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Balkrishna as a Hindu Reformist in Narayan Dhakal's *Pretkalpa (The Age of the Dead)*: A Critique of New Traditionalism

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Abstract

This paper examines reformation in the Nepali society as represented in Narayan Dhakal's novel *Pretkalpa (The Age of the Dead)*. The novel advocates social reform in the Hindu society as modernity in Nepal during the early decades of the twentieth century. The paper hinges on the following research questions: How are modernity and reformation connected? To what extent does social/religious reformation contribute to modernity? Under the influence of reformist ideas from Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyārtha Prakāś (The Light of Truth)*, Balkrishna, the protagonist of Dhakal's novel – a Kashi educated Brahmin pundit – leads a series of reformation initiatives to change discriminatory practices across the lines of caste, gender, and class. To examine his reformist initiatives based on the Vedic knowledge, this paper recontextualizes Subir Sinha et al.'s critique of the discourse of new traditionalism in relation to the politics of development and environmentalism in India. Threatened by the reformation efforts of Balkrishna, the state – under the leadership of Chandra Shamsher – does everything it can do to retain the orthodox Hinduism, casteism, and feudalism. Eventually, the feudal Rana system based on the practices like *cākarī* and *caplusī* (sycophancy and flattery) prevails, exposing the vulnerability of new traditionalism and thereby of the conservative modernity as well. Discussing modernity, reformation, and new traditionalism, and their connections between and among them to analyze the novel, the paper foregrounds new traditionalism as a significant concept to examine modernity in Nepal.

Keywords: Hinduism, reformation, modernity, new traditionalism

Introduction

In the South Asian scholarship, there – with the rise of nationalism and departure of the Western colonialism – is a resurgence of looking back into the Vedic intellectual

tradition with nostalgia and romanticism. Though the scholars from the Sanskrit language and literature may come into one's mind in this connection, the more remarkable ones working towards it are some scholars, who challenge the Western colonialism and Western models of development even by resorting to the Vedic tradition, if need be (Sinha et al. 67). Moreover, encouraged by the rise of the Hinduism and Narendra Modi in India, some people in Nepal are struggling to bring the Shah monarchy and the Hindu state back (Pulami n.p.). Such groups of people seem to share among themselves an idea that the panacea to all the ills of the modern world can be found in the pristine Hindu past. In the context of this intriguing phenomenon from political as well as intellectual life, Narayan Dhakal's *Pretkalpa*'s pitching for the Vedic knowledge for social reformation of the Hindu society in Nepal during the early years of the twentieth century sounds quite captivating. In an attempt to understand this intriguing phenomenon, the present paper examines modernity in the Nepali society as represented in the novel. Under the influence of reformist ideas from Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyārtha Prakāś* (*The Light of Truth*), Balkrishna, the protagonist, leads a series of reformation initiatives regarding discriminatory practices across the lines of caste, class, and gender. As a new traditionalist, he digs deep into the Vedic tradition to bring reformation in the existing Hindu society. Despite his valiant efforts for reformation, he fails to bring the much desired changes. His failure exposes the vulnerability of the Nepali modernity based on social reformation. This is how this paper critiques new traditionalism as well.

This study is a qualitative research based on close reading and interpretation of Dhakal's novel. Rather than resorting to a conventional literature review of the primary text, this paper has allocated generous space for literature review of the conceptual categories. Nevertheless, the relevant studies on the primary text have been reviewed as per need. Meanwhile, the novel has been selected as this text offers the researcher textual details to look into complex interconnections among reformation, modernity, and new traditionalism in the context of the Nepali society in the early decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, this novel bears new traditionalist echoes, which have grown louder in the recent years as Nepal has been struggling to establish itself as a Federal Republic. The primary text and the theoretical insights on traditionalism, reformation and modernity supply the required data for analysis and discussion. Finally, deriving from the relevant discourses on modernity, reformation, and new traditionalism and the interconnections between and among them, this study focuses on the paradigms like gender, caste, and class. As mentioned above, not only does this theoretical discussion function as a theoretical framework to explicate the intended issues in the primary text but it also functions as a location to delineate new theoretical possibilities, which are corroborated by the details of the primary text. This complex process is expected to foreground the concept of new traditionalism in the debate of modernity.

Reformation, Modernity, and New traditionalism: A Theoretical Perspective

This study primarily identifies elements of new traditionalism within reformation in Dhakal's *Pretkalpa* as it critiques reformism. One can begin with traditionalism to understand how tradition still has its hold over the present. Mirka Erler and Christoph Dittrich make the following observation regarding traditionalism: "Traditionalism refers to a romanticized and sometimes exclusionary way of understanding practices of the past . . . (n.p.). Though traditionalism romanticizes the past, it does not try to judge or change the present. New traditionalism, however, is a tendency to resort to the imagined past for fulfilling different needs of the current time. To introduce new traditionalism as part of the formal discourse, one can start with some documented cases. Edwin Diamond and

