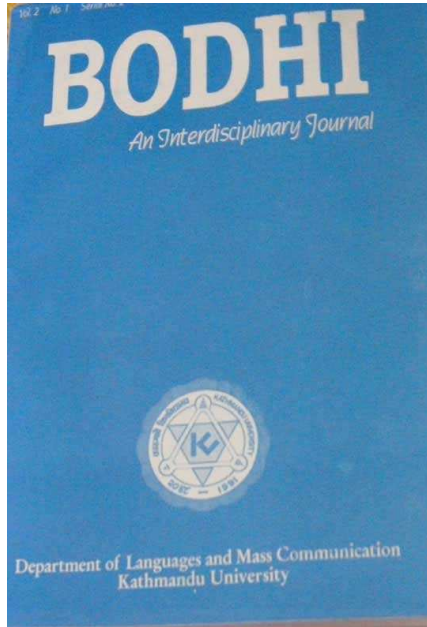


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**Culture and Nationalism in Devkota's *Shakuntala***

- Bal Krishna Sharma

Laxmi Prasad Devkota's reputation as one of the most accomplished literary figures in Nepal needs any elaborate explication. A cursory glance at his English writings reveals that he was as good in English language as in Nepali. His English renderings include essays, poems and translations. Kafle (2007) puts Devkota's English writings in three categories: first, those originally written in English; second, the translations of his own works; and third, the translations of other contemporary writers (p. 19). The famous epic *Shakuntala* is considered greatest among his works written both in English and Nepali.

There have been extensive readings on the Nepali *Shakuntala*. These readings explore the social, political, aesthetic, autobiographical and mythological aspects of this epic. Making a text-based reading of *Shakuntala*, Tripathi (1972) throws light on its stylistic aspects (p. 7). Likewise, Risal (1974) studies *Shakuntala* for its plot and symbolism (p. 94). Another eminent critic Bandhu (1979) extends the scope of *Shakuntala* by highlighting its aesthetic and philosophical part (p. 131). However, there have been only limited attempts to study the English version despite its being equally rich and powerful for literariness. This paper presents a study of Devkota's English *Shakuntala* as a cultural and nationalistic text. I hope my reading bears some significance in a form of initiation.

***Shakuntala*, Nationalism and Culture**

Ernest Renan (1990) puts that national consciousness invariably refers to "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories" (p.19). Viewed from this point of view, Devkota's *Shakuntala* perpetuates the legacy of rich cultural, social and geographical heritage through this epic rendering. Devkota is marked for his consciousness to strike a rapport of national sensibility among the people of his country through the uses of

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imageries steeped in typically indigenous vegetations, flora and fauna and landscape. The poet's concern in this sense seems to be that of an anthropologist striving to excavate the previously hidden or forgotten names of local vegetations. Devkota's striving to revive and sustain local plants imparts a typical native flavour to the entire text. Devkota's nationalism is conscious to preserve for posterity nationally significant indigeneity which may be eroded due to the blurring effect of modernisation and globalisation.

Devkota's national sensibility can be distinctly categorized in the use of characters. It would be worthwhile to examine his characters to illustrate how writers bring in characters to allegorize existing conditions. For Anthony D. Smith (2005) one of the criteria of national identity and love for nation is "the rediscovery of forgotten history and heroes" (p. 7). Renan also concedes to this fact adding that nation is "a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul, or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present" (1990, p.19). In this context, *Shakuntala* is Devkota's attempt to retrieve and revive forgotten history and heroes and retains rich cultural heritage.

Every nation has its own understanding of its distinctive past that is conveyed through stories, myths, and legendary personalities. This component of time is characteristic of every nation and is called "temporal depth" (Grosby, 2005, p. 8). Devkota is acutely conscious of this depth and therefore subtly brings in the politically repressive situation of his contemporary time. This temporal depth is pervasive throughout the text. The conclave of Indra and his entourage to distract Vishwamitra's penance camouflages the Rana's sinister design to foil the potential Nepalese stirring to revolt against the oppressive regime. The resplendent and lavish decoration of Indira's palace subtly shows Devkota's literary knack in drawing parallelism between Indra and the Ranas.

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Likewise, the description of Indra's palace reminds one of that of the Ranas'. When Dushyanta is conducted to Indra's palace, Devkota becomes subtle and is wonderstruck when he gazes upon the gaudy interior of Indra's palace. In canto 9, Devkota dwells upon the description of the banquet hall as being "filled with waiting gods and goddesses/ A sumptuous feast of food celestial / Was spread before them" (L 146- 43). In the same canto, Devkota presents the menu that consists of "nectar [drink] and food ambrosial" (L 152-53). Inside the palace, Dushyanta and Indra are entertained by "the ballet, whirling arabesques/ Of 'apsaras' (Canto 9, L 153 -54).

Furthermore, Devkota's national consciousness can be illustrated in the way he has lent temporal dimension to his characters. His Indra is the subtle representation of the repressive Rana rulers. He camouflages the Ranarchy in the canopy of legendary figures. Vishwamitra, a sage bent upon demolishing the power of Indra, can be taken as the portrayal of Nepali people who reeled under the yoke of the suppressive Ranarchy.

