

## **Devkota's Worldview: A Philosophical Analysis of *Laxmi Nibandha Sangraha***

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### **Abstract**

Pioneer modern voice in Nepali literature, Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909–1959), places both Nepal and Nepali ways of life at the center in his essays that reflect on both the contemporary Nepali practices of his time and seek to identify the ways to address the lapses in the ethos of his time. As a modern Nepali essayist, he carries the voice of the 1920s and 1930s national awakening in his collection of essays titled *Laxmi Nibandha Sangraha* [Laxmi Collection of Essays] (1942–1943). All his thirty-seven essays present his reflection on his self, society, and the awakening of the nation. Often, Devkota takes a very vicarious road to the subject matter and hides the argument in his aesthetic ways of presenting the social reality: his harsh commentary on social development also finds due space in what he finds relevant to talk about the limits to the social and the political in his time. The modern essayist loves his people and his culture: he celebrates the ways of his people and his society, seeking out the strengths of his own culture and exposing the weaknesses of the imported set of values. The reading of his essays also reveals his ambivalent attitude toward what he sees in the world, in that he stands to denounce and appreciate specific values of the modern world, thereby letting himself stand in a much undecided intellectual mood as well. This paper discusses the worldview that Devkota

has developed in his essays in *Laxmi Nibandha Sangraha*.

**Keywords:** social awakening, Nepali literature, ethos of modernity, celebration of the old, rationalization

### **Introduction**

A forerunner in modern Nepali literature, Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909–1959) wrote extraordinary personal essays in the 1930s, later published in the collection *Laxmi Nibandha Sangraha* (referred to as LNS hereafter). As in his poetry, LNS establishes him as a pioneering modern Nepali essayist, reflecting on self, society, and the nation. His essays construct a world for the readers, taking them to great heights to observe the reality below. In the essays, the author's arguments refer to the contemporary cultural realities of the time, wherein the essayist identifies cracks in society that require philosophical intervention. In this sense, *LNS* serves as a philosophical intervention by a deeply thoughtful poet during a time of social transition in Nepal. Published in the early 1940s, the collection captures the worldview of intellectuals striving to transform societal consciousness. Devkota intertwines reflections on self and nation within a single collection and sets them against the backdrop of larger political upheavals in South Asia.

Devkota often retreats into his personal world to reflect on the nature of reality within his society. At times, he becomes a victim of adhering to a traditional way of life that he finds far more pleasant and scientific than any foreign practices recently adopted in the new social context. He pointedly opposes Western perspectives on humanity. Celebrating the hills of his nation, he aspires to ascend to the seventh sky, from where he can observe the ground reality and appreciate the ways of his people. For instance, he highlights the features of life in the hills as the most natural and ideal way of living. Moreover, secular occasions like the fifteenth of Asadha are transformed into special moments of

celebration. This paper examines six essays from *LNS*: “Hai hai Angreji” [Hail to English], “Ke Nepal sano chha?” [Is Nepal small?], “Nepali sahitayako itihasma savrashrestha purusha” [The greatest personality in the history of Nepali literature], “Pahadi jivan” [The life in the hills], “Shree Ganeshaya nama” [The beginning], and “Asadhako pandhra” [The fifteenth of the month of Asadha]. I have read the first five essays in original Nepali language of Devkota, while the last was translated by Mansfred Treu in 1993. I have translated and paraphrased the excerpts from the Nepali texts myself, while I have used Treu’s translation for “The fifteenth of the month of Asadha” in the textual analysis.

### **Devkota’s Worldview**

Devkota grounds his worldview in his personal encounter with the world, which gradually expands to the more significant categories like society and the nation. He appreciates the origin and formation of ethos, challenging the irrational in the existing society and subverting the ways of looking at the prevailing practices. He exposes the fissures in the seemingly perfect spheres of society and asserts his preference for the primitive, nature, and the spontaneous. Like the voice of dissent, he challenges the people and practices at the center, takes them to locales beyond their regular access, and helps them realize the origin of classical values. He yokes together reason and intuition at the most critical hours of his argumentation when he searches for the glory of language, literature, culture, and nation. The examination of the most abstract concepts emerges in the most palpable way: he visualizes the argument, reaches the depth of the impulses of the culture to measure the size of the contemporary ethos, and fixes his perception of self, society, and nation there. As a critique of the prevailing practices, he never loses his ground

in excitement. As a visionary voice in the transition of his society, he identifies the lapses in society by using both *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, resulting in a synergistic effect in forming his philosophical worldview.

Devkota explores the modern tenets of self, society, and polity through his personal and meditative essays in *LNS*. In the collection of thirty-seven essays written in and around the late 1930s and early 1940s, he explores his self as he openly states, "In some places in the essays, I have myself entered, coloring with my own personality to explore myself and establish myself. At other places, I am present – aloof from the essays – as the audience to study the drama of life and nature" (Devkota, 1967, *Preface*, p. i). He is both a participant and an observer of social reality, which provides him with critical and creative impetus. As Bhatta (2012) observes, Devkota's love for the nation transcends the quotidian reality (Bhatta, 2012). As Bhatta states, "This fact reveals Devkota's serious national consciousness. He argues no artist should despise his own folk; none should strive to be exotic and pose an expatriate in his own country..." (p. 71). Centrally focusing on the nation, his essays celebrate facets of nations from their geography to the people, their cultural and social practices, their aspirations and motivations, and their political ambitions. As the essayist, Devkota places himself somewhere between the observer and the observed and critically works on the content of the world in an attempt to explore reality beyond general perceptions.

Standing at the crossroads of Nepal's transition in the 1940s, Devkota observes the formation of a political self heavily influenced by Western values. The essayist critiques the impact of such values in contemporary times and argues that any society must understand the traditional cultural roots during rationalization. The raw form of rationalization

does not guarantee social welfare and satisfaction for the larger public. For instance, he states that Trichandra College, established in 1918, has been training the modern mind, which must also seek to balance between modern values and classical values of our society (Devkota, 1967, *Shree Ganeshaya*, p. 2). Highly politically motivated as the creative genius of his time, Devkota presents the vision of the political self when he reflects on the formation of modern polity. He "projects the picture of modern Nepali subjectivity that possesses firm moral values that do not allow wisdom to go astray, bliss that does not challenge the classically tested and traditionally accepted values and mores of the society" (Phuyal, 2011, p. 23). It may sound self-contradictory when he appreciates and even glorifies the origin and departure of the historical turn. Devkota's appreciation reaches its peak when the issue is connected with the formation of the national ethos and enhances the sense of glory of the people by developing a sense of political bond in this context.

He places the seeker between the self and the object sought and emphasizes the role of cultural context in attempting to develop comprehension in this way. Besides, he critically observes the growing influence of British culture in Nepal through his celebrated essay "*Hai hai Angreji*" [Hail to English]. Critically assessing the growing need for English for economic success in his time, the essayist sees the craze for the language in his society. As a young man, he wanted to bring about a massive transformation in the mindset of the people through English. As he presents,

I wanted reformation; I wanted to bring in a new age.  
What type of new age? I wanted an age in which every  
Nepali could speak English. They could write articles  
in English; they could invent new things by reading the

books of physics and chemistry; they could readjust the social circumstances along the lines of Malthusian economics; the vaidya could know the formulas of chemistry; the people are promoted to a new class of happiness in the age; and Nepalis could beat the drums of their own significance in the way of advertisement with red sparrow-headed letters in the age. I cannot say what reformation I was attempting to bring about.

(Devkota, 1967, *Hai hai Angreji*, p. 47)

Devkota's worldview consists of an early fascination with Nepal gaining its salvation, having achieved knowledge from English education. At the heart of his critique, he mocks his novice ways of upholding foreign values: he critically assesses his immature self, seeking a certain type of reformation for his people and nation. Later, he is disillusioned with realizing that English is just a language—a way of communication, not the source of salvation. He debunks the grand perceptions formed in society through the invasion of foreign practices and the elites' fascination with them.

His critical remarks are scattered throughout the essay. Implicitly, the essay also presents the critical attitude of a Nepali intellectual towards the presence of the British Raj on India and its influence in Nepal. Simultaneously, he critiques the colonial form of education promoted in Nepal when he goes on to examine the loss of traditional values. Devkota insists on the appeal of the locals in the colonial context of South Asia. He writes that the modern educational system treats "Krishna as the king in an old story, Vyas as the conman, Pashupatinath as a stone" (Devkota, 1967, *Hai hai Angreji*, p. 49). Very conscious of his own identity, the essayist places his self at the center stage in his arguments. For instance, Lohani (2014) analyzes, "This is Devkota whose identity does not lie in

slavish imitation of others” (p. 39). As a critical observer of self and society, the essays treat Devkota's self as a challenger in the intellectual scene growing in Nepal in the 1930s and the 1940s. The essayist understands the implications of the growing ethos of the society as a nation on the whole. Such an attitude, as promoted in the colonial form of education, directly shatters the traditional faith and values of Nepal. The language of the empire intrudes into the Nepali scene as a means of earning a living for the people and begins to challenge the whole being of the essence of the society.

