which was hungry and naked, a deaf dumb and blind Nepal an uneducated Nepal, an undeveloped Nepal.⁴

Freedom of literary expression was strictly limited by the Rānā government, which had established the Gorkha Language Publication Committee (*Gorkhā Bhāshā Prakāshini Samiti*) in 1913 to control and censor publications. A law was promulgated which stated that:

If anyone wishes to publish a book on any topic, he must first bring it to the

²For a detailed account of Jang Bahadur's visit to Europe, see Whelpton: *Jang Bahadur in Europe* (Kathmandu, 1983).

³An English translation of this novel recently appeared, entitled *The Wake of the White Tiger*.

⁴Rānā: *Seto Bāgh* (Kathmandu, 1973), p. 120. All translations presented in this paper are my own.

Gorkha Language Publication committee for inspection If a book is published without the Committee's approval, the publisher will be fined 50 rupees. If the content of the book is improper, the books will be seized and punishment will be meted out according to the Committee's decision.⁵

Several notorious incidents occurred under this rule. In 1920, for instance, one Krishnalāl Adhikārī was jailed for nine years for writing, in his introduction to a book on maize cultivation, that: "Foreign dogs were being pampered in Nepal, although native dogs were the only useful ones so far as protection against thieves was concerned. . . .";⁶ a statement which the Committee apparently construed as a criticism of the administration. Writers who wished to express controversial views had therefore to do so obliquely, and an understanding existed between the government and the educated members of society that overt political statements would not be tolerated. Many books were banned, particularly while political tension was rising during the 1930s and 1940s, and authors whose social comments were not sufficiently opaque often suffered periods of imprisonment.

Despite this repressive atmosphere, Nepali literature grew to maturity in the decades leading up to 1950 in the poetry of Lekhnāth Paudyāl and Lakshmīprasād Devkoṭā, fiction by Bishveshvar Prasād Koirālā, Guruprasād Mainālī and Lainsingh Bāngdel and the dramas of Bālkrishna Sama. Much of this "early modern" literature was first published in journals, particularly those which were produced from Indian towns such as Banaras and Darjeeling, to which Rāṅā censorship could not extend. It illustrated a society which was in a state of transition from age-old traditionalism to a new spirit of social progressivism. Young writers began to base their work on their own experience of life, and to reject the classical conventions and conceits of the older tradition. Many also adapted traditional genres and styles to express their own concerns. Thus, a poetic exposition of *viraha*, the quasi-mystical sentiment of longing induced by separation from one's beloved, or from God, could be utilised to convey a subsidiary message, such as its author's opposition to caste discrimination. The Rāṅās were concerned to maintain a stratified society in which the social and occupational divisions which derived from considerations of caste were strictly observed. It was even forbidden for the lowest castes to wear shoes, or to affix tiles to the roofs of their homes. A clear example of the use of a traditional genre to convey a reformist message can be seen in Lakshmīprasād Devkoṭā's *The Tale of Munā and Madan* (*Munā-Madan*, 1935), which tells the story of a young

⁵Bhattarai: "Nepālī Bhāshāko Kānūnī Prishṭhabhūmi," in *Nepālī*, 1976:30.

⁶Rose and Joshi: *Democratic Innovations In Nepal* (Berkeley, 1966), p. 53.

merchant who travels to Lhasa in Tibet to seek his fortune. He falls grievously ill on his way home to Nepal, but is rescued by a humble Tibetan. The point here is that Tibetans are regarded by caste Hindus as ritually unclean:

Save me now and the Lord will see,
He who helps his fellow man
Cannot help but go to heaven,
This son of a Chhetri touches your feet,⁷
But he touches them not in contempt,
A man must be judged by the size of his heart,
Not by his name or his caste.⁸

Social comment of this nature became increasingly commonplace in Nepali literature in the years leading up to 1950. In fiction, social realism became the hallmark of modernity. Authors such as Bishveshvar Prasād Koirālā, better known as "B.P." Koirālā, leader of the Nepali Congress Party, addressed topics such as rural landlessness, traditional moral and sexual values, or the status of women and widows. Poetry and, to a lesser degree, drama, came to be regarded as the most appropriate genres for political statements, and since open opposition to the Rānās was fraught with danger, literature became an important medium for the expression of veiled criticisms of the regime. The tone of the poetry which emanated from the communities of exile Nepalese in India, where much of the political activity was taking place which would eventually topple the Rānās, was far more radical than that of their counterparts within the kingdom:

Our food, our clothes, our homes we leave behind
In the name of Justice,
Even if we lose our lives, our very breath,
We shall not care.
There is one thing a man requires
Which we do not have and cannot leave behind!
For sure, I will have to die one day,
But I will not live like an animal,
If I am human, I shall live like a man,
Asserting my right to humanity!⁹

⁷Chhetri: the second caste, roughly equivalent to the *Kshatriya* of India.

⁸Devkoṭā: *Munā-Madan*, (18th edn., 1986), p. 21.

⁹Devkoṭā: *Pahādī Pukār* ["Mountain Cry"] (1948). Quoted in Bhaṭṭa: "Lakshmiprasād Devkoṭāmā Krāntikārī Pravritti," in *Bhānu*, 1968, p. 346.

The Dream of a New Birth

The Nepali poetry of the 1940s and early 1950s is full of expressions of hope for the future, although much of it could not be published in Nepal until after 1950. The works of the "revolutionary" poet Gopālprasād Rimāl are the best illustration of this tendency. Born in Kathmandu in 1917, Rimāl was one of a group of important writers who centred on a journal entitled *Shāradā*. This journal, which the Rānās allowed to continue despite grave misgivings, has been described as "a product of an unwritten, silent compromise, allowed and accepted as an experiment between the authorities and the rising, impatient intellectuals."¹⁰ Even so, Rimāl was too radical for his superiors and was swiftly removed from his post after only a few weeks as editor.¹¹ The most overtly political of all the Nepali poets of the time, he railed against the injustices and inadequacies of the Rānā government and longed for a social awakening, which he symbolized in his poems as a new birth.

One of Rimāl's poems which makes his new radicalism plain was published in 1960, although written much earlier, and is simply entitled "To" ("*Prati*"). At first glance, it appears merely to be a short poem addressed to an anonymous lover, but its novelty is apparent from its startling political message:

Here we should give birth to Buddha,
 Here we should give birth to Lenin;
 Is there a better mirror than the face of a child
 For us to see ourselves?¹²

Many of Rimāl's poems were allegories which expressed his conviction that change was inevitable in Nepal. Nepal was frequently symbolized by a mother who dreamed of bearing a son who would combat evil and inaugurate a future full of hope, Rimāl refrained from explicitly identifying this mother with Nepal, or from naming the oppressors who were the cause of her sorrow. These poems could therefore also be interpreted as expressions of the *angst* which grips the world during the *Kali Yuga*, the age of universal degeneration, or as more general expositions of the human condition. In

¹⁰Khanal: *Nepal, Transition from Isolationism* (Kathmandu, 1977), p. 236.

¹¹Upādhyāya, "Gopālprasād Rimāl ra Āmāko Sapnā," in Pradhan (ed.), *Sājhā Samālochanā* (Kathmandu, 1977), p. 119.

¹²Rimāl: *Āmāko Sapnā*, (3rd edn) (Kathmandu, 1983), p. 38.

the context of Nepal at the time, however, Rimāl's message was abundantly clear. His most famous poem, *A Mother's Dream*, (*Āmāko Sapnā*) consisted of a dialogue between the mother and her son: she assured her son that "he" would surely come to fight against injustice:

At first you will think he's a dream,
You will grope with your hands to touch him,
But he will come,
More tangible even than fire or snow. . . ¹³

Rimāl depicted his country as a loving mother who was disappointed with her offspring and waited in ardent hope for the birth of a son who would deliver the rest of her children from the Rānās. The poem concludes with the lines,

Yes, he will come,
Come spreading light like the morning sun,
But that you would be him:
This was the dream of my youth.¹⁴

The symbol of "Mother Nepal" (*Nepāl Āmā*) appears to stem from a conception of the earth and the natural world as feminine entities. Although gender has to a large extent been discarded from spoken Nepali, and is usually used only to denote human femininity in the literary language, some writers do occasionally accord feminine gender to nouns such as *prithvi*, the Earth, or *prakṛiti*, Nature. The more obviously nationalistic concept of "motherland" is perhaps utilised more widely in India than it is in Nepal, but Rimāl's symbol of "Mother Nepal" is clearly equatable with that of "Mother India" (*Bhārat Mātā*) which is so beloved of Indian propagandists.

Naturally, Rimāl was exhilarated by the fulfilment of his dream, and in 1949 he wrote in exaltation,

They had always lived in misery,
Today they would gladly pledge their lives . . . ¹⁵

but the new order failed to live up to his expectations. Like many other Nepali writers, he had been jailed on several occasions for his criticisms of the Rānā regime and felt

¹³Ibid., p. 1. Poem originally composed 1943.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 54.

betrayed by the factional strife and instability which characterised the several administrations set up between 1951 and 1960. It may well have been this sense of disillusionment which caused Rimal to become clinically depressed and, latterly, mentally deranged

Another poet who had looked forward to the demise of the old regime is Kedār Mān Vyathit, a government minister in subsequent administrations who was born in 1913 and continues to write in several languages today. His *The Storm (Āndhi)*, 1956) looks back with relish:

The black cloud sang,
 Spreading a voice of thunder
 To the horizon's end
 And the crazy storm danced
 Like a destructive god . . .
 . . . but next morning I heard
 Many great trees had fallen,
 The streets had been washed clean,
 The crops were flourishing,
 And I was eager to see
 A revolution in this land.¹⁶

Nepal's master playwright, Bālkrishna Shamsher Jang Bahādur Rānā, had allied himself quite closely to the forces opposing the regime, despite the fact that the Shamshers had been the most powerful family in Nepal since the turn of the century. In 1940, members of a secretive political group, the *Prajā Parishad*, were arrested in Kathmandu and sentenced either to death or to life imprisonment. It was alleged that several *Parishad* members had taken part that same year in some of Balkrishna Shamsher's plays, and that these plays had inspired their subversive activities. All of Shamsher's dramas were therefore immediately proscribed, and in 1947-48 he suffered a brief period of imprisonment. Upon his release, he signified his opposition to his own family's regime by changing his name to "Sama", meaning "equal."

The aftermath of the Rānās' downfall heralded a new era of literary freedom during which an extraordinary number of works were published which had previously been banned. It had been a tradition for generations for the people of Kathmandu to stage satirical dramas in the streets of the city every summer during the *Gāī Jātrā* festival. Since these performances invariably lampooned the political figures of the time, they

¹⁶Vyathit, *Sanchayitā* (2nd edn.) (Kathmandu, 1971), p. 27.

were banned during the latter years of Rana rule. Once the "revolution" had run its course, the tradition was revived, and among the plays performed were several of Sama's most important dramas. One of these, *Liberation (Amlekh)*, which concerned the outlawing by Chandra Shamsher of debt-bondage and slavery in Nepal, had been submitted to the Gorkha Language Publication Committee in 1929, but had been proscribed because of the following lines:

. . . how many castes are created by wealth? Does the Lord number us all among humankind? . . . Can one man be a beast belonging to another? Is Manu Smriti not the root of all branches? It is the fool who is an animal. He who calls his brother an animal is himself a beast.¹⁷

A Sense of Disillusionment

The literature of the 1950s reveals a growing sense of disenchantment with the vacillatory and factional political atmosphere which typified the decade before King Mahendra dissolved the government headed by B. P. Koirālā, which had been elected in 1959. The first Cabinet, created by King Tribhuvan in 1951, had been doomed to failure, since it was an attempt to forge an alliance between two fundamentally opposed groups: the Nepali Congress and the Rānās. The second Cabinet was composed entirely of Congress members and was therefore undermined by those excluded from it. Between 1951 and 1959, numerous political parties sprang up and fragmented, various Cabinets were formed and dissolved, committees were convened and abolished with depressing regularity. These political uncertainties made the implementation of essential reforms virtually impossible and social and economic conditions in Nepal changed very little as a result.

Nepali poets devised various symbols to represent their disappointment with what many felt were the broken promises of the 1950 revolution. A striking number of compositions appeared on the theme of martyrdom. In 1941, Juddha Shamsher ordered the public execution of several members of the Prajā Parishad on the Tundikhel parade-ground in central Kathmandu. Three of these men have now entered national mythology as martyrs for the cause of democracy; a bust of each of them is enshrined in Martyrs' Gate to the south of the parade-ground and they have left their names to posterity, strangely enough, alongside those of notable Rānās:

There are also the statues of the various Rana Prime Ministers. Most have been removed from their original sites . . . Juddha Shamsher, however, has kept

¹⁷Sama, *Mero Kavitaiko Arādhana* (Kathmandu, 1972), pp. 92-93.

his commanding position at the end of Juddha Sadak . . . The other streets leading away from the intersection are named after three of the political activists he executed in 1941. One might at first think it an incongruous combination, but on reflection it seems a wholly appropriate ambiguity.¹⁸

After these executions, Gopālprasād Rimāl gathered a group of young writers about him, and his group paid visits to the temple of Pashupatināth, where the Hindu dead are cremated, each morning, and to the temple of Shobhā Bhagavatī each evening. There they would sing the following hymn, to register their protest against these executions, and to pledge themselves to the struggle for political change:

I serve the country, give me strength,
 May I bring happiness and welfare to all,
 To you we cry in supplication,
 We are free, all slavery is abolished,
 Oh Shiva, give me strength,
 I serve the country, give me strength.¹⁹

Many poets clearly felt that the martyrs' sacrifice had been made in vain. Bijay Malla suggested as much in a short poem entitled *To a Martyr (Shahidprati)*:

Just suppose that one day . . .
 . . . you fulfilled your resolution:
 You became a martyr,
 You died and left an emotion behind,
 But alas
 There was no-one in the world
 Who could maintain your memory;
 No-one at all.²⁰

Bhupi Sherchan, the author of some of Nepali literature's most biting satirical verse, mentions the martyrs on numerous occasions, sometimes in a tone of devotion:

¹⁸Whelpton, "Rana Nepal: a Political History," in Srestha (ed.): *Nepal Rediscovered* (London, 1986), p. 17.

¹⁹Tānāsarmā, *Nepālī Sāhityako Itihās* (Kathmandu, 1970), p. 115.

²⁰Malla, *The Road to Nowhere*, (Kathmandu, 1979), p. 77.

There can be no dawn without the setting of the stars,
No country can be built without the dying of some sons. . .
(1962)²¹

but, more typically, in a deeply ironical tone. He concludes a poem, written in 1968 about a stroll down New Road amid "flower-baby hippies", "virgins wearing coils" and - beggars with the following lines expressing perplexity over the condition of modern Kathmandu:

I light my last cigarette,
Put the hollowness of Kathmandu
into the empty packet, and throw it away.
I glance up and fling Martyrs' Gate a silent question,
But it just replies with a faint smile
And disappears into the mist.²²

In 1956 another influential poet, Mohan Koirālā, protested against the execution of the martyrs:

We cried out - stop, you butchers,
They have not stolen your shame and servitude,
They have not taken your malice and envy
they have not robbed you of hunger and hate,
They have tried to fill your eyes with joy.. .²³

but he then expressed the opinion that the martyrs were already a part of past history and that his country should look to its future:

But they have died already,
I make the picture clear,
I wash the dusty ground with water
. . . and I turn the page to another history²⁴

By 1961, when his famous poem *The Fiddle (Sārangi)* was published, Koirālā had begun to express his own disappointment with the aftermath of 1950. The central figure of this

²¹ Sherchan, *Ghumne Mechmāthi Andho Manchhe* (1984), p. 36.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²³ Koirālā, *Mohan Koirālākā Kavita* (Kathmandu, 1973), p. 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

poem is a young minstrel (*gāine*). The minstrel is a well-known figure of rural Nepal where illiteracy is still widespread and a strong oral tradition persists. The minstrels' songs frequently recount tales of political intrigue, or comment on social trends. Alexander Macdonald has reproduced the texts of four minstrel songs which bewail the lot of the poor of Nepal and criticise the political situation under the Congress government.²⁵ Koirālā describes a minstrel who is ignored by the people who once listened to his songs:

Now brother minstrel is utterly cold,
And he has had no chance to play his fiddle,
And so his hands are numb.
Without men all around to abuse him
He is desolate now. . . ²⁶

Koirālā's minstrel seemed to represent the lowly and deprived classes of Nepal, for whose sake, in the poet's view, the revolution had taken place, but who had not benefitted from it as they should. The final verse of the poem encapsulates its political message and the concluding lines quote slogans of social reform and spiritual uplift ironically in their original Sanskrit:

I say, "Why does the blind man sing
When he sees the world as nothing.
But the ashes of burned meadows?"
And he asks me, "Where are the trees?
Where are the bushes, green shade for the traveller?
Where is the high land, the low land,
Rent-free for the hoe?
The rivers and streams for my thirst,
The glass of water for my labours?
Where are those rotten wise men who said,
'May all beings be happy?'
Where are the men who said,
'Truth, not Falsehood, shall triumph?'"²⁷

²⁵Macdonald, *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia*, (Kathmandu, 1975), pp. 169-175.

²⁶Koirālā, *op. cit.* (1973), p. 121.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

The extent to which the Nepali poetry of the 1940s and 1950s reflected the upheavals which were taking place in the political life of the kingdom is quite remarkable. The "older generation" of poets, men who were perhaps in their 30s or 40s at the time, were unanimous in their opposition to the autocracy, and also unanimous in their disappointment with the administration which replaced it. Prior to the *sātsāl* revolution, for instance, Siddhicharan Shreshtha had written:

I don't have time,
Death, do not call me,
I don't have time to mop up
The blood from a broken head . . .
. . . The people of my country
Have cancelled their meals
And are struggling: look!
No smoke comes from their chimneys.²⁸

By 1952, however, his optimism had already begun to diminish:

Times have changed,
The Rānās are sunk
They say our chains are broken.
But freedom, progress, democracy
These have not come to us;
A woman is crying out,
"Father has not come home."²⁹

The generation of poets who had "come of age" during the latter years of the Rana regime were poorly equipped, in an intellectual or ideological sense, to comment on the unprecedented changes taking place in their land. Their sense of betrayal was abundantly clear, but their often sentimental and formulaic compositions seemed increasingly ill-suited to an age in which the literary and intellectual culture of Nepal was suddenly exposed to the "neon lights of an electronic age."³⁰ After the inauguration of Tribhuvan University in 1959 and the establishment of colleges and campuses for higher education throughout the kingdom, a new generation of Nepali writers began to emerge. Although

²⁸Shreshtha, *Mero Pratibimba* (Kathmandu, 1978), p. 132.

²⁹Ibid., p. 46.

³⁰Malla, op. cit (1979), p. 192; Hutt, "Neon Lights and Vedic Caves," in *South Asia Research*, 1984.

these young men and women acknowledged the debt they owed to illustrious predecessors such as Devkotā, their awareness of literary and philosophical traditions and innovations other than those which were native to Nepal caused a marked change to occur in the tone and content of their writings.

Several poets straddled these two very different generations, since they did not begin to write until the late 1950s. Bhūpi Sherchan is an important case in point. Born in 1936, Sherchan became a wholesale convert to communism during his youth. He adopted the pen-name *Sarvahārā*, "Proletariat" and published two volumes of revolutionary verse, which are now totally unavailable. In 1960, he was jailed for his political activities but by 1969 he had been rehabilitated to the extent that his third collection of poems, *A Blind Man on a Revolving Chair*, (*Ghumne Mechmāthi Andho Mānchhe*) received a prestigious literary prize. Sherchan is now a member of the Royal Nepal Academy, and his career reflects the oft-quoted adage that a Nepali poet's political attitude passes through three phases as he grows older: *garam* (hot, rebellious), *naram* (mild, compliant), and *harām* (complacent).

The Nepali literature of the 1960s and early 1970s was characterised by widespread experimentalism, and references to contemporary political issues again became veiled. This was especially the case with regard to poetry. Some writers of fiction did continue to refer to contemporary political circumstances, however.

Ramesh Bikal, for instance, published a famous story in 1962 about a blind beggar whose pitch was on the pavement of New Road, the main commercial street of central Kathmandu. One day, this old man is moved from his customary position by police to make way for a procession to welcome a foreign dignitary to the capital:

A jeep came up behind them, a loudspeaker blared from it. Someone was shouting about democracy. . . citizens. . . friendly nation. . . a guest. . . welcome with open hearts. . . The sound of the loudspeaker gradually faded away into the distance.

"What is it Sānī?", asked the blind man, then turned around to ask a shopkeeper the same question.

"They're telling you to send your wife to the women's assembly to make a speech about democracy." The air was suddenly filled with the sound of many people laughing.

"Oh, democracy, how long is it now since that happened? We've had that for years!"³¹

³¹Bikal, *Nayam Sadakko Git* (Kathmandu, 1977), p. 44-45. The blind man mispronounces democracy (*prajātantra*) as *parjatantra*.

Although "development" (*bikās*) became part of every Nepali citizen's vocabulary during this period, with enormous advances being made in the fields of communications, health, education and so on, and although the *Panchāyat* system of government devised by King Mahendra was not wholly unresponsive to public opinion, the political opposition was again forced "underground". Thus the works of younger writers exhibited the influences of existentialism, Marxism and the psychological theories of Freud, but their prevailing tone was one of social and cultural alienation, rather than political rebelliousness. Several attempts were made to redefine the purpose of literature: the "Third Dimension" (*Tesro āyām*) movement in particular achieved some measure of success with its argument that writers should address all aspects of existence. Despite the fact that poets such as Ishwar Ballabh and Bairāgi Kānlā have been accused of propounding "literary obscurantism at its worst"³², their efforts to establish a school of Nepali modernism have had a lasting effect. The cerebral tone of this new poetry, with its abstruse vocabulary and cryptic references to world mythology, rendered it inaccessible to all but a highly-educated elite in Nepal. Unlike the poems of Gopālprasād Rimāl, which were "symbolic yet simple, simple yet lyrical, lyrical yet progressive,"³³ the new poetry was rarely aimed at a mass readership, or written to propagate a particular political view. It would be fair to say that during this period of experimentation Nepali literature became almost completely divorced from the everyday realities of the kingdom.

These trends towards intellectualism and obscurity began to be reversed during the 1970s, a change which was attributable partly to the growth of an educated but under-employed class of young adults issuing from Nepal's educational institutions, and partly to the enormous popularity of Bhūpi Sherchan's celebrated collection of poems. Sherchan had not shrunk from attacking the modern society of Nepal with vigour: his most famous poem, after which the collection was named, depicted a man in a position of high authority who was corrupt, insensitive and narrow-minded. His anger burst out almost uncontrollably in *This is a Land of Uproar and Rumour*, a long cry of patriotic rage against the corruption and lack of intellect which he considered his country's greatest weaknesses:

This is a land of uproar and rumour,
Where deaf men wearing hearing-aids
are the judges of musical contests,
Where those whose shoes are full of stones
Are connoisseurs of poetry. . . (1967)³⁴

³²Subedi, "The Movements in Nepali Poetry of this Decade," in *Flow*, 1970:67.

³³Tānāsarmā, op. cit. (1970), p. 115.

³⁴Sherchan, op cit. (1984), p. 45.

Sherchan quickly became a major influence upon the younger poets of the time, with the result that many began to simplify their language and to reintroduce references to contemporary social and political issues. This trend reached a climax in 1979, with a combination of literary and political activity which was extremely rare in Nepal.

The Street Poetry Revolution of 1979

Since 1960, Nepal has been governed by a pyramidal system of *Panchayat* councils at local and national levels, headed by the monarch who exercises a veto. Political parties have been banned for most of this period, but many operate surreptitiously and during the mid-1970s considerable dissatisfaction with the existing order began to become apparent in the main urban centres. After a wave of strikes, and a violent student riot in Kathmandu, King Birendra amazed both supporters and critics by announcing, in May 1979, that a referendum would be conducted to ascertain the will of the people on the question of the national political system. Two options were set before the electorate: the retention of the *Panchāyat* system, with minor reforms, or the reintroduction of multi-party democracy.

Both "camps" made strenuous efforts to influence public opinion during the twelve-month run-up to the Referendum. Nepal's extremely low literacy rate obliged them each to adopt means of communication other than the written word. The National Commission which had been set up to organise the Referendum allotted two campaigning colours: sky-blue to the multi-party protagonists, and yellow to the defenders of the status quo. In the propaganda battle which ensued, each colour was invested with negative or positive qualities. The multi-party camp claimed that its skyblue was the colour of peace, democracy and freedom, since it represented the sky, under which all are equal and in which all have a share. The pro-*Panchāyat* campaigners, however, described blue as the colour of coldness and identified it with the cold ashes of a funeral pyre. Conversely, opponents of the *Panchāyat* system attacked yellow as the colour of jaundice, but its supporters described it as the colour of the sun, gold, and the costumes of the gods.³⁵

It was made fairly clear by the authorities that political campaigning would be tolerated in Nepal during this period, and that low-key activity along party political lines would not be prevented. In Kathmandu, this new atmosphere of freedom produced what became known as the *Sadak Kavita Krānti*, the "Street Poetry Revolution." Young poets recited their works to passers-by and onlookers, and their campaign had its hub at the old pipal tree on the capital city's New Road, traditionally an evening rendezvous-

³⁵Verma, *Nepal: Progress and Problems* (Kathmandu, 1980), pp. 55-56.

point for writers and intellectuals. Collections of verse and new literary journals, all containing propagandist work which supported the multi-party option, were printed in large numbers and sold on the streets. A typical example was *The Cry of Mother Nepal* (*Nepāl Āmāko Pukār*), a collection of fourteen poems of rather indifferent quality published by its author, Himālaya Lohani, in August 1979. One thousand copies of this booklet were sold within a fortnight, and a second edition soon appeared. The Street Poetry Revolution was a political campaign rather than a literary movement. The poets who were involved described their works as "the release of the voice of history, suppressed for nineteen years".³⁶ Their poems were simple and direct, not to say unsophisticated, and despite the campaign's lack of political success, it had the effect of strengthening many Nepali writers' desire to produce literature which came closer to the people.

Recent Trends: a Sampling

By a narrow majority (54.7 per cent), the National Referendum of 1980 maintained the political status quo. The fact that most young writers had vigorously supported the multi-party option demonstrated that the educated urban Nepali remained untypical of his nation. In general, urban areas with a high percentage of literate people opted for the multi-party system, although there were notable exceptions to this in the lowland Tarāi districts.³⁷ However, the latest generation of Nepali writers have become more radical and less optimistic than their predecessors. This is particularly true of young Nepali poets, who have discarded most of the symbolism and ornate language of the older tradition and express themselves simply and forcefully. Sherchan, a major influence on these new poets, has discussed the reasons for this change in the tone of Nepali verse:

Today's generation of sensitive young people are discomfited by unemployment among the educated youth of the lower middle class, the constant increase in the cost of living, the moneyed classes' vulgar display of their wealth and the deepening gulf between rich and poor. In my opinion, the basic trends of modern poetry are influenced by an anger and pessimism which are engendered by this atmosphere, and modern poetry has become a powerful medium for expressing these emotions.³⁸

Nepalis are still guaranteed the right to express "legitimate criticisms" of their

³⁶Verma, "Contemporary Nepali Poetry," (1981), p. 9.

³⁷Baral, *Nepal's Politics of Referendum* (Kathmandu, 1983), p. 108.

³⁸Sherchan, Interview in *Madhupark* (Kathmandu, 1983), p. 108.

government, although a constitutional ordinance stipulates that "no person shall establish political parties and organizations with party objectives"³⁹ and a section of the Treason Act of 1961, (known as the *Rāj Kāj* Act), prohibits criticism of the king or the royal family. Some uncertainty exists as to what constitutes "legitimate criticism": it is highly unusual for any Nepali to criticise the monarch, but writers have occasionally fallen foul of the law by appearing to do so. Since it is still rather early to attempt an evaluation of the literature which has appeared since 1980, it will be sufficient merely to present the reader with a few samples of the political tone adopted by the newest Nepali poets.

Young writers like to pour scorn on the romantic verse of the older generation, and clearly feel that literature which is not socially or politically relevant is of little worth:

The moon is spreading coolness,
The night is fragrant, the heart overjoyed,
-but pardon me please, oh poet,
I must interrupt your poem once more:
Has rice become cheap in the marketplace?
Have you eaten enough today?
Oh dear poet, are you quite well?⁴⁰

Some satirise various aspects of national policy, such as Nepal's dependence upon aid from foreign governments:

Respected visitor, this is the Kathmandu Valley,
In other words, our capital;
Here there are three cities:
Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur,
Please cover your nose with a handkerchief,
No sewage system is possible,
The building of toilets has not been feasible;
Our next Five-Year Plan has a Clean City Campaign:
Could you make a donation?⁴¹

Others are still overtly political, and continue the tradition established by Rimāl

³⁹Baral, *op. cit.* (1983), p. 114.

⁴⁰Bimal Nibhā in Sharmā (ed.), *Samasāmayik Sājhā Kavita* (Kathmandu, 1983), pp. 269-70.

⁴¹Mīnbahadur Bishṭha in *ibid.*, p. 21.

by describing, allegorically, a revolution which they feel sure will come:

April has come to the lowlands
With a wind like a crazy elephant,
Oh cooks with your spoons and ladles,
Beware of the fire!
Oh you who try to act as father
By grabbing your whole family by its hair,
Beware of the fire!
Beware of the wind!⁴²

It will not be possible for us to understand any contemporary society fully if we do not take account of the views of that society which are expressed in the literature it produces. I have referred specifically to the instance of Nepal in this article, restricting myself to an examination of the ways in which writers there have commented upon political change during the past forty years. The course of evolution which is charted here: from revolutionary zeal to post-revolutionary disillusionment, and from a school of social realism through a period of abstraction to a renewed forcefulness and simplicity, is replicated by most South Asian literatures. What is noteworthy in the case of Nepali is that this evolution has occurred very rapidly. This perhaps raises questions about

⁴²Krishnabūshan Bal in *ibid.*, p. 42.

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