

## Humanism in Devkota's *Bhikhari*

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### ***Abstract***

This paper analyzes some of the poems from Laxmi Pd. Devkota's *Bhikhari*, one of the popular compilations of Nepali poetry. Devkota is primarily a humanist poet. He is also the leading Nepali poet who popularized Romantic poetry in Nepali literature. In *Bhikhari*, Devkota seems more like a 'romantic humanist'. The paper tries to trace the root of 'humanism' in general, and how English Romantic poets accommodated it in their Romantic philosophy later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In short, humanism believes that individuals have everything they need to grow and develop to their fullest potential. This article is a reading of Devkota's some of the poems from his collection *Bhikhari* from the perspective of humanism.

*Bhikhari* is one of the popular collections of Nepali poems by Laxmi Pd. Devkota. He is primarily a humanist poet. He is also the pioneering Nepali poet who introduced and popularized Romantic poetry in Nepali literature. When we go through the poems in this compilation, Devkota sounds more like a 'romantic humanist'. This paper briefly talks about 'humanism' in general, and how it reflects in western Romantic Movement later. It also attempts to explain some of the poems by Devkota from the perspective of humanism.

Humanism is the intellectual and social movement which is usually said to have begun from the Renaissance as a rediscovery and re-evaluation of the aspects of classical civilization, i.e. ancient Greece and Rome, and the application of these aspects to intellectual and social culture. Scholars are still debating on the definition and the different aspects of humanism. However there is a consensus on a basic understanding. It is the philosophical idea that emphasizes the dignity and worth of the individual. Humanism and its ideals came to pervade the art, literature, learning, civic life, first in Italy, then in all of Europe. M. H. Abrams writes:

Typically, Renaissance humanism assumed the dignity and the central position of human beings in the universe; emphasized the importance of the study of the classical imaginative and philosophical literature, although with emphasis on its moral and practical rather than its aesthetic values; and insisted on the primacy, in ordering human life, of reason as opposed to the instinctual appetites and the 'animal' passions. (83)

Abrams is clear here. Humanism involves a revival of study of the ancient Latin and Greek authors and trying to see what they actually meant. It expresses a confidence in human's ability to exert control over nature or to shape society according to its needs and desires.

In this regard, Renaissance humanists largely concentrate on classical civilization and the writers. Humanism, in this sense, is nearly as old as human civilization itself. And the term 'humanist', as Abrams writes further, "often connotes a person who bases truth on human experience and bases values on human nature and culture, as distinct from people who regard religious revelation

as the guarantor of all truth and values” (83). But it does not mean that humanists are entirely against god or religion. They reject neither religion nor God. Rather they are not ready to accept religion as a prime dominating and obstructive force in their lives. They want to establish it as one of several institutions in the society. This notion of religion opens the possibility of happiness and prosperity in the earth itself.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romantic poets too disregarded god-centric perspective and ‘humanism’ remained one of the key aspects of their Romantic philosophy as well. By not daring to bring ‘man’ in the place of ‘God’, Romantic poets put forward ‘Nature’ in the place of God, another equally powerful force. The path they took was indirect but the motive clear- replacing God with Nature and from Nature to the Man. In this sense, humanism paved the way for pantheism. In humanistic view, not the supernatural agents, but ordinary people and the things shaped the world for better or worse.

In this paper, I attempt to explain some of the poems by Laxmi Prasad Devkota from the perspective of humanism. The eponymous poem *Bhikhari* itself is an example of the poet’s portrayal of humanism. The poem presents a beggar in the extreme wretchedness, in dire need of handfuls of rice. He appears as a blurred image, like a patch of cloud, in the courtyard. The society he lives in is quite unaware or indifferent even for his survival. The pleading of the beggar, and his miseries manifested in his appearance make the poet reflective. The sight becomes an epiphany. Soon we find the poet meditating upon the humanity itself. He does not find any difference between this beggar and the rest of the human beings in the earth. In terms of human desires and dreams he finds no difference between the human beings, between creatures in the world. Now the beggar no more remains a miserable man in the courtyard, rather one of the gods descended in the earth disguised. The poet notices the sparks of divinity in him. The poet writes:

कालो बादलबाट खसेको  
अन्धकारमा भित्र बसेको,  
ईश्वर हो कि भिखारी ?  
बोल्दछ, ईश्वर हृदय घुसेको  
घर, घर, आँगन चारी  
बोल्दछ, आर्तध्वनिमा बोल्दछ  
करुणामृत दिल भारी ।

Here, the message is clear. Devkota probably hints at the contemporary political regime that only fed the handful of rulers and aristocrats, depriving the commoners even the survival. This political satire is here. At the same time, the poem tries to impart the message of co-existence, the spirit of fraternity and brotherhood. What a humanistic appeal to the humanity!

