

# **SIDDHICHARAN SHRESTHA (1913-1992) IN NEALESE PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Background**

There is a misconception that the Nepali language, known as *Khas Kurā* in earlier times, was forced upon the Newar speaking population of the Kathmandu valley, and other linguistic groups in the mountains and the plains particularly after the Gorkha Conquest of the Kathmandu valley kingdoms in 1768-1769. However, much before 1768, Pratap Malla, (1641-1674) the king of Kantipur (Kathmandu) had inscribed in Nepali that he had made Ranipokhari in memory of his son in 790 (1670 A.D.). Apparently, Nepali had become a *lingua franca* among the hill communities outside the Kathmandu valley much before Nepal's unification by Prithvi Narayan Shaha and his descendants. Pratap Malla's inscription indicates that it was also used in the Kathmandu valley to some extent probably by the communities living in the outskirts of the urban centres. Such a spread of Nepali language had given a sense of common identity to the peoples of the mountains who were otherwise divided into small outlying principalities called *bāisis* and *chaubisis*.

Another misconception prevalent in Nepal especially among the scholars studying various aspects of Nepalese society is that Nepali is the language of the Brahman and Chhetri castes alone and that it is the Khas Brahman and Chhetri writers who have played an exclusive role in the development of modern Nepali literature. In fact, however, other linguistic and ethnic groups, particularly the Tibeto-Burman language speakers, have written extensively in Nepali and contributed almost equally to the development of its literature. Sundarananda Bada (ca. 1783-1843), a Newar poet from the Kathmandu valley, had translated the *Adhyatma Ramayana* into Nepali (prose) around 1832 before the "pioneer poet" Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814-1868) had translated it from Sanskrit into Nepali (verse), around the 1850s. The very

first poem available in the Nepali language, *Prithvinarayan*, was written by Suvananda Das, who is suspected to be a Newar poet from Lalitpur in the Kathmandu valley (Sambhav 1981:82-83).

### Non-native Nepali Writers

The non-native writers of Nepali have been contributing significantly to the development of its literature as have the native speakers from the very beginning. This trend has been more pronounced in later periods, reflecting the growing strength of Nepalese identity based on the social and literary feelings expressed through the Nepali language. Besides the hill Brahmans and Chhetris, other prominent writers of Nepali include Newars, Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Thakalis and the various caste groups from the plains of Nepal and from Darjeeling district of West Bengal (India). The following long list of the non-native writers of Nepali intends only to indicate that in a rather short history of Nepali literature their contribution has been as great as that of the native speakers.

A few better-known modern Nepali writers whose mother tongue was probably other than Nepali were Riddhi Bahadur Malla (1898-1968), Paras Mani Pradhan (1898-1986), Baikuntha Prasad Lakoul (b. 1907), Satya Mohan Joshi (b. 1913), Kedar Man "Vyathi" (1914-1998), Bhawani Bhikshu (1914-1981), Hridaya Chandra Singh Pradhan (1915-1960), Krishna Bhakta Shrestha (1915-1982), Ratna Dhvaj Joshi (1916-1987), Daman Raj Tuladhar (1916-1991), Ali Miyan (b. 1918) and Shiva Kumar Rai (1919).

Those who were born in the 1920s and contributed significantly to the growth of Nepali literature are Okiuyama Gwynn (b. 1920), Hari Shrestha (b. 1921), Govinda Bahadur Malla "Gothale" (b. 1922), Lain Singh Bangdel (1924-2002), Bijaya Malla (1925-1999), Basu Pasa (b. 1925), Krishna Chandra Singh Pradhan (b. 1925), Birendra Subba (b. 1927), Keshav Lal Karmacharya (1928-1990), Indra Bahadur Rai (b. 1928), Kaji Man Kandangwa (b. 1929) and Kavindra Man Singh (b. 1929).

Prominent among those who were born in the 1930s are Dhuswan Saymi (b. 1932), Pasang Goparma (b. 1934), Man Bahadur Gurung (b. 1934), Dhruva Krishna Deep (b. 1934), Raj Narayan Pradhan (b. 1935), Shanta Shrestha (b. 1935), Bhupi Sherchan (1936-1989), Buddha Kumar Moktan (b. 1936), Bam Prasad Shrestha (b. 1936), Madan Mohan Mishra (b. 1936), Upendra Shrestha (b. 1936), Basu Shashi (1937-1991), Devichandra

Shrestha (b. 1937), Parijat (1937-1993), Yugeshwar Verma (b. 1937), Kumar Pradhan (b. 1937), Bairagi Kainla (b. 1939) and Prem Thulung (b. 1939).