Devkota's minor characters also hold a notable significance for the reason that they reflect the poet's concern to perpetuate Nepali culture of fidelity or trustworthiness. The affinity displayed by *Shakuntala's* two confidants, namely Annosya and Priambada at the time of Shakuntala's departure to her husband Dushayanta's palace is an apt example of generosity and unselfish love. They dispense good counseling to *Shakuntala*. They believe in the efficacy of curse pronounced by sages and therefore, entreat Durbasa, a sage, to commute his punishment, which the sage pronounces because of *Shakuntala's* impertinence towards him.

Devkota's national consciousness focusing on distinct native flavour can be found in the way he exhorts his readers to do away with the dreariness and mechanized life of modern age. Devkota's concern in sustaining the pristine glory of the past, which is being pitted against the deadening and enervating

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impact of sprawling modernization, is clearly evident throughout his address to the reader. This apart, his appeal to imbibe ancient values, to live according to the precedents of “wondrous past” (To the Reader, L 29) and to revive “the ancient fires”(To the Reader, L 34) clearly subscribe Renan’s “soul, and spiritual principle” attached with national sentiment.

*Shakuntala* encompasses a comprehensive Nepali ambience. In his imaginative flight from the earth as far as Indra’s abode (Canto, 9), Devkota makes an incisive and vivid survey of the entire setting with his consciousness focused on typical local and indigenous milieu. This epic encompasses both this physical world and the heaven. Dushyanta is called upon by Indra to fight on behalf of gods. Devkota presents an encyclopedic view of the earth and the world beyond. Despite divergent movement from one setting to another Devkota has kept local colour intact.

Besides, *Shakuntala* has acquired local colour not only in characters and setting but also in philosophical values and beliefs espoused by the poet. This can be noticed in the expounding of Gautami and curses pronounced by sage Durbasa. Gautami illustrates assertiveness calling upon king Dusyanata to “Look on this tragic maid, Shakuntala” (Canto 8, L 224). This indicates the sanctity of the nuptial relation, trying hard on her part to salvage the Dushyanata- Shakuntala marriage. When the king rejects Shakuntala as his wife, Gautami addresses him as “Soulless” (Canto 8, L165). Beside her assertive nature, she also has a tinge of motherly reproach as is illustrated “Too long then playest, child; the chilly dawn/ Will give thee cold” (Canto 8, L23 -24).

Belief on destiny and curses and the capacity on the part of the sage to pronounce deadly curses of long-standing consequences is a part of Nepali cultural beliefs. “Fortune’s wheel full circle turn’d / Estranging love, ensnaring memory” (Canto 8, L117-18) is clearly reminiscent of Durbasa’s curse. Sage Durbasa known for his temperamental wrath once visits the hermitage of

counterpart Kanva. Shakuntala fails to notice the arrival of this sage as she has been engrossed in thoughts of her husband, Dushyanta. On being ignored, the sage feels offended and curses Shakuntala that the person about whom she has been thinking will henceforth forget her. However, upon many entreaties by Shakuntala's friends the sage commutes the curse saying that Dushyanta will recognize her on the production of a souvenir. This is a distinct Nepali cultural belief.

*Shakuntala* is steeped in nature. Devkota's felicity in the description of the lush vegetation, the swaying trees, the gurgling streams has enriched the tapestry of the epic. Devkota is delighted in the way he presents nature and its various components. His sharp observation of the landscape reinforces his propensity towards the influence nature can prevail on human beings. Also, its invigorating power is capable of invoking creativity and inspiration.

For Devkota nature is intricately bound up with human activity. In *Shakuntala*, Devkota projects nature as being capable of vicarious experience for human beings. In miseries, nature seems to be sympathetic whereas in happiness nature becomes invigorating. Dushyanata, away from "his hall of state" (Canto 4, L 40), pursues the bracing and embalming effect of nature. He feels a profound affinity and intimacy with nature inspiring his love for Shakuntala. The lines "His soul luxuriates in greenery/ And feels its kinship with all natural things" (Canto 5, L 7-8) reinforces one to one relationship between nature and a human being. Even birds are capable of imitating "the vedic hymns" and "holy chants" (Canto 5, L 12- 13). Besides, the poet personifies Vanaspati presenting it as "the Monarch of the woods" (Canto 2, L161-162).

For Devkota cultural traditions, values, beliefs and topography are a great monument of national heritage. As literature is a cultural creation, Devkota unearths and preserves various cultural icons through his great epic *Shakuntala*. As Grosby aptly remarks that people maintain and show allegiance to their

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nation through “memories about the past” (p. 8), Devkota, in his bid to effect oneness among different people of his nation, retrieves the memories of old legends, myths and, through subtle representation, politics of his time. For retracing and nativising ancient legendary personalities and situating them against contemporary time to expose repressive socio-political scenario, and for preserving unique geo-cultural phenomena, Devkota's *Shakuntala* can be rightly termed as a cultural text.

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