Stephen Bates claim that new traditionalism, in the context of advertising, commenced in 1976 when "the Ford and Carter ad campaign [during the U.S. Presidential election] resembled each other: they stressed the traditional American virtues of home, family, and country" (247). In 1982, Connaught Marshner, a religious conservative political activist as well as commentator, wrote a tract called "The New Traditionalist Woman" in which she claims that "the New Traditional woman . . . is traditional because, in the face of unremitting cultural change, she is oriented around the eternal truths of faith and family. Her values are timeless and true to human nature" (qtd. in Darnovsky 74). Later on, this term 'new traditionalism' gained popularity in the 1990s, when a US advertiser *Good Housekeeping* – most probably following Marshner's tract – launched a marketing campaign called The New Traditionalist, which featured women, who – along with their jobs – took care of their house and children. Marcy Darnovsky presents one advertisement of *Good Housekeeping*: "She is the New Traditionalist – a contemporary woman who finds her fulfillment in traditional values that were considered 'old-fashioned' just a few years ago" (72). Darnovsky calls new traditionalism a nostalgia monger as "[a] rhetoric of nostalgia invades the New Traditionalist ads, enforcing the rusty links between women and tradition that are regularly polished up to fend off feminist challenges" (81). Therefore, Elsbeth Probyn relates new traditionalism to postfeminism in these words: "If new traditionalism naturalizes the home into a fundamental and unchanging site of love and fulfilment, the discourse of postfeminism turns on a re-articulation of that choice" (152). In other words, presenting women's return to their home as a 'choice,' postfeminism – just like new traditionalism – promotes status quo.

Another interesting aspect of these advertisements is that they do not rely on binary between modernity and tradition. Contrarily, they, according to Darnovsky, try to present tradition as modern: "The ads pose the old-fashioned not as the opposite of the modern, but as its embodiment. . . . It suggests 'modern because of being old-fashioned'; it celebrates the old-fashioned as fashionable" (81). In this way, new traditionalism is connected to conservative modernity. Alison Light, according to Kit Kowol, is the first scholar to use the term 'conservative modernity' in her work *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (782). Examining the writings of the middle class women at home during the interwar period, Light explains that "a contradictory and determining tension in English social life in the period which I have called a conservative modernity: Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before" (10). Though conservative modernity is different from the earlier conservatism, it – because of its leaning towards tradition – allows space for the traditional practices and values. Under the garb of a few superficial reforms or changes, such conservative modernity, for Bal Bahadur Thapa, "masks and helps retain the traditional values and practices" (364). Thus, this paper argues that the new traditionalist approach to modernity leads to conservative modernity.

Hinting at the exhaustion of new ideas and narratives in the late capitalist world, some critics think that new traditionalism is postmodernism. Though Simon Schleusener shies away from claiming that there is a direct connection between postmodernism and the rise of right wing politics, he points out that postmodernism has left a legacy of pluralism, relativism, and identity politics which have been appropriated by the contemporary right wing discourse. Therefore, his analysis sheds light "on contemporary right-wing movements that have (consciously or unconsciously) appropriated elements of the postmodern logic for their own political purposes" (Schleusener 62). However,

this paper does not aim at examining the postmodernist elements within the new traditionalist discourse in Dhakal's novel. It is limited to the examination of the value of the constructed ideal past, which is supposed to unlock the solution to a plethora of problems of the present. In this paper, Balkrishna, has been examined as a new traditionalist reformer, who resorts to the imagined past to bring change in the present.

In addition, the paper also recontextualizes the notion of new traditionalism as developed by Subir Sinha et al. in their work "The 'New Traditionalist' Discourse in Indian Environmentalism" as their discourse of new traditionalism shares certain elements with the discourse of new traditionalism in the context of Nepali society and history as portrayed in Dhakal's book: a critique of colonialism, a yearning for the imagined ancient Hindu community living in peace and harmony, and an invocation of the classic Hindu scriptures as source of truth and authenticity. In the South Asian context, given the colonial history, new traditionalism seems appealing to scholars as it helps them challenge the colonial as well as the Western scientific knowledge. In India, the new traditionalist discourse "is part of a wider and ongoing critique of Indian modernity, which is currently taking place within the context of global neo-liberal economic reforms" (Sinha et al. 89). The same is more or less true in the context of Nepal. Labeling his PhD dissertation on the Vedic and ethno science as a decolonizing gesture, Kamal Prasad Koirala claims that the Nepali education system has been facing challenges because of the practice of the Western science through curriculum at schools. Therefore, there is a need to derive science from the Vedic scriptures. He asserts, "Vedic scripture and cultural knowledge are not only ritual and spiritual. Huge science can be seen embedded within them and it could apply to the sustainable knowledge development of Nepalese people" (321-22). According to him, the Vedic science can be used for the sustainable knowledge development of Nepali people is a representative example of new traditionalism. Not only has been new traditionalism important for interpreting the Hindu past in an appealing and evocative way but also for mobilizing "a version of the past as a template for alternative development policy" (Sinha et al. 69). One can observe such new traditionalist voices in the Nepali novels as well. In this connection, Michael Hutt contends that "the authors of *Urgenka Ghoda*, *Pretkalpa*, and *Radha* have all delved into the past and drawn lessons from it for contemporary Nepali society" (27). Here, the point of contention is whether an uncritical and romanticized appeal to the Vedic tradition can build foundation for the intended modernity. However, this paper does not aim at dismissing the efforts of the reformist movements or movements for change for that matter. Rather, it argues that the new traditionalist approach to social reformation has certain limitations. Even if genuine efforts are made for progress and change, this approach to reformation, as illustrated by Balkrishna's case, remains a path to conservative modernity to be sustained and eventually swallowed up by tradition.

Contrarily, in the context of the Indian environmental historiography, new traditionalism arose as a critique of colonialism. Critiquing the works of Madhav Gadgil, Ramachandra Guha and Vandana Shiva, Sinha et al. argue:

New traditionalism's specific critique of colonialism and 'development' is accompanied by an equally specific reading of Indian 'tradition'. Within this discourse, traditional or pre-colonial Indian society was marked by harmonious social relationships, ecologically sensitive resource use practices, and was generally far less burdened by the gender, economic and environmental exploitation which concern contemporary observers. (67)

In their work, Sinha et al. consider the new traditionalists like Gadgil, Guha, and Shiva as the latter ones – in their writings about the Indian environment, especially the famous

Chipko (Hug the tree) movement – claim that colonialism and science based development projects are responsible for all the environmental ills and thus idealize the ancient Indian civilization and its balanced relation with environment in their effort to offer solution to the current environmental crisis. Burdening colonialism with all the social as well as cultural ills, new traditionalism – in the case of India – has presented "'tradition' largely immune from the kind of critical assessment it directs at colonialism and development . . ." (Sinha et al. 88). In their bid to present the past free of ills and shortcomings, the new traditionalists, among other strategies, tend to resort to the ancient scriptures and mythologies. For example, Vandana Shiva, in her *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, invokes the classical texts like the Vedas as authentic socio-ecological reportage to construct the ideal relation between nature and the Indian civilization before the colonial onslaught. Shiva, deriving from the Vedic knowledge, redefines nature as *prakriti* (nature) to challenge the Western notions about nature. Shiva claims, "Contemporary western views of nature are fraught with the dichotomy or duality between man and woman, and person and nature.

In Indian cosmology, by contrast, person and nature (Purusha-Prakriti) are a duality in unity. They are inseparable complements of one another in nature, in woman, in man" (39). Here, one cannot miss almost a subsuming impact *purusha*, i.e., male or masculine force, has on *prakriti* in Shiva's alternative insight about gender. One cannot overlook Shiva's politics of appropriating the Vedic knowledge either. Indeed, the new traditionalists have been accused of appropriating the classical Hindu texts so as to maintain their upper caste elitism as such Vedic texts "are components of the elite Hindu Brahmanical tradition, . . ." (Sinha et al. 77). These new traditionalists think that colonization killed off such Vedic ideas and practices from the Indian people, especially those who came into contact with the colonizers. Sinha et al. claim that the Indian new traditionalist discourse about the relation between environment and human beings "sees colonial rule as having imposed a pervasive and alien set of social, economic and ecological relationships on India, which post-independence economic development policies continue more or less *in toto*" (67). Nevertheless, in India, according to Shiva, there are certain communities, which were not soiled by colonization and thus they, like their predecessors in the ancient times, live in harmony with nature. In order to recreate that harmony between the nature and people, Shiva "creates a spiritualised view of the Himalayas and a romanticised view of 'traditional hill society'. As her concept of *aranya sanskriti* (chandelier culture) underscores, forests are the cradle of 'authentic' Indian civilization" (Sinha et al. 70). For example, Shiva claims, "The new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*" (45). He idealizes the rural women as the bearers of indigenous knowledge, which is as authentic as the Vedic knowledge is. However, Sinha et al. critique Shiva's ecological radicalism as it is "profoundly conservative in inspiration and attitude" (70). They also claim that "a critical approach to 'development' should not lead to an uncritical acceptance of alternatives to it . . ." (88). Such observations of Sinha et al. echo the concerns of this paper as Balkrishna invokes the Vedas as a source of truth and authenticity to reform his society. The reasoning seems to be that a return to the pre-Rana period will ensure the re-establishment of the traditional balance of ideal life. The aim of reformation, as portrayed in the novel, seems to be a return to the pre-Rana ideal Hindu civilization, which did not suffer from any social problems. Such a new traditionalist interpretation shows a failure to pay attention to minute details of history. Indeed, the Rana dynasty was one of the offshoots of the practices and values instilled by the Hindu mythologies and scriptures idealized by the new traditionalists like Balkrishna. In Dhakal's work, the valorization of the Vedic

knowledge aims to recover equality, justice, and rights encoded within the ancient scriptures and thereby challenge the internal colonialism of Rana rulers. Thapa argues that the Ranas, as sycophants of their British masters, would try to emulate their masters in every way. He asserts, "The Ranas would treat the Nepali people the way British masters would treat the native people of India" (47). In this context, Balkrishna's reformist movement can be interpreted as his initiative to challenge the internal colonialism of the Rana rulers by recovering the ideal values and practices from the Vedas.

As discussed above, some implicit and explicit new traditionalist assumptions that prevail in Dhakal's *Pretkalpa* are: a) The Vedas are the most authentic source of truths, and thus one can always rely on the Vedas to find solution to any problem; b) In the ancient time, the people- governed by principles of the ancient scriptures- were honest, trustworthy, egalitarian and peaceful; c) The life people led in the ancient time was stable and balanced and thus it did not deteriorate until it was disrupted by the Rana rulers; and d) Under contemporary conditions, restoring 'traditional' knowledge and practices is a means of re-establishing social stability, social well-being, justice and egalitarianism.

Narayan Dhakal's *Pretkalpa*: Critical Analysis

Historicity of the Novel

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the world was undergoing upheavals triggered by the Indian national independence movement, the Russian October revolution, the Chinese May 4 Revolution, and the World War I. Chandra Shamsher, who ruled Nepal as Prime Minister as well as *Shrī Tīn* (the king of Kaski and Lamjung districts) on behalf the autocratic Rana dynasty from 1901 to 1929, understood these events as a sign for a social change in Nepal as well. At such a critical historical juncture, he moved ahead with the two contradictory projects. On the one hand, he tightened the security measures in order to take care of the dissenters like Madhav Raj Joshi. Joshi, father of a revered martyr Shukra Raj Shastri, established the Nepal chapter of *Arya Samaj* (Noble Society, or a reform movement in Hinduism) in 1896. As a member of *Arya Samaj*, Joshi, a man from a Newar family from Kathmandu, started a campaign against the Hindu caste system and paid a heavy price for his courageous effort. In July 1905, Joshi – following a framed intellectual debate between Joshi and the Royal priests to interpret the Hindu scriptures – was physically assaulted by the Brahmin scholars, including Prayag Raj, the chief royal priest, with a permission of Chandra Shamsher. Finally, Joshi was thrown into the jail for two years. Though Balkrishna comes from a Brahmin family, he seems to be modeled on Joshi to some extent. Indeed, David Seddon claims, "The experiences of Madhav Raj Joshi are more or less reproduced in fictional form in the novel, *Pretkalpa*, by Narayan Dhakal" (Seddon 20). In short, the way this novel portrays the impact of the *Arya Samaj* members like Madhav Raj Joshi on the then Nepali society is poignant.

On the other hand, Chandra Shamsher started some development projects. Chandra Shamsher as presented in *Pretkalpa* was guided by the following idea: "If any progress takes place, it has to take place under my control; otherwise it can go to the hell. This is the political commitment of *Shrī Tīn*" (175). This is an example of appropriating modernity at one's convenience. Despite his reluctance towards change and his will to have control over it, Chandra Shamsher's reign was quite significant from the perspective of modernity. In this regard, Bhim Bahadur Pandey argues, "Though the Rana rule was a pure feudal system, many social rectifications took place during the rule of Chandra Shamsher. Some of them are noteworthy: the 1963's abolition of the practice of keeping

pāttarni in Doti, the 1977 abolition of the practice of *satī*, . . . the 1982's abolition of slavery (*kariyā*) . . ." (188). Here, Chandra Shamsher played an important role in exerting the state's intervention in redistribution of capital. Firstly, he took some steps for development like establishing the first ever college (Tri-Chandra College) in Nepal, setting up an innovative way of linking Kathmandu to India through a ropeway, a road, and a train, and exploring some minerals. He even hired the foreign experts in order to get his vision materialized. Chandra Shamsher's time was "notable for the first tentative steps by the Nepalese rulers to develop the productive potential of their situation by purchasing *foreign* expertise" (Thapa 36). Chandra Shamsher, like his predecessors, depended on the capitalist West for his modern projects in Nepal. All these examples demonstrate that Chandra Shamsher's deeds reflect the two important things from the perspective of modernity: limited submission to global changes and state's limited redistribution of capital collected from the people.

During Chandra Shamsher's rule, the Sugauli Treaty was dismissed in 1923 and the British Raj removed the restrictions it had imposed on Nepal regarding the diplomatic relation and trade with other countries except Britain. Blaikie et al., in this regard, argue, "Indian capitalists now had easy access to a growing market in a period when their productive capacity was rising fast whilst world trade was tending to becoming more restrictive. . . . The presence of a captive Nepali market capable of absorbing over 1 percent of total Indian exports . . . is thus not insignificant . . ." (36). Not only did this 1923 treaty with British Raj make Nepal a sovereign country but it also opened a way for Nepal to directly deal with India, which ultimately became the most significant mediator of modernity in Nepal. Nepal got exposed to several modern experiences like reading newspapers and magazines and postal service via India. The Nepalis started getting the updates of the world around through the Indian newspapers. In this connection, Pandey observes, "Whatever foreign newspapers would come to Nepal, the source of all of them was usually India" (13). Indeed, the situation was bleak as reflected by these words: "At that time, the hope – if other nation's flood of change . . . entered Nepal, Nepal would be uplifted at the downfall of the British – was like a mirage" (14). The Nepalis, who were aware of the Ranas' dependence on British Raj, had this hope. It was bolstered by the news they would get from the newspapers from India. Moreover, the Nepali people were exposed to postal services through India. Through India, the influence of the Britain was also visible: "The guns given by the British government were shining in their hands" (Dhakal 60). The Nepali army officers would be dressed in the British attire as observed below: "The colonel was also dressed in the attire like that of British army officer" (61). Certainly, the attire modeled on the British army's uniform, which was imported from India. This brief contextualization makes it clear that Dhakal modeled his protagonist Balkrishna on the *Aryasamajis* (the members of Noble Society) like Madhav Raj Joshi. Moreover, it also helps one understand how modernity in the feudal Nepal was primarily negotiated via India. In all, *Pretkalpa* bears palpable historicity and thus it is open to historicist reading.

