

## BALKRISHNA SAMA

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Balkrishna Sama was a typical prodigy of Nepali renaissance. Born in 1902 in Kathmandu to nobility of a privileged Rana family; he was brought up in an atmosphere of comfortable security, opulence and learning, as well as good taste in the arts. His father was an expert stage director and an accomplished photographer as well as a painter. Family influence under such a father's care during his formative years, as also under his elder brother, Pushkar Shamsher, a pioneer of modern, impeccable Nepali prose, had their effect on the precocious Balkrishna who started writing verse at the age of eight and simultaneously went to try his hand later at painting, photography, histrionics and dramaturgy, as also at music.

Sama's formal education did not take him beyond the high school level. After passing his high school examination from Kathmandu's Darbar School, then the only school for Western-style education in Nepal, he joined a college in Calcutta to study science. But science subjects did not harmonize with his artistic temper; and domestic circumstances forced him to give up college education. It does not appear if he ever regretted it; and whatever he acquired for his equipment was by his self-study at home.

During Rana rule, Sama, a Major Captain of the Nepal Army, was for many years head of the Government Bureau of Publications (Nepali Bhasha Prakashini Samiti) set up for the publication of Nepali books, generally text books. At the same time he taught Nepali language and literature in Darbar School and Trichandra College in Kathmandu, both educational institutions run by the Government. Political activities directed at the overthrow of the Ranas led to his imprisonment in 1950. After his release in 1951, in consequence of the overthrow of Rana rule, he renounced his family name Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana and took Sama instead to signify his commitment to social equality. He was for some time the Director of Publicity and later for a spell Chief Editor of the *Gorkhapatra*, a Government-owned Nepali daily.

In 1957, Sama was nominated to the Nepal Academy (later Nepal Rajkiya Prajñā Pratisthan) in recognition of his service for the cause of Nepali letters. Towards the middle of 1971 he retired as its Vice-Chancellor. He has been for some time a member of the Standing Committee of the Council of State, a constitutional body. At present he is busy writing his autobiography, the first two parts of which have been published so far. He is seventy, and yet inexhaustible. He has remained the greatest literary craftsman since he began to publish.

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From the very start of his literary career Balkrishna Sama could be recognized as a force in Nepali literature giving an impetus to new trends. His first book, a play named *Mutuko Vyatha* (Heartache, 1929), was a social tragedy, bold enough in theme and technique to startle the votaries of conventional standards.

Of course there had been pioneers before him: Shambhu Prasad Dhungyal, Lekh Nath Paudyal and Dharanidhar Koirala had already introduced various changes in the field of poetry. Dhungyal's poetry had already begun to give expression to the sombre and melancholic sentiments of a people treated like subjects rather than citizens and overburdened by autocratic Rana ruler's orthodoxies, ruthlessness and exorbitantly exploitative privileges accumulated over the generations. His poems varied from the elegiac to the lyrical overtones, from the playfully erotic to the fervently national themes. Gnostic quibbles alternated with lush descriptions of Nature. Paudyal's verse was philosophical and aphoristic, having first found expression in eroticism and impressionism his language well chiselled and down-to-earth idiomatic. Koirala again was startlingly a nationalist as well as an inspiring social reformer, putting a premium on moral and ethical values and glorifying the country in laudatory terms. Thus when Balkrishna Sama appeared on the literary scene, the language had already begun to admit new influences and the degree of the poet's contact with the common people was rapidly increasing. But, in spite of all this, the writers' consciousness of a social function to be in accord with the people's aspirations and expectations of improvement in their lot as a whole was not sufficiently formed to give them confidence; their writings tended to be either halting or hesitating, or excessively elaborate, abstracted from realities. Sama was the first fully conscious mature artist writing in a contemporary idiom and themes, with lucid and luminous nuances. His sensibility was an entirely new element in the world of Nepali letters.

With his very first play *Mutuko Vