

Haai! Haai! Angreji

by Lakshmi Prasad Devkota

translated by Michael Hutt

Translator's note

Born in 1909, Lakshmi Prasad Devkota published over forty volumes of writings before his death in 1959. There are multiple translations of his most popular work, a long narrative poem entitled *Muna-Madan*, first published in 1936, and of a number of other popular poems, but despite Devkota's lauded status as the Mahakavi ('Great Poet') of Nepali literature, the vast majority of his output remains untranslated.

Although he is known mainly as the composer of some of Nepal's most profound and exquisite poetry, Devkota also penned a large number of essays. The 290-page volume *Lakshmi-Nibandha-Sangraha* ('A Collection of Lakshmi's Essays'), first published in 1945, contains 37 essays on a wide variety of topics, of which this is one of the best known.

Very few of Devkota's essays have been translated (Manfred Treu's excellent rendering of 'Asharhko Pandhra' is the only one I have seen in print),¹ though several are famous among the Nepali cognoscenti. It is possible that aspiring translators have been deterred by what David Rubin calls 'the unpredictable originality of the poet's mind and the frequent obscurity of his diction', which is in evidence in several passages here.² As Abhi Subedi remarked in a very helpful response to an emailed cry for help with several of the more opaque phrases, '[Devkota] makes his own expressions'.

The date of this essay's composition is uncertain, but it refers to events and developments from the poet's student years. Devkota enrolled at the Darbar High School in 1921 and married in 1925 at the age of fifteen. In 1926 he passed the Patna University matriculation examination with a first class and went to Trichandra College to study science the following year. It was at this time that he began to work as an English tutor for the children of the Rana elite. His growing interest in

1 'A translation of Lakshmi Prasad Devkota's "The Fifteenth of the Month of Asadha"' *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 20(2): 149-64.

2 David Rubin: *Nepali Visions, Nepali Dreams: The poetry of Lakshmi Prasad Devkota*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980: 55.

literature led to him to abandon his study of science, and in 1930 he received a BA in English, mathematics and economics from Patna University. David Rubin (1980: 7) writes that this was the only BA awarded in Nepal that year.

As an account of a young Kathmandu intellectual's encounter with English in the early decades of the twentieth century, the essay appears to me to be of considerable interest to anyone researching issues such as language and globalisation in Nepal today.

'Alas! Alas! English' is the best translation I could come up with for the title, but I am not at all satisfied with it. I have therefore retained the essay's Nepali title, which seems to me to encapsulate its tone much more faithfully. The rest of the translation is also far from perfect, and I hope someone will improve upon it one day—and also undertake to translate Devkota's other essays, many of which are equally deserving of a wider readership. MH

When I was eight years of age, my elder brother had just recently passed his Entrance and he was earning upwards of three hundred a month at the tuition school of that time. I regarded him as the ideal of the world. And Mother too often used to tell me, pointing him out with a finger of love, 'That's how you should study, Baba, just like your brother.' I was afraid of him, just as young lads are naturally afraid of Mahatmas who have attained an ideal. When I saw in him the grandeur, pomposity, weightiness and profundity that a master should possess, I was immediately cowed and my soul would wait for that golden age to arrive when I too would pass in the first class and be able to stand in front of the boys with a cane in my hand, and threaten and scold them!

At that time, passing in first class seemed like the summit of the world. I could not see the attraction of learning rising any higher than that. It seemed to me that the essence of Mahatmahood lay in being able to stammer out some English and I wanted to follow my wetnurse's instructions, 'you must earn money, you must study English, you must be a master' to the letter. But I did not know with what pain, with what cries, with what worries that person called 'a master' had to place his soul in the dustiness of the ordinary in the charmless task of earning a living, and how he had to sit with his head bowed low, even as he saw the lofty sky.