Balkrishna as a New Traditionalist

Since the Rana rulers like Chandra Shamsher and Juddha Shamsher did not allow common people to pursue education, Kashi in India would become a significant centre of education for many Nepali men during the early decades of the twentieth century as illustrated in Dhakal's *Pretkalpa*. Educated in Kashi, these men were exposed to the Indian independence movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Balkrishna, the protagonist of the novel, is exposed to all these changes in Kashi. He is exposed to reformation in Kashi. He takes part in the rallies and demonstrations while he

is a student there. The Indian cities, as illustrated in the novel, become the training centres for education, reformation, and independence. He gets educated in Kashi and returns home. He has brought Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyārtha Prakāś*, which disrupts the life in Dukhapur: "Not only did that book bring a great quake in Mandodari's family but also in Dukhapur's peaceful and monotonous life" (Dhakal 18). Though Balkrishna points out the religious scriptures as a source of rectification in the traditional practices, one cannot overlook his exposure to modern practices in Kashi where he was educated. The changes he talks about echo the changes the *Aryasamajis* were discussing and practising all over India in the second half of the nineteenth century. They were trying to reform the Hinduism. It is quite palpable that he is influenced by his stay in Kashi and the ideas of *Satyārtha Prakāś*. Ramkrishna, Balkrishna's father, is alarmed by seeing *Satyārtha Prakāś*, which is banned in Nepal. He gets angry with his wife for supporting the son's cause. He calls her a door to the hell. Balkrishna challenges his father by labeling him a devotee of the Puranas, the dogmatic ancient religious scriptures. Only a dogmatic man can call a woman a door to the hell or a tangled pack of mysteries or the creature to be disciplined by beating. Deriving from the scripture itself, Balkrishna challenges his father in this way: "This is a symptom of the decadent medieval society. There is a glorious place for the woman in the Vedas. They are equal to men. They have equal right to get knowledge" (41). Like other followers of Dayanand Saraswati, also known as *Aryasamajis*, Balkrishna draws inspiration for change and progress from the Vedas. This is what makes Balkrishna a new traditionalist, who looks back to the Vedas for the reformation in the miserable condition of women in his society.

The evidences from the book indicate that Balkrishna is a follower of *Arya Samaj*, which was founded by Dayanand Saraswati in India on 10 April 1875. Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyārtha Prakāś*, a collection of Saraswati's lectures, was published in 1875. The book was the guidebook to the members of *Arya Samaj*. Walia et al. observe *Arya Samaj*'s effort to bring reformation within the orthodox Hinduism in this way: "His adherents disapproved of idolatry and did not adhere to astrology. He declared that he believed that the individual, soul, and matter are three elements of God that are everlasting. By God's favour, each individual was free to seek out the truth for himself with whatever assistance he could. Additionally, he broke predetermines" (1373). In the lines above, Walia et al. present the *Arya Samaj* movement as the movement against superstition, idolatry, astrology, and fatalism. The most important factor was Saraswati's recognition of individual self of human beings. He "urged all men to conduct independent searches for truth rather than accept prefabricated ideologies from the priestly elite. During his lifetime, he established schools and pathshalas" (1373). Thus, he seems to link knowledge to the recognition of the self. This is how he helped his followers recognize themselves as the independent agents, not the puppets of destiny. Such reformist steps of him and his followers project a modern outlook. Though *Arya Samaj* did not stop building temples, they were "used as meeting spaces or schools. Simple rites made up the sixteen Sanskaras that span a man's lifespan. No mysterious or evil spirits were worshipped throughout the rites" (1373). The *Aryasamajis*, who considered the Vedas as the source of all knowledge, contributed to education as well. Nalini Waghmare Avash Avash points out the colonial context, which inspired Saraswati to spread awareness among masses through education. According to her, Saraswati "had realized that the strength of the West lay in their advanced knowledge. Thus, he wanted to spread education among the Indian masses" (Avash 60). *Arya Samaj* also worked on eradicating social evils like polygamy, *pardah* (curtain, or a custom of separating women from the public practiced by Muslims and Hindus), casteism, and *sati pratha* (in Hinduism, a ritual suicide of women after husband's death). The upliftment of Dalits was

one of the most important steps the *Arya Samaj* took to challenge the prevailing caste system. Because of its acceptance of the Vedas as the ultimate source of knowledge, the *Arya Samaj*, however, could not diametrically challenge the division of society as per the Hindu caste system. Nor did they offer an alternative model for organizing the contemporary society. Nevertheless, the members of *Arya Samaj* were not in favour of "the hereditary caste system" (61). Avash's observation somehow nudges one to link the *Arya Samaj's* approach to the new traditionalism as well. Against the background of India under the British colonization, *Arya Samaj's* religious cum social reformation resorted to the traditional values and practices via the Vedas. Even though this approach to modernity bore some fruits, it ended up valorizing the unknown past for the sake of the national pride, which had been dented by the British colonization.

Under the influence of the reformist movement of *Arya Samaj*, Balkrishna gives shelter to an untouchable boy and names him Ashwini. He derives this name from the Vedas. Ashwini is one of the twin gods, who are children to the sun god and *samjhanā* (conscience). Balkrishna teaches Sanskrit to Ashwini. For Ashwini, he also performs a sacred thread offering a ritual, which is reserved for the Hindu upper caste boys only. On the one hand, Balkrishna's act – given the situation of the untouchable people of the time – may sound quite revolutionary. Here, Dhakal's novel poignantly shows the condition of the people like Ashwini belonging to an untouchable caste. Hindustane Gore, an untouchable man, says, "I had to take birth in the womb of the *camār* because of the sin of the previous life. . ." (Dhakal 42). Khuite Kandaro, another untouchable man, adds, "Our task is to serve the Brahmin pundits and Chhetri *kājiī sāhebs*. We are only the dust under their feet" (43). They cannot agree with Balkrishna even when the latter tries to do something in their favour. Kamaro, another untouchable man, questions Balkrishna's acts of teaching Ashwini and conducting sacred thread ceremony for him in these words: "How can the god worshipping pundit and the carrion eating *camār* be the same?" (42). This is the village where a school run by Balkrishna is shut because the upper caste people do not want their children study sharing the bench and room with the children from the untouchable castes. Many upper caste guardians complain to Balkrishna in this way: "Our son is to be taught, sitting next to a Sarki boy! It's not acceptable. Instead, let our son remain ignorant" (44). Against such social background, Balkrishna's act of treating Ashwini as an upper caste child sounds revolutionary. This very act undermines his reformative or progressive gesture. Ironically, the reformer Balkrishna's act ignores the structural violence caused by casteism and thereby simply places more importance on the sacred thread than it really deserves. Referring to the hazardous impacts of *mulukī ēn* (the legal code) on the Nepali society, Sanjeev Uprety and Bal Bahadur Thapa argue that "this provision discriminated between upper and lower caste men, and made such discrimination part of the normative legal system, thus contributing to structural violence against people belonging to the lower castes" (330). While dealing with the caste discrimination prevailing in the Nepali society in the early twentieth century, one cannot ignore the impact of the *mulukī ēn*, which had been promulgated by Jung Bahadur Rana in 1854. This legal codification of the caste system was an attempt of the elite Hindu upper caste communities to assert their hegemony over other groups marginalized in terms of caste. Ironically, *mulukī ēn*, which was a remarkable institutional change in terms of strengthening nation-state and rule of law and thereby modernity, reinforced the age-old caste system further (Thapa 125). Against this historical background of caste system, Balkrishna's reformist act reifies and reinforces casteism. Not only does such approach hide the existing caste problem but it also fails to challenge the structure of casteism. To borrow from Sinha et al., "Such a naturalization of caste system simply

naturalizes the caste based system of domination" (82). This is how new traditionalism can reinforce status quo further.

Balkrishna as a Reformist

Nevertheless, in his attempt to challenge the caste system and promote the widow marriage, Balkrishna, a Brahmin pundit, marries Damyanti, a Chhetri widow. Certainly, this inter-caste affair with a widow creates a wave of controversy among the villagers: "In the traditional social system of Dukhapur, the sexual intercourse between the pundit Balkrishna and Damyanti Khadka becomes an explosive topic. After hearing this news, many tremble and bite tongue in their excitement" (Dhakal 139). Both the inter-caste marriage and widow marriage are vehemently disapproved in the Hindu communities. To a great extent, Balkrishna seems to go beyond tradition in his ideas as well as deeds. Therefore, it is not easy to pin him down as a new traditionalist. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that Balkrishna, as a Brahmin man, has structural dividend recognized by national code of the time. He does not have to bear serious consequences for committing this 'double crime' of marrying a lower caste widow. According to the provision of *mulukī ēn*, "henceforth, lower and higher ranking subjects shall be punished uniformly according to their guilt and caste" (Hofer 178). This could be one of the reasons why Chandra Shamsher, despite a hue and cry this scandal has created in Dukhapur, acquiesces to this affair. However, when he is threatened by other reformist activities of Balkrishna, he gets Balkrishna arrested. Even for his crime against the state, he does not have to face death penalty. Janmardan, the jailor, says to Balkrishna, "You survived because of being a *Bāhun* [a Brahmin]. You did not have to face the life imprisonment because of being a pundit" (Dhakal 9). Thus, Balkrishna enjoys this structural privilege.