Those who were born in the 1940s and contributed equally to the development of Nepali literature are Krishna Bhakta Shrestha (b. 1940), Dwarika Shrestha (b.1940), Guman Singh Chamling (b. 1941.), Peter J. Karthak (b. 1941), Kumar Bahadur Joshi (b. 1941), Tulasi Diwas (b. 1941), Prithvi Sherchan (b. 1941), Ram Dayal Rakesh (b. 1942), Parashu Pradhan (b. 1943), Prem Sherpa Biroki (b. 1943), Banira Giri (b. 1946) Tej Prakash Shrestha (b. 1946), Shailendra "Sakar" (b. 1947), Man Bahadur Mukhiya (b. 1947), Krishna Bhushan Bala (b. 1947), Bhagirathi Shrestha (b. 1948), Prem Man Dangol (b. 1948) and Mohan Rai "Dukhun" (b. 1949).

After the political change of 1950 the list of such writers becomes much longer. A brief indicative list includes Madan Rai (b. 1950), Pavan Chamling (b. 1950), Shailendra K. Singh (b. 1950), Ramesh Shrestha (b. 1950), Shankar Kumar Shrestha (b. 1951), Rajesh Bantawa (b. 1951), Ashesh Malla (1954), Biyogi Budhathoki (b. 1954) Avinash Shrestha (b. 1955), Shantikumari Rai (b. 1956), Shankar Subba Fago (b. 1956), Bishwa Bimohan Shrestha (b. 1956), Bijaya Bajimaya (b. 1957), Sarubhakta Shrestha (b. 1957), Anita Tuladhar (b. 1959), Pramod Pradhan (b. 1959), Krishna Pradhan (b. 1959), Bhupal Rai (b. 1960), Ishwar Kumar Shrestha (b. 1960), Kumar Tamang "Yatru" (b. 1962), Ramesh Shrestha (b. 1968) and Momila Joshi (b. 1968).

It is notable that the non-native writers of Nepali literature come from both inside and outside Nepal, especially from Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim in India. For many writers, writing in Nepali seems to have become so natural now that it is almost unthinkable that they could have written in any other language.

### **Siddhicharan Shrestha in Nepalese Perspective**

Siddhicharan Shrestha (1913-1992) comes from this tradition of non-native speakers of the Nepali language, but he stands out as one of its most important poets. Working in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – the golden period in Nepali literature called "Sharada-kal" (the Sharada magazine period), – he wrote in both Nepali and Newar, but his contribution to Nepali literature was highly acclaimed from early on. Suryabikram Gewali, a scholar, historian and literary critic, wrote an article on Lakshmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959) and Siddhicharan Shrestha (1912-1992). This article published in the 1930s

(reproduced in this volume in English) entitled "Two Stars in Nepal's Literary Sky" (Nepali *Sahityakashaka Dui Tara*) indicated how important Siddhicharan Shrestha was as a poet. Three years younger than Devkota, Shrestha was a romantic poet, focusing his poetic mind mainly on nature and human being, like his older peer.

The year 1951 was remarkable in Nepal's history as it witnessed a revolution overthrowing the century-old Rana rule (1846-1951). This revolution was to change not only the political system in Nepal, but every aspect of Nepalese society and culture including education and literature. This change in Nepal did not come all of a sudden. India's independence struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s and 1940s had an impact on the educated segment of Nepalese society, although education itself was tightly restricted by the Rana rulers. Both Devkota and Shrestha have written poems reflecting this situation in the country.

Siddhicharan's poetry of the 1940s and 1950s is, therefore, worth studying as it reflects the hopes and frustrations of a medieval society in transition towards modernity. It was a period when Nepal went through the birth pangs of a new social order. The birth, however, was not without complications and hindrances. This period was characterized by confusion and chaos in Nepalese society. Accordingly, three distinct attitudes or trends are discernible in Nepalese poetry of the time: (1) traditional, (2) mixed, and (3) modern or romantic.

