

RESEARCH NOTE

PROTEST POETRY: THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

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*"They say:
If you see a slave sleeping,
Do not wake him lest he be dreaming of freedom*

*But I say:
If you see a slave sleeping,
Wake him! And explain to him freedom."*

Kahlil Gibran

Protest poets throughout the world have always been the nation's voice of conscience. They have through history swayed governments, toppled dictators and changed political systems. They have always mirrored society in its various forms, and moreover, oppression in all its aspects. They have vehemently criticized and held up to ridicule the vices and corrupt practices of brokers of power and have in all earnestness, like true crusaders, taken up the responsibilities of restoring political stability, social harmony and above all the sanity of a nation.

Whether it be poets like Lorca, Iqbal, Kahlil Gibran, Stephan Biko, Derek Walcott, Farouk Asvat, Amrita Pritam, Jayanta Mahapatra or Black consciousness propagators of America and South Africa, there is as it were, a certain unity among them. Back home, our very own poets like Lekh Nath Poudyal, Gopal Prasad Rimal, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Kedar Man Vyathit, Siddhi Charan Shrestha, Bhupi Sherchan, Kali Prasad Rijal, Chhetra Pratap Adhikari, Gopal Yonzon, to name a few, also belong to this conscious breed. A tacit understanding, or a common thread of sorts seems to bind this brave

band together the world over, to time and again raise their voices for the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden.

These protest poets have at times been punished, their poems banned and at times even imprisoned under deplorable conditions for long periods of time. But they, nevertheless, continue their relentless battle against the forces of evil and oppression even from the darkness of the dungeons or from other places of imprisonment. But unlike most political prisoners who later get to positions of power either through compromises or change in a political system, a majority of such poets on release, preferably remain to be the dissenting voice –the nation's voice of conscience. To them it is insignificant as to who is in or out of power or which political system has been ushered in. All they know is that they will forever wield their pens and continue to "fight the good fight" against discrimination, oppression and exploitation of any kind.

As a conscious breed, politically and socially, the Nepali protest poets like their counterparts the world over, have from the very beginning also resisted and consistently raised their voices – no matter how covertly. They have been active from the very days of the autocratic Rana regime when the Nepali people were denied their rights to make culture and history as a free people. Ironically, that very struggle continues even to this day under a multiparty dispensation and as the fight continues against oppression and to defend ones freedom, we enter history, and as human beings we redefine and create culture.

The culture of oppression, exploitation and corruption continues unabated in Nepal even to this day as in the past, but under the thick, safe, unquestionable garb of democracy. This has, in the Nepali case, made the fight even more difficult, as the strong, universally supported democratic shield must be penetrated to expose the oppressors. The political situation in Nepal in the last decade has deteriorated to such an extent that it has had adverse effects on the country's economy, education, health and administrative sectors. But along with time, new methods of fighting oppression have also evolved in that the culture of the oppressed has also developed in various forms of protest writing in painting, poetry, songs etc. The voice and expressions articulated in those art forms reflect the atmosphere of the times, a voice forever searching and refusing to accept living in a vacuum. A voice plagued by a mighty force of repression, yet a voice reminiscent of fights and struggles for freedom in not so distant past.

From the early 1960s right down to 1990 was a period in Nepal when the Panchayat system had entrenched itself and through the sad plight and state of its citizens, reached its highest form of expression. The result was poverty, corruption and unemployment – the intensification of raids and random arrests being the hallmark of the time. Leaders of the people were arrested or exiled, and banned political parties and organizations operated only from the underground. Any opposition to the partyless, autocratic regime was crushed ruthlessly, and nobody dared talk about it except in whispers. The protest poets, however, continued writing and lashing out at the regime, and were to a great extent responsible for educating and mobilizing the mass for the final overthrow.

Bhupi Sherchan's *Ghumne Mech Maathi Andho Maanchhe* (Blind Man on a Revolving Chair) mostly a collection of protest poems is, in its entirety, an elegant howl against the Panchayat system of the time. The collection was and still is so popular among the masses that the record of sales reached an all time high. Bhupi Sherchan, the poet, was able to capture, with tremendous success, the state of mind, emotion and being of a crushed people. It was the kind of poetry which effectively inspired despair among the readers and moreover, the masses, written as they were against the backdrop of moans made by the victims of oppression. In some poems cynicism is eloquently articulated, in some, anger abounds and in some utter frustration. But yet, Bhupi the poet clings to the hope that poetic language would grow and eventually link the poet with the people so that a collective effort would ultimately defeat the forces of corruption and oppression.