Devkota's personal exploration gains a nationalistic height as he contemplates the nation. His selection of the rhetorical question “Is Nepal small?” rejects the notion of size when one begins to think of a nation. He argues that Nepal is complete in itself as a nation. In Nepal's quest for a more substantial state in the 1930s and 1940s, he claims that “Nepal is the devotee of classicism, though the society shows some concerns for modernity” (Devkota, 1967, *Ke Nepal*, p. 51). Unlike Foucauldian modernity, which is often taken as an age corresponding to its spirit (Foucault, 1997, p. 309), Devkota sees modernity as a challenge to the contemporary way of living in a classically settled social order. He glorifies his nation, moving beyond the prevailing set of standards of size and geography. Rather than the area, he seeks to establish Nepali society's virtues for all the people to enjoy and use. Narrowing the form to content and then seeking after the essence of Nepal, the essays fly across the Himalayan landscape to appreciate the diverse geography that he thus telescopes in his writing:

Some people say Hindi is better, and others prefer Bangali. But I choose the letters that are infused with the natural voice of the blue mountains, the characters carrying the slopes of Amarbhallari and flying with the

birds. Though my language has not spread much, this is the song of the spring of my rainbow. (Devkota, 1967, *Ke Nepal*, pp. 52-53)

Devkota's preference for Nepali language, culture, and geography and his poetic treatment of size as the physical entity only celebrate Nepal as an awakening nation in the 1940s. In the quote above, he brings sound, sight, and colors together to create a unified effect that appeals to the people's hearts. Writing at the dawn of modern Nepali literature, he was committed to setting high standards for writing in the nation and celebrating the national identity as such.

Devkota distinctly catches the local themes and festivities in the essay collection. For him, the life of the people at the bottom of society counts a lot, like their festivities. The peasant festivities, like the mid-Asadha, become the greatest of the festivals in which he celebrates the toil and sweat of the people at the bottom. He introduces the festival in the following words:

By the command of God and through His mercy for His children, the earth has acquired youthfulness. We go to plant rice in the hope of a golden harvest; in our hands are the green rice seedlings, in our minds are joyfulness and longing, in our hearts is a light rhythmic quivering, and in our throats surge up the sweet songs of our hearts. Today, we enter the soft, swampy fields. Today is the planting of joy in Nepal, today is the fifteenth of Asadha. (Devkota, 1993, *The fifteenth of Asadha*, p. 155)

Devkota's humanistic approach to life manifests in his treatment of the issues of the common folks in his writings and the celebration of life as observed in the organic rusticity. The peasantry's raw festivities promise subsistence to the people at large: the people invent their



own food, music, and ways of having fun in the muddy paddy fields. The youths splash water and hit each other with swampy mud: the essayist finds the bliss of life embedded in such activities. Devkota's celebration of life continues from the paddy fields to the lives of people in the farthest corners of society.

Devkota's essays treat the hills and the inaccessible localities as the source of knowledge, highlighting the natural ways of living as the core of Nepali life. For instance, such treatment shows his inclination towards the issues of the subaltern people, as Devkota's writings embed subaltern consciousness (Phuyal, 2008, p. 56). The issues of the common folks and their consciousness enter Devkota's writings, as Phuyal (2008) argues:

Moreover, their basic qualities like honesty, meekness, and proximity to nature fascinate him. The only fear in him is to protect these qualities because the bourgeois-elitist education system propounded by imperialism always swallows up the beautiful aspects of the subaltern life and makes them rootless. (2008, p. 57)

Like his reflection on Nepal in "*Is Nepal small?*," "*Pahadi jivan*" [Life in the hills] presents the voice of the ignored people, places, and practices beyond the access of the mainstream. However, Dhakal (2018) only sees the portrayal of the socio-political context in the lives of people outside mainstream locales. Her study concludes that Devkota firmly grounds himself in the rural context to write essays and depicts the issues from the places (Dhakal, 2018, p. 28). Moving beyond the implications of Dhakal's argument, Devkota's soul flies far away in search of the ruptures in the formation of consciousness. His travels acquainted him with the classical values that have lived constantly for years in distant human settlements, away from

the access of modern eyes.

The essayist treats his travels to such societies as an opportunity to reflect on the weaknesses of his life in the city and the strengths of living in such societies. A nature lover, he seeks to find a soothing balm for his soul, wounded in the city by the artificiality of modern ways of living. His essay "*Pahadi Jiwan*" documents his travel to Jhiltung to see how people live in the villages, where he realizes the presence of the source of knowledge in the most natural way. He falls so deeply in love with the hills that he wishes to spend his life there; however, he dismisses such a possibility because he finds town spaces more comfortable to live in (Devkota, 1967, *Pahadi jiwan*, p. 9). This visit completely changes his perceptions as he gets a real touch of the life of people in the farthest corners of the nation. He accepts that "he was properly acquainted with the life in hills after visiting Jhiltung" (Devkota, 1967, *Pahadi jiwan*, p. 11). Gadtula's reading (2018) asserts that Devkota's essays derive an understanding of life and the world from Eastern philosophy (p. 32). "*Pahadi Jiwan*" also views Jhiltung as the most original place, away from the intervention of the ways of the city. His ego dissolves when he sees such purity and begins to learn from the most primitive ways of Jhiltung and its people. He goes deep into the most pensive mood to see the formation of the mantras of the Vedas in such mountains in ancient times.