Like in *Bhikhari* where Devkota appeals us to become happy by helping others, another poem entitled *Prasnottar* revolves round the same message. The poem deals with the ideals of a good life. In the very stanza, the poem answers how a man can achieve happiness. It is a great puzzle, always a mystery to the mankind. But how simply the poet answers this, and how human he sounds when he says ‘आफू मिटाई अरुलाई दिन" जहाँ छ’. The poet argues that human happiness is here and it is attainable. It does not require any supernatural intervention. No

more gazing to the sky. One can achieve happiness by selflessly helping others. He accepts that life is mysterious. Look at how a rose plant grows in your garden, the poet argues, you can unfold the mysteries of life. He writes:

...यस्तो रहस्यमय जीवन बुझ्नलाई,  
जानू कहाँ ? पढनु हो ? गुरु को बनाई ?'  
'फुल्दो (खुल्दो) गुलबबिच ज्ञान अनेक फुल्छन्  
उद्यानमा बस गई सब तत्व खुल्छन् ।'

Being a romantic poet, the poet sees every chance for a man becoming an incomplete being detached from nature. He shows the interconnectedness between man and nature. He shows how man and nature complement one another. And what are two great things in a man's life? It is again too difficult. It is very difficult to choose only the two out of many important things in a man's life. But the poet is not confused at all, and answers: 'के हो ठुलो जगत्मा ?' 'पसिना विवेक'. For him, hard work and the conscience are the two most important things in our life. He tells it precisely. But the message is of far-reaching importance.

One of the principal features of Romantic humanism was the 'quest for freedom'. British Romanticists were greatly inspired by the philosophy of Rousseau and the ideals of the French Revolution. Rousseau was one of the intellectual fathers for the Romanticists, who always sought for human freedom. In his book, *The Social Contract*, he tells that 'man is born free but everywhere he is in chains'. Similarly, let's see how Rousseau's autobiography, *The Confessions* begins: "... Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different" (7). In this way, Romanticists acknowledged the diversity and uniqueness in every human being.

Quite similar to British Romanticists, we can mark the voices of individuality and freedom in Devkota's poetry as well. He himself accepts the influence of British romantic poets on him. Only the difference is that they were against neoclassicism, the movement in literature which emphasized the decorated use of language and rigid poetic form. But here in Nepal, Devkota wanted freedom from the political Rana dictatorship. As a creative genius, he too was suffocating like other Nepali people. They didn't have the political environment to exercise basic human rights too. In his poem entitled *Ban*, Devkota argues clearly why he values human freedom most. He writes:

कुबेर बोले, 'नोकरी लेऊ दिन्छु म दौलत अनगिन्ती ।  
मेरा सेवक हेर उज्याला, सेज सुनौला भुल्छन् ती ॥  
मैले बोले, 'धनका मालिक म सम्भन्छु धनको मोल ।  
अन्तस्करणको स्वतन्त्रता यो तर छ आहा म अनमोल ॥

This way, the poet finds nothing as great and precious as human freedom. He is clear on what he values most. He values conscience and freedom. That's why, he immediately recalls those martyrs who sacrificed their life for the country, for the freedom of Nepalese people. He says:

धर्म बोले, 'कुन मन्दिरमा पूजा गछौं ? आजु ।'  
मैले बोले, 'वीरहरुको बलिदान भएको ठाउँ ॥'

The poet does not show any inhibition to express his conviction. He is a man of strong political convictions. The holiest place for him is the site martyrs sacrificed for the country. Here too, he values those people who contributed for the noble cause. He pays tribute to the martyrs for they sacrificed their life for the good of others.

Just like in this poem, there are many other poems by Devkota such as *Kisan*, *Garib*, *Jindagiko Mausam*, *Ghaansi*, *Yaatri*, etc. which clearly present Devkota's faith on ordinary human beings. He idealizes these so-called common characters. He sounds truly humanistic by speaking on behalf of them, idealizing them. He romantically elevates them. He wants to correct the society, which often makes fun of them. Devkota appreciates them. These people believe in their hard work. They do not wait for any miracles or any sort of divine intervention that brings happiness for them. Nor we find them pulling anyone's leg to fulfil their unquenchable material greed. We find them earning happiness by working hard and becoming reciprocal to nature. Most of the modern people define and calculate the meaningfulness of a man's life in terms of money he has accumulated. But unlike these modern people, Devkota's characters in these poems are not materially rich, however they don't have much grudges. They are content with whatever little they have. Let's see how a farmer lives in his poem *Kisan*:

न्यानो छ त्यो घर अहा म सुखशान्ति बास  
 बत्ती छ सानु तर सुन्दर त्यो प्रकाश म  
 गर्दै प्रवास दिनको, करले कमाई  
 छन् गाँसगाँस कति स्वाद किसानलाई ॥

In this way, just like other humanists, Devkota too believes that individuals have everything they need to grow and develop to their fullest potential. He sees the greatness in these common people. He sees them full of potentiality. He does not give them less importance. He rather appreciates their faith on hard work, their honesty, and dignified way of life. He finds them in integration with Nature. And for Devkota, Nature is the source of everything, and thus of humanity as well. In the poem *Sandhya* he writes:

फुल्लन् यसकै रसमा सारा  
 भावहरुका कोमल फूल  
 यसकै भित्र छ फैलिरहेको  
 जीवनको सब अन्तर मूल ।

In this way, Devkota seems very romantic. He believes that Nature is the source of human civilization. He puts forward his pantheistic worldview that God is identical with the cosmos, the view that there exists nothing which is outside of Nature.

Thus, Devkota, in *Bhikhari*, primarily sounds a humanist. The poems of this compilation largely support to Devkota's inclination towards humanism. Most of the time he idealizes very common characters, and thus sounds romantic in his tone. Devkota, like English Romanticists, wants to convey the message that the source of entire civilization is Nature. And of course, of humanity too.

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