The theme of the poems in Sherchan's collection was, and still is, an inspiration to other protest poets in Nepal then and now. Like Sherchan, they identified themselves with the struggle for liberation and had to fight against the fallacy which the oppressor creates in order to justify his position of dominance and ignore the conditions of the oppressed. But at the same time, they also had to inspire the oppressed not to accept their condition, but to rise and fight for freedom.

It was under such conditions of oppression and suppression of human rights that poets like Lekhnath Poudyal, Gopal Prasad Rimal, Kedar Man Vyathit, Siddhi Charan Shrestha etc. articulated their voices against the despotic Rana regime. And it was this very same theme that poets of the later generation like Bhupi Sherchan, Kali Prasad Rijal, Mohan Koirala, Krishna Bhakta Shrestha, to name a few, faithfully articulated against the Panchayat regime. The protest writing of the latter period, in comparison, relied heavily

on anger and bitterness, and at times cynicism and frustration to get the message across to the masses. These poets equated such writing only with poetry, and the voice of that poetry collectively became the voice of resistance.

Today, even with the restoration of democracy in the country after 1990, protest poetry has surprisingly continued to be on the rise. In more than a decade of multiparty rule, so much in the form of protest poetry has been written and published that the total number, so far, could possibly be far greater than that covertly written in all the thirty years of Panchayat rule. Surprisingly, the theme is frustration, cynicism and anger all over again, but ironically, a voice raised more against corruption and the abuse of human rights under a democracy than against autocratic or absolute rule as voiced and articulated in the past. The collective voice of protest poets after 1990 have equally focussed on the betrayal of the people and the movement for democracy and human rights by the new leadership and the utter humiliation experienced by Nepal and the Nepalis at the loss of national identity, pride and self respect.

In other words, the protest poems published today collectively echo the despair and frustration that has seeped into the body politic through multiparty rule. The post 1990 protest poetry is a voice which searches the past, returns to the present and voices the heroic deeds of the oppressed in their bid for freedom. It also deftly identifies and juxtaposes the dead heroes and patriots of the land and brings them dramatically face to face with the "harbingers" and "champions" of democracy and human rights. Such poetry urges the oppressed in a multi party dispensation to rise and fight for true democracy and freedom in the spirit of past heroes. The marching footsteps of the workers, students and the masses that echo in these poems are recited at meetings and rallies, demonstrations and cultural functions. The urgency of the post 1990 protest poems is to keep the people informed about the betrayals by the new leadership in the name of democracy and to constantly remind them that the struggle against oppression and suppression of human rights is far from over.

The whispers against despotic regimes of the past, now in comparison, seem more like deafening screams going by how the whisperers were ferreted out and punished. But today, literally, even deafening screams against the multiparty excesses, political instability and incompetent leadership that rent the air, bounces off unaffected from the thick, hide-like skins that multiparty leaders have acquired over the years. Ironically, the people today have all the

right to shout, scream and criticize, which they do. But the duty of the democratic leadership to heed such complaints and do the needful has remained sadly absent. In all these years, this democratic exercise has only proved to be a classic dialogue of the deaf. The right of the people to be heard by the powers either falls on deaf ears or is conveniently ignored.

The screaming protest poems that appear almost every other day in some weekly newspaper or the other have indeed rendered the poets hoarse. They have in these years been ignored by the government(s) of all hues, colours and combinations with such style and finesse that one is for a while tempted to believe that such protest poems really are “the ranting of pseudo or ultra nationalists.” It might, however, be convenient at the moment for the politicians and the new leadership to dismiss these voices as “cry babies of nationalism.” But it will also be wise for them to remember that these were the very same voices belonging to the very same breed of poets who were labeled “cry babies of democracy” when they in the past challenged and viciously lashed out at the excesses of autocratic and dictatorial regimes.

The truth, however, may be ignored for some time but not for long. The protest poems of today are aimed squarely at the non-performance of governments, corruption, unemployment and the rise in the poverty situation. Besides, the betrayal and utter humiliation of the country and the people after 1990, the gradual erosion of democratic norms and values etc. have now become so dangerously synonymous with the present multiparty system the country is experiencing, that it has indeed given democracy a bad name. Moreover, the damage incurred has been such that reviving the faith the people once had in democracy – a political dispensation that they fought – bled and died for a decade ago as the only panacea for the country’s ills will by no means be easy.

For example, utter humiliation of the country and its people at the hands of the new leadership could not have been better expressed by Chhetra Pratap Adhikari in his poem *Saarathi* (Charioteer) published in the *Samakalin Weekly* of Bhadra 19, 2054. Here the poet in a fit of emotion takes a swipe at the new leadership by artfully employing characters and situations from the classical Hindu religious texts and using them as effective symbols to make his point.