Some writers, such as Lekhanath Paudyal (1885-1966), remained heavily influenced by Sanskrit literary tradition in every aspect of their works. They were probably not very comfortable with the change in society. Lekhnath's *Satya-Kali Samvad* (Conversation between Satya and Kali) is full of nostalgia of the golden past (*sayta yuga*). As we move on to Balkrishna Sama (1903-1981), we find him drawing upon both the Sanskrit and English literary tradition, particularly in his dramas. Although Devkota drew also heavily upon Sanskrit in his works such as his epic *Shakuntal*, one of his very first works *Muna Madan* (1936) broke away sharply from the tradition both in terms of its form and content.

In Siddhicharan Shrestha, the dose of romanticism becomes much heavier. Seeing the plight of the people under the Rana rule, he advocated for a drastic change in society, to the point of suggesting a national political revolution to overthrow the Ranas. So the Rana rulers sentenced Shrestha to jail for 18 years for writing a poem in Newar in which he said "there will be no peace without a revolution" (*Kranti bina thana juimakhu swaccha shanti*).

It is a post-modernist tendency among literary critics to look for anti-colonial elements in the writings of Nepalese and Indian authors during the period before India's independence in 1947 and after it. However, since Nepal was never actually colonized, there was hardly any such element except in Lekhanath's Satya-Kali Samvad. Rather than criticized the British colonialists, he actually praised them for their role in introducing modern science and technology to the Indian subcontinent. The romantics such as Devkota and Shrestha, however, did question the indigenous Rana family dictatorship as against the foreign rule.

### Siddhicharan Shrestha's Poetry

Like those of Devkota, the main characteristics of Siddhicharan Shrestha are indignation against poverty as in *Timro baasita paisa chhaina* (Your Father has No Money, Son, 1952); the wrong aspects of the social tradition such as the untouchability of a section of human society, as indicated in his poems *Chyamini* (1951) and *Achut* (*The Untouchable*, 1955); call for a revolution against political and economic exploitation by the Rana rulers, as in many poems such as *Sankat* (*Crisis*, 1945), *kag* (*The Crow*, 1946), *Yugako Urdi* (*Orders of Time*, 1948); and disillusionment over the people's unfulfilled expectations from the 1951 revolution as in the poem *Ba aaunubhaeko chhaina* (*Father Has Not Come Home*, 1952). Parts of these poems are reproduced in this article with English translations by various authors. Except in cases where the credit is acknowledged, the translation, (or modification/improvement of others) is done by the present author.

#### 1. *Timro baasitapaisa chhaina* (1952)

(*Your Father has No Money, Son*)

In this poem, as in another one, i. e., *Ba aaunubhaeko chhaina* (Father has not come home, #8 below), also written in 1952 the poet expresses disappointment over the fact that Nepalese people remain economically poor, and that there is no prospect of freedom from this grinding poverty. "Father has not come home" implies that democracy had not come to Nepal as yet, "Father" here symbolizes democracy, that is freedom without economic prosperity

Mind you, my son you will have none –  
Delicious food and beautiful dress

And the privilege to walk with pride,  
Holding books in a bundle tight  
Human you are, but better you were a dog –  
Your father has no money, son!

Whatever wages I get, my son,  
Toiling, moiling all day long,  
Are not enough to feed us full.  
Nothing useful can be done  
Your father has no money, son!

Go and use your delicate hands,  
Earn a few paisa if you can.  
For your mother and father  
Droop, droop before your time  
Your father has no money, son!

Grazing buffaloes, cows and sheep,  
Wandering on the banks and fields –  
Read all the disarray  
In this book of Nepalese life –  
Your father has no money, son!

Schooling's gate is closed to you  
To enter through to intelligence,  
Knowledge varied and novel sense  
Pure and full of consciousness --  
Your father has no money, son!  
(Trans. by Karmacharya, 1998)

## 2. *Chyamini* (1951)

Those professional castes who clean the toilets and streets in Kathmandu are called *Chyame* and *Podey*, and are regarded as untouchables. *Chyamini* is a woman belonging to the *Chyame* caste. The poet sees a beautiful *Chyamini* and as he becomes attracted to her, he becomes also aware of the unjust custom in the society which makes her untouchable.

Proud youth, gorgeous beauty,  
Burning bright, this Chyamini.  
When the heart-violin is playing  
and pouring out streams of the song,  
it is as if something is scratching,  
or something has gone wrong.