Devkota views Bhanubhakta as the initiator of modern Nepali literature. Bhanubhakta became the greatest modern Nepali mind as he contributed to forming the body of modern Nepali literature. He critically examines the ethos of the twentieth century in populist activities and states that the people have not put serious efforts toward forming the national ethos. Setting such context, he argues that Bhanubhakta's poetry promotes the spontaneity of Nepali

society and "awakens the true Nepal soul and takes us to the world of aesthetics" (Devkota, 1967, *Nepali sahityako*, p. 23). The essayist further explores the features of Bhanubhakta and his poetry:

He takes the language to the space where children are elated, Nepali is pure, and the mothers tell the old stories. He has neither complexity nor artificiality. He does not twist the word. He does not pretend to show off the refined perspectives. His pen runs smoothly. His poems do not fly away beyond Nepali hills. His language is just like those poets who do not write anything. We begin our education by reading Bhanubhakta and scorn him by finishing it. But those who can understand feel a unique magic in the light of their house. (Devkota, 1967, *Nepali sahityako*, p. 25)

Both Bhanubhakta's poetry and his simplicity carry the essence of nature around him and his world. As the lover of the natural, Devkota sees great meaning in fusing such spontaneity in language and his poetry. To him, Bhanubhakta's revolt against the contemporary use of Sanskrit in poetry refers to the greatest act of preparation for laying the ground for the Nepali language to emerge on its own. Reading Bhanubhakta through his poems and using Nepali vernacular to challenge the established authority of Sanskrit among the existing intellectuals was a great event at the time. In this sense, Bhanubhakta challenges the intellectual luxury of the "classy" scholars to benefit the masses: Nepali language and literature find their departure in Bhanubhakta as the first poet.

Devkota's world consists of his personal observations of self, society, and the nation, which he often brings into a single piece of writing. Beginning with the minute observation of bits and pieces of his surroundings, he

transcends worldly affairs to reach the domain beyond the access of the general public without the power of analysis and intuition. Often, the autobiographical content of his observation turns into the political treatment of himself as the exploration of his subjectivity. Symbiotically placing people and places, agents and nature, and people and nations in developing certain ethos in history, the essayist fuses analytical knowledge with intuition and personal observation with the political development of certain ideas in society. He delves into the space beyond the capture of any modern tools of understanding when he reaches the impulses of contemporary society, as present in his essays on Bhanubhakta, Nepal as a nation, or the celebration of labor and toil on the fifteenth of Asadha. He treats Bhanubhakta as the spontaneous development of Nepali as a tongue of the people and then of the nation; he measures the size of the national ethos in “*Ke Nepal sano chha?*” arguing for the spiritual depth of the people and society. Similarly, the most secular form of celebration gets a critical and creative response from Devkota in “*Asadhako pandhra*” in the most welcoming way. The peasants and the locales away from the center occupy the central space of the formation of knowledge in Devkota’s writing, for he aligns himself with such people.

### **Reflection on Self and Society**

Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909–1959) writes about people, power relations, and polity in his essays to make sense of the world and to intervene in the context with his vision. This paper attempts to explore how Devkota centers himself within the prevailing socio-political practices and how he seeks to address the lapses therein. Devkota examines Nepali society in the 1920s and 1930s, analyzing the ethos of the time. In *LNS*, his essays critique the intellectual and political awakening of the nation during these decades. His philosophical worldview centers on the formation of self and nation within the larger cultural and

political context. Devkota moves back and forth through time and space, searching for the intersections of self and nation in their formative stages. During the 1930s and 1940s, Nepal was intellectually preparing for a massive social transformation, and his essays are set against the backdrop of national political transitions, both within Nepal and in the global context.

On one hand, he takes responsibility for defining the national canon through his reflections on Bhanubhakta and Nepal as a nation, providing people with a reason to believe in Nepal as a political category. On the other, he expands his scope of observation to include themes ranging from festivities like the fifteenth of Asadha to human settlements in Jhiltung, requiring profound reflection to understand the essence of Nepali life. A true devotee of nature, he explores the most scholarly ideas among the people of Jhiltung and the most natural flow of language in Bhanubhakta's poetry. The whole nation speaks its voice through the tunes of the hills in both Jhiltung and Bhanubhakta. Devkota's worldview is grounded in the intersection of self, society, and nation, as he treats it as the subject matter for his essays. On the other hand, he turns himself into the observer and the observed: the expansion of the personal ego takes the shape of – in the most sublimated form, pure from any traces of arrogance – a collective form of polity that functions as the voice of the whole cultural setup in general. The analytic knowledge fused with the intuition of the poetic heart helps create a unique voice and the most authentic aesthetic voice in the tradition of modern Nepali essays.

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