I went on studying, went on growing, and the Entrance seduced me, called me on, took me up the hard climbs, just like Gosainthan summoning the rain—perhaps I can say in very thin cold air and on a diet of corn

flour. I had no wish to play. My obsession with 'I have to study, I have to earn money' was taking me away, not allowing me to look to either side. A young boy can easily get information from the faces of his worried parents, and in a poor home the idea that the search for economic means is life itself can easily be inscribed on his heart. I wanted to become a master, in order to earn money, to make the home bright, to help my brother, to take everyone to milk and rice. In my keenness to pass quickly, I gave up playing. I found no flavour in my food. My brain was always spinning in Baburam Master's geography lessons, as if I had taken cannabis. I dreamed of the pages of my English book, I slept on the pillow of a book. Although I accompanied my younger brother in his games between four and six o'clock sometimes, more often I would lock the door and stay in the room wearing out my eyes until dusk. My studying went on until 12 o'clock at night and from 5 o'clock in the morning, and in this way I spent five years, in order to pass with a first class.

My studies were supposed to be for nine years, but I finished them in five, and during these five years I did not taste my food, I must have looked at my face in the mirror very rarely, and in many private things I was like a competitive friend who had vowed never to wear shoes until he passed with a first. You could even say that I never spoke to the world, nor did I ever take the lead in its works. I was very unpopular in the society of women, because I never stepped out to take part in their shopping and such like. I was possessed by the need to pass. After I passed with a first in Patna University in 1926 my nose rose a little higher, but my heart was not content. I wanted to study further and the lure of a BA began to call me.

When I arrived in Trichandra College, my hesitancy was loosened a little by the manners on the other side of Rani Pokhari, and I began to debate a little, to come forward to speak. But by then my fellow college students just called me taciturn, devious and conceited. At that time Wordsworth's poetry affected me greatly. I used to write a few poems in Nepali and English and often showed them to the teachers. And it was from this time that I began to taste the pleasure of being a master. I had to give tuition from four until six in one place and for three hours each morning and evening in another, and along with this I had to study science too. I did not study; in class I just listened, then got up to go. For at least two days each week I stayed at home and wrote poems.

When I got my BA I started giving tuition for as much as thirteen hours

each day. The mild *ganja* of 'have to earn, have to teach English, have to become a master' put me on a bicycle and sent me around the city. I did not speak Nepali, I did not speak to people who spoke Nepali, but if I met someone who spoke English on my way I would become thunderously voluble. It seemed to me that there were no words in Nepali. Emotions could not be expressed in it. It was as if Nepali was not the language of a scholar. When I spoke Nepali my tongue became tangled up, after I had spent thirteen years polishing it. I thought in English and talked in English. When I spoke Nepali I was deaf and dumb, when I spoke English people turned their faces toward me with a look of appreciation. If I spoke Nepali, students looked down on me, but if I stammered English the noses of their pride hit the ground. It seemed to me that the fact that no progress had taken place in Nepal was because English education had not been extended enough. When I saw the pandits they seemed like 'fossils': very old, not yet reached by the light of modernity, conservative, devoid of science, narrow. Putting all that Indian medieval slumber onto their heads, I said to myself, 'How constricted you are!' Because I too was the son of a pandit, I had some reverence for the ancient civilisation and culture, but none the less I felt 'something is missing! Something should be added, improved, increased!' 'Where is the life in them? Like creepers, clinging, clinging'. I could not explain or reform them in English. A shame!

I wanted to reform, to bring in a new age. What kind of age? One in which all Nepalis would be able to speak English. To write articles in English. To read books on physics and chemistry and make new discoveries. To reconcile the social situation in accordance with Marshall's economics. [Nepal would be a place] where doctors would know chemical formulae, where people would take classes in happy human life, where Nepalis could beat the drums of their importance in front of the world, with the red sparrowheaded letters of advertisement. What did I want to reform? I cannot say.

If I had not had the habit of writing I would have been a completely useless donkey. The pen developed me and took me along and I came to understand the country, the times, and the situation a little, but English tries still more to turn me into a translation and a fake. The critics gave me the name of *exploiter* (an exploiter is someone who makes materials from another's thought and creation and tries to become rich), as if I brought

out my English in the manner of a Nepali translation, although I had always carefully rejected conscious imitation. I had to erase and set many things aside. The first battle was between the thoughts of an English habit and habits of thought, the next between the echoes of the conscious and unconscious, which constantly tried to penetrate the classroom.