When a tired traveler  
finds a peaceful and easy shelter,  
and is about to enter into the inn.  
It's like the door that shuts off  
saying "Oh, No: not here."

This is a fleshy weapon  
That can dispel the darkness.  
But it cannot fit in my heart-sheath  
unless its callousness is scraped off.

The custom is crooked, the rule fake.  
She has brought the Fate's order in paper  
that is tied to the string of her blouse;  
Go, get it, open it, and read it.  
Proud youth, gorgeous beauty,  
Burning bright, this Chyamini.

3. *Achut (The Untouchable, 1955)*

In this poem, the poet is attacking the same evil in society. He is speaking on behalf of God, who is rejecting the offerings from those who have outcaste their own fellow beings.

What is this you have brought me,  
untouched by your brothers and sisters?  
Take it back, I do not want such things,  
you cannot worship while hating yourselves,  
you may not enter my temple  
if you shut its, door to others

Go away, oh sinners,  
go away fools and savages,  
your offerings I reject.  
Do not bow down at my feet,  
my body is burning, burning.

The waters you bring are defiled,  
far worse than puss and mucus.  
If you truly wish to worship,  
bring before me the man  
whose rights you've usurped through all ages,  
touch first his feet against whom you have sinned,  
him you have called untouchable.

Only then may you come to my temple,  
only then are you blessed as men,  
only then will you cease being thorns  
preventing our nation's progress,  
only then will you be straight.  
(Trans. by Hutt, 1991:61-62).

4. *Sankat (The Crisis, 1945)*

In this poem written five years before the collapse of Rana rule, the poet is speaking as a revolutionary young man, committed to overthrowing the unjust regime. He is ready to fight against all odds, and is prepared even to die. This kind of revolutionary fever is a special characteristic of Siddhicharan Shrestha.

Now that you have reached mid ocean  
You must not retreat in fear.  
The storm may rage – let it do so,  
You must not lose your nerve.  
Drown or die – what choice is there?  
Is this all that you fear?  
Millions die and millions drown  
To maintain the way of the world.



Enough of a life that is full of tears—  
Let me team to die with a smile.  
Let me be able to kiss with warm lips  
The rope I'll be hanged by.  
Paying no heed to the hurdle of tears  
Of sons, daughters, mother and wife,  
Let me be able to offer my breath  
In the fire of patriotic love.

Listen, its Crisis who is calling,  
"I am Crisis, your beloved own.  
Since your birth I have been with you;  
Why feel offended now?  
Yes, of course, he was my companion;  
A support of life he was too.  
Long ago Happiness went away,  
Leaving me far behind.  
(Trans. By Karmacharya, 1998:23).

5. *Kag (The Crow, 1946)*

The crow is regarded as a messenger of Fate in Hindu society. When it crows in front of a house, it is supposed to be giving a good or bad message depending on its repose to people's order. If it obeys what the people say after its crowing, it means a good omen. If it does not obey what the people say it is a bad omen. In the following poem, the poet is asking the crow if it has brought the message of the end to the Rana rule.

Crow, what news do you bring?  
Please tell me your tidings.  
Sitting on the wall across the yard,  
Tell me please, what you have brought.  
Today it is so bad.  
Tell me of tomorrow.  
O clever bird in the sky!

Shall I pass all my days like this?  
Or, shall I get some respite some day?  
Will the burden of my mind be removed,

And shall I be fortunate one day or not?  
Will pleasure embrace me?  
Will it love me?  
O black shrewd bird, please tell me.

It's within the human capacity  
to bear the pain of mind.  
It's among the gifts of the dream  
the hunger for prosperity is satisfied.  
So shall I take shelter with you now  
putting the gifts of my dream  
in the platter of humanity?

This frustration and this hopelessness  
I will erase it, or tear it apart  
Dipping my songs in immortality,  
I will take a new life, that is glorious  
and I'll come to you, O brother crow, wait.

7. *Yugako Urdi (Orders of Time, 1948)*

Again, in this poem written just one year before the end of the Rana rule (1846-1951), the poet is writing about the "clarion call of the new age", that is dawning slowly upon the Nepalese land. It looked very likely that the Rana rule was going to collapse any time, after the British rule in India ended in 1947. According to the poet, the youth has to be ready for braving the heavy odds, and win the battle against the Rana regime even at the cost of his own life.