In the prison, while explaining to the prison guard, Rajaram, why he has been arrested, Balkrishna discusses his reformist ideas: "I have just said that the society should be changed. . . . He [Chandra Shamsher] can run the state but should run [it] in a righteous way" (Dhakal 5). Here, he talks about social change. However, again, Balkrishna argues that the answers to the social ills of his time are found in the age-old Vedas: "I have said nothing new. The answers I have sought are there in our religious scriptures. Love the human being. Don't discriminate on the basis of caste. Don't practise child marriage. It's not a sin to marry a widow. I did raise these issues in the last ten years" (Dhakal 6). This tendency to look back to past in a nostalgic way certainly reminds one of new traditionalism. Within new traditionalism in the context of South Asia, the imagined Hindu community living with the Vedic values and practices has been idealized. The Vedas seem to be sources for spirituality, change, and authenticity. Therefore, the Brahmins with the Vedic orientation – exemplified by Balkrishna – are presented as a quintessential example of the ones leading the idealized life with freedom, justice, and egalitarianism. Indeed, the educated Brahmin priests consider themselves the owners as well as custodians of the Hinduism, and thereby the Hindu mythologies and the scriptures like the Vedas and the Puranas. However, they – except a few priests serving the Rana rulers – were humiliated and oppressed under the autocratic Rana rule. This kind of historical situation may have driven Balkrishna to new traditionalism the way it happened to the members of the *Bramho Samaj* and *Arya Samaj* in India during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century when they were trying to reform their society in their struggle against the British rulers.

However, one must not forget that Balkrishna, unlike many Brahmin men, does not subscribe to all the Hindu scriptures. He challenges even his own mother, Mandadari, when she proposes to get his sister married at the age of 11 on the basis of

what she has "heard of things from scriptures" (Dhakal 14). She is hinting at the marital practice as per the Puranas. He calls this practice of child marriage "an utter superstition" (Dhakal 14). True to his words, Balkrishna starts teaching his sister. Mandodari, too, stops talking about getting Kanchhi married. Not surprisingly, Balkrishna presents himself as a modern man, who challenges superstition based on the orthodox religious scriptures like Puranas. Here, one must not overlook the difference between the religious scriptures like the Vedas, which are the main source of knowledge and truth for the followers of *Arya Samaj* like Balkrishna, and the religious scriptures like Puranas, which tend to impose the age-old dogmatic values and practices on the people. Under the influence of Saraswati's book, Balkrishna dismisses the Puranas as a source of superstition and valorizes the Vedas as a source for social change. Balkrishna's zeal to do something to bring change in his society makes it difficult for one not to perceive him as a modern man.

In principle, it is important to distinguish between modernity and social change. Graham Murdock's definition of modernity may be partially helpful here: "We can define modernity in its most general sense as that complex of processes that detached societies from the economic, social, and cultural formations we now characterize as 'ancient' or 'traditional,' and constructed the formations we have come to see as defining the distinctiveness of the contemporary world" (523). In the lack of significant political and institutional changes during the Rana autocratic system, social change – in the form of reformation – appears as modernity in Dhakal's work. However, social change does not guarantee modernity, which, as the above definition illustrates, involves many more things than social change. On the other hand, sometimes, even the political and institutional changes of great value for modernity may not bring the expected social change. Deriving from Alexis de Tocqueville, Gerard Toffin cautions, "Political and institutional changes clearly have to be distinguished from social changes which are much slower. There is no systemic link between the two" (14). Therefore, modernity based on social change through reformation becomes a matter of doubt. On top of this, Balkrishna's turn to new traditionalism for reformation only reinforces this doubt further.

Nevertheless, as a man with a modern outlook, Balkrishna, therefore, cannot tolerate *jimmawāl* (village chief) Bishnubhakta's feudal way of treating people as subjects. He challenges Bishnubhakta's ruthless whipping of a helpless man. It shows that Balkrishna "had changed due to his five year stay and study in Kashi" (Dhakal 19). However, the relation between the powerful *jimmawāl* and the powerless subject has remained so lopsided for such a long time that the subject does not trust Balkrishna's words. Instead, he waits for an order from Bishnubhakta. Relations between the people have been like this forever in Dukhapur. Balkrishna defines tradition in terms of status quo: "The village is still the same. Nothing has changed" (22). However, he understands it better now owing to his study from and stay in Kashi, and thus he can see problem "with the established social values of Dukhapur now" (21). Therefore, he starts fighting for social change.

Five months after his arrival to the village, Balkrishna is invited to Simhadurbar by Chandra Shamsher. Regarding this invitation, Michael Hutt argues, "Chandra Shamsher's first response to the threat represented by Balkrishna and his new ideas is to try to co-opt him. Thus, Balkrishna is summoned to Singha Darbar and the Maharaja offers him a position as an advisor" (23). Bishnubhakta facilitates this. He enlightens the pundit on the importance of *cākarī* [flattery], one of the most significant features of the feudal ruling system, i.e. the Rana rule. Bhim Bahadur Pandey helps understand age-old practices of *cākarī* and *cuklī* during the Rana rule in this way: "At that time, *cākarī* was mandatory for all army as well as civil servants. Therefore, all gazetted [army as well as

civil] servants, in order to pay salute to the king and the Prime Minister, had to go to their palaces" (197). He illustrates how people used to practise *cākarī* in these words: "At that time, *cākarī* meant to show one's pitiful face to his lord and to please him. . . . Since the government had the attitude that only the poor man was always hopeful and obedient, all servants would try to look helpless, poor and shabby" (198). In a way, the common people had to pretend as if they were poor, helpless and devoted so that their Rana masters, just like gods, would come to their rescue. Certainly, *cākarī* was already there in the feudal Nepali society. However, it is the Ranas, who got it institutionalized through the state mechanisms. Surprisingly, after all the changes following the Rana rule, *cākarī* has remained one of the features of Nepali administrative mechanism specifically and the society as a whole in general.