It was at that time that I understood what a mistake it was to study English. What translations we are becoming! Our book of education was becoming one that taught us to become a translation. We called that thing 'education' which set off an earthquake in our beliefs. We were deprived of our *swadeshi* values. We thought of our literature as separate from religion and life. We despised the ordinary and the uneducated. We had become distant from the habits of Aryan thought, but even so we straightened the ears of the ignorant, flashed our spectacles at them and showed them our magnificence. It was as if we were wayward, we were deliberately forfeiting our *swadeshi* independence. We treated our language with contempt.

I truly began my education when I left college and began to see life. Then I understood that there is no education in the husk of the university. The people who are called 'learned' are those who replace the magic of life with the mechanicalness of a book, who want to place their own race into a foreign pattern and carry out reform while covering their eyes. To study is just to weave a foreign net, just to translate and become translated.

We take our school habits along with us even into adult life and we are becoming corrupted. Someone who reads English a lot seems like a scholar to us, and an affection for the long words of the English dictionary penetrates our lives. We become wordy bombasts; forsaking truth, we debate in words. Competitive quarrels about who knows the most turn on superficial matters with foreign habits. We argue about matters from the other side of the ocean and close our eyes to our own intimate and proximate affairs. We like to lord it over our *swadeshi* brothers; as soon as we see an English *saheb* the upright heads of the graduates bow like the comb of a cock who has eaten salt. To speak English and to shake the hands of the English is understood to be the apex of the education of a member of the Aryan race. We want to write in English when our own literature cannot even go *ryain ryain* like the hollow but broken violin of a *gaine*.

Now I wonder, what did I gain from studying English? Our normal life time is probably about 25 years. With fifteen years of study we become a

BA. If you add ten years of childhood, that is where we end. Our education is so mechanical, blunt and dry that all it does is agitate the glands of our *swadeshi* brains. We have no aim other than salt and bread. We are sold for money and we are selling the souls of the world. With our minds thinking only of money, we are sharing out the world's children, as teachers sitting all dressed up on chairs. We snatch away the milky language that sits easily on their tongues and we distort it, we put on English spectacles and onto their easily developing minds we load the tyranny of western opinion. But I give my studying boys sarcastic praise. A boy who agrees to study English by becoming like a ox with a rope through his nose must be unhealthy. We want natural strength there, but where a foreign chain is put on human nature what has the poor ox gained after it has been made to plough for so many days? Dry grass! Nothing more had been written. Neither this blue ink of the hills nor these green pages of the forests!

That's all! That's all being a graduate amounts to! To show your ability in the world on the strength of a husk of paper! To wear away your bones for 70 rupees! Not to know how to pick up a bamboo pen! To be a translation of English; to corrupt your habits of thought; to teach from the morning until the curfew cannon to make donkeys be like donkeys in the thirst to spread butter on your bread; to show off your false conceits; to rob the world; and what else I cannot say.

For a graduate Krishna is the king of the Purana story. There is no truth in the *Bhagavat*; Vyas becomes a thief; Pashupatinath is a rock; *hejlin* becomes sandalwood; the tomato becomes wholesome food; mankind is oppressive; the Puranas become cunning threats; heaven is a void; Yamraj becomes casual conversation; the truthfulness of the Vedas is lost, and ancestors become fools.

How much do we know when we become graduates? It's like the proverb about the lad who goes to fetch water and drowns in his own vessel. Many people are afraid to speak English, let alone write it. Saraswati merely makes the parrot of examinations repeat mechanically what it has learned by heart. As soon as we emerge from the examination room the limit of our knowledge is reached and our enquiry comes to an end. We wrinkle like peppers and dry up. And life becomes canes, threats and dishonesty.

But there is salt in this same English; this English is sweetmeat for children's mouths. Here is India's 20th century; here are modern eyes;

here are foreign connections; here is international debate; here are the Indian courts; here the sun does not set; here there is pomp and wealth. This is our daily life. What does it lack, this English?

For the student of English there are the daughters of the well-born, in the Babu Sahebs' homes a chair, in the school a cane, in the college a beard, at the trading centre money, in the foreign office honour, to the translation bureau a summons, on his bread butter, pomp abroad and conceit at home, a nose held high among his friends, fifty rupees in an hour and a good standing in the world: hail hai! Angreji! You get the job at the set rate, you shake hands with the Viceroy, you go to London, it is by your glory that we sit here eating, where the learned pandits just sit growing wrinkled.