*Insulted by the Dakchhaprajapatis
Sati Devi has the country become.
Having ruined every part of the country,*

*On roads, confused and grief stricken,
The helpless, Mahadev have we become.
How others like us were ruined,
I know not,
But in our case, our very leaders,
Defilers that they are ruined us.
Shameless as they are ruined us.*

Tired and disillusioned with the present leadership and the crisis of governance the country is going through at the moment, he goes on to say:

*What's happened has happened,
Now there is one last hope.
With backwardness bundled round the waist,
And the entire country heaped on the head,
I'm in search of an able charioteer
To steer us through the new century.
In this generation he must already be born.*

At the sad erosion of the Nepali identity and Nepali nationalism in today's multi party context Gopal Yonzon, poet and lyricist, in his *Nishani 53* in sheer despair asks:

*Say, Nepali brother where does my country lie?
I also want to sing a Nepali song.*

*Where lie the banks my heroes cleansed their swords?
Where lies Nalapani that reeks of Nepali blood?
I also want to drink of its very waters,
Say, Nepali brother where does my country lie?*

In the same vein Yonzon goes on to ask:

*Nepalis have you love for Nepal or not?
Few drops of the ancestral blood
Have you or not?
To shoulder the mighty Himals
Have you strength or not?*

Many poems have been written about the rampant corruption symbolized in the Nepali context by the Pajero vehicle. In Nepal corruption is popularly known as the "Pajero" culture after the advent of multiparty rule. The following lines by Kali Prasad Rijal, in his poem, *When the Pajero Passes by* and published in the *Samakalin Weekly* of Asad 12, 2054 stands out for its sensitivity and finesse in the treatment of the theme:

*When a new air-conditioned Pajero
Temptingly passes me by,
I see the pleasure palace
Of my recurring dreams,
Glide the road in all its grandeur.
Just for once, I feel like touching it,
The sleek, sparkling Pajero,
For once, just to pet and fondle it,
To bow before it in deep respect.*

He further goes on to say:

*And in the valuable
Smoke-mixed dust it raises,
Helpless, in spite of not wanting to,
I search for my country,
My village, my home.
Helpless, in spite of not wanting to,
I search for the future
Of tiny little children of this country.
For a pure, harmless, flawless future
I start to search.*

(The above poems translated from the Nepali by the author)

In the poem *Nation Builders* by "Tuki" and published in *Nava Kavita* of 2051, No. 29 the yawning gap between the rich and the working class is dramatically brought out into the open. To bring home the point, poor labourers of a sawmill with starvation wages and no guarantee in life are juxtaposed with politicians leading a soft life and forever in search of fast

money. The picture that emerges is a disturbing one, but true, nevertheless, in today's multiparty context.

*For a measly sum,
They slog and heave,
Their lives at stake,
Sawing the hours away.*

*Some minus fingers work as before,
Never knowing,
When broken knees, or crushed toes,
Add to their woes.*

*While nation builders,
Drowned in sofas and commissions,
Coffee and whisky the hours away.
Nursing five-star backaches
From too many meetings,
And continuous pursuit
Of emerald green lawns
And turquoise swimming pools.*

In the same volume under the title of *Hawks and Doves* "Tuki" graphically depicts the culture of exploitation of the people by the powers that be even in a multiparty dispensation. The betrayal of the people by the leadership is aptly illustrated by the use of powerful symbols.

*Perched atop temples,
Fatter than Christmas turkeys,
Hawks nestle in contented silence.
Too full to move.*

*While in the red-white courtyard below,
Strewn with feathers soft,
Red-breasted Doves huddle
In scared silence.
Waiting... Waiting... Waiting.
Waiting for the Hawks to go hungry again.*

A sudden swoop!
A famished cool!
Silence!
A contended silence!
A terrifying silence!

The poems discussed above are only a very few of a sea of such poems that are written almost daily by a new crop of emerging poets who equate protest writing only with poetry. No matter what they are labeled by the powers that be, they do in reality represent the collective voice of the general mass. The common people that have been taken for granted and who by default are led to believe that the dictatorial regimes of the past were far better than the "democracy" which the country is supposed to be blissfully experiencing at the moment.

Protest poetry in Nepali literature has indeed come a long way from *Baalak Baburo* right down to the poems discussed above. As fighters for freedom and human rights at different stages in the nation's history pass away, old protest poems give way to new and other forms of expression. Similarly, numerous poets, like the mythical phoenix, rise from the ashes of the past and merge a poetic language with the language of liberation. In the Nepalese context like in many other countries, history is uncannily repeating itself. The protest poets say "...it happens when the time does not favour the oppressor."