In such a context, Balkrishna is almost trapped. He reluctantly sets out for the palace of Chandra Shamsher. But his modern outlook derived from his stay in India helps him ward his temptation to *cākarī* off: "It kept aggravating the feeling of hatred towards the journey in my mind. These things were opposite to the culture I had received from the Gurukul of Kashi. Likewise, they weren't compatible with the values and assumptions constructed by national independence movement rising in India" (Dhakal 56). The pundit regrets for agreeing to make this journey to Simhadurbar from the beginning. Eventually, he declines the post of the king's advisor. He sticks to his hard earned progressive values. Not many people, who follow *Arya Samaj* or *satyārtha prakāś*, can really escape such a temptation. Bishnubhakta, Rambhakta's son, is a case in hand. When Bishnubhakta wants Rambhakta to be involved in *cākarī*, the latter resists in this way: "Surely, I am not a man to betray my father but I hate going to the court to do *cākarī*. I am a man of the new age. How can I retain the worn out custom of the old age?" (Dhakal 57). Challenging his father, Rambhakta further says, "Now tradition should be changed" (57). Firstly, he identifies himself as a man of the modern age. He poses the new age against old age, which is epitomized by tradition. Secondly, he claims that *satyārtha prakāś* has given him this reformist outlook. However, Rambhakta is eventually lured by perks and social esteem one commands out of his association with the court and his belief in reformism "born out of reading *satyārtha prakāś* had become temporary and transitory like a dewdrop before crossing six months" (58). The modern ideas have hard time getting institutionalized amidst the dominance of the institutionalized tradition. Finally, Rambhakta is destroyed by his pragmatism since he joins a government post through his father's *cākarī*. As Bishnubhakta's power starts declining, his rival Shankhadhar rises in power through *cākarī* to Chandra Shamsher, and the latter emerges as a great threat to Balkrishna, too. Eventually, Rambhakta is fired since his father is no longer a favoured sycophant of Chandra Shamsher. Following this fiasco, Rambhakta disappears for good. If one examines Balkrishna in comparison to Rambhakta, it is not difficult to fathom the depth of Balkrishna's progressive sensibilities.

Finally, Shankhadhar appropriates tradition so as to maintain his grip on power. He persuades people not to call Balkrishna for preaching the Puranas and conducting other religious rituals citing that he is married to a Chhetri widow. Shankhadhar's rise as the new chief of the village eventually leads to the exile of Balkrishna from the Kathmandu valley. This shift in power means the victory of tradition over change and reform Balkrishna has envisioned. No reformation matters. The tradition survives all these onslaughts of reformation and change, and thus renders the garb of continuity and normalcy to Dukhapur: "To say it in brief, no event could address the sentiment of Dukhapur and the harrowing story did not come to an end. Till now, the sorrow of Dukhapur has remained the same" (Dhakal 223). This harrowing sorrow is shrouded in

the mist of normalcy called tradition. This ultimate victory of tradition exposes the limits of new traditionalism espoused by the reformers like Balkrishna. Despite his sincere efforts, his new traditionalist position does not let him envision the new values and practices that really solve the social problems of his time. His opponents, traditionalists like Bishnubhakta and Shankhadhar, see through his weaknesses. Therefore, they turn table on him by using the weapons based on traditional values and practices. For example, Shankhadhar demoralizes and weakens Balkrishna by raising the issue of impurity based on the Hindu casteism. Balkrishna's main source of income is performing the religious rituals and interpreting the religious scriptures. In the Hindu community, the pundits are supposed to remain pure in terms of their behaviours and relationships. As Balkrishna has married a lower caste woman, the people easily fall for Shakhadhar's propaganda against him. Balkrishna's cultural position and his staunch belief in the Vedas do not seem to let him go beyond new traditionalism, which leaves him vulnerable to attacks from his enemies. Eventually, Balkrishna's exile looms large as a defeat of new traditionalism.

Conclusion

To conclude, Dhakal's *Pretkalpa* portrays the Nepali society, which was undergoing reformation by deriving inspiration from the Hindu reformist movements in India during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The novel depicts the Nepali society that tries to dig out inspiration for change from the deep pockets of the religious scriptures. This is how new traditionalism arises in this novel. It tries to make people aware of the progressive ideas within their own religion: Hinduism. Thus, it is conservative modernity, which relies on new traditionalism. One cannot forget the role of India as a mediator of modernity in Nepal, however. The very Indian movement of reformation led by *Arya Samajis* has exerted a great influence on Balkrishna. The novel portrays how a wave of reformation led by Balkrishna collapses under the weight of the traditional practices and values like *cākarī* and *cuklī* and the caste system reinforced by the Rana state. One of the main reasons behind his failure is his new traditionalism, i.e., looking back to the ancient Vedic tradition to reform his society. Balkrishna's failure shows a failure of the reformist campaign based on new traditionalism. It is the failure of conservative modernity. This paper, however, does not dismiss the reformist campaigns or the utility of the Vedic tradition. Instead, it critiques the religious reformist campaigns based on new traditionalism.

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