Troubles befall a human being  
Not a stony thing  
A hailstorm lashes the flowers first  
In the garden green  
The broader the chest a person has  
The greater the blow to him.  
Bullets were fired on Gandhi only  
Not any other being.

The submarine fire chooses the sea,  
Not a ditch or a stream;  
Troubles have nothing to savor  
On things the size of a gnat.  
What charm, my friend, do young girls find  
Among the little boys?  
Will those who are under troubles pressed  
Have a fitting chest?

Troubles shine in the name of those  
Who face the same to death;  
A girl in love passes her days  
Weaving memories lost.  
Man that you are, rise up you must –  
The crisis you must face;  
A man becomes a genuine man  
If the orders of time he obeys.  
(*Trans. by Karmacharya, 1998: 34*).

8. *Ba aaubhaeko chhaina*

(*Father has not come home, 1952*)

In this poem the poet finds that Aama ("Mother" Nepal) is awaiting Father ("Democracy") to arrive. But he also finds that democracy has not come to Nepal yet. So the poet has begun to see the promises broken. The feudal structure of the society remains intact. The lot of the poor people is the same. So the poet laments. In this way, the poetry of Siddhicharan Shrestha and that of the other poets such as Devkota, in the 1950s, describe a similar social condition and people's frustrations as in the 1990s after the restoration of democracy.

The rain is falling, the wind is blowing,  
Time has donned her garb of lateness,  
the lamps are lit, a meat is cooked.  
Mother is crying out,  
"Father has not come home."

Times have changed,  
The Ranas have sunk,

they say our chains are broken,  
but freedom, progress, democracy,  
none of these has come.

Mother is crying out,  
"Father has not come home.

The sting of our thought,  
the thunderbolt of our dreams,  
have smashed the skull of darkness,  
but a new dawn, a new age, a new day,  
none of these has dawned.

Mother is crying out,  
"Father has not come home."

(*Trans. by Hutt, 1991:62*)

### Conclusion

Thus, Siddhicharan Shrestha came out straight against the Rana rule, poverty and other social evils associated with it. He wrote mostly in Nepali because it had wider audience including the Ranas themselves. He had a clear message for change. So he wrote in a simple language but with a great deal of symbolism in it.

Siddhicharan Shrestha's works in Nepali are collected in several volumes: *Urvashi* (*Urvashi*, a celestial nymph's name, 1960), *Kopila* (The Bud, 1964), *Mero Pratibimba* (My Reflection, 1964), *Jyanmara Shail* (Killer Mountain, 1982), *Kuhiro ra Gham* (Mist and Sunlight, 1988), *Siddhicharanaka Pratinidhi Kavita* (Siddhicharan's Representative Poems, 1988), *Tiramire Tara* (Twinkling Stars, 1988), *Bachiraheko Awaj* (Living Voice, 1989), *Mangalman* (Mangalman, name of a man, 1992) *Ansu* (Tears, 1993), and *Karagaraka Samjhana* (Memories of the Prison, 1995). *Atmabilauna* (My Cry) is forthcoming.

Siddhicharan Shrestha's works with no mention of dates are: *Junkiri* (Firefly), *Bhimsen Thapa* (The Nepalese Prime Minister who fought a war against the British in 1814-1816, and died a tragic death in 1839), *Balivadha* (The Sacrifice of Bali), *Shabari* (name of a legendary figure), *Rimjhim* (Children's Poems), *Yatra Samsaran* (A Travelogue), *Yuddha ra Shanti* (War and Peace), and *Kantimati* (name of a Nepalese Queen).

In the Newar language, Siddhicharan Shrestha's main works are *Siswan* (Wax Flower), *Phuswan* (The Last Flowers), *Gwayaswan* (A kind of Red Flower used in Tihar), *Trishna* (Thirst), *Lubhumi* (A Woman from Lubhu), *Muswan* (A Sweet Smelling Flower offered to Macchendra Nath), *Siddhicharanaya Nibandha* (Siddhicharan's Essays), *Narihridya* (The Woman's Heart) *Uttara-Vilapa* (Uttara's Lamentation) and *Ghama* (Preface).

Unfortunately, very few of Siddhicharan Shrestha's works are available in the bookstores. Most of them are out of print. So there is a need for the publication of his complete works in a single volume to facilitate a much more detailed study than the present one, which intends only to give a perspective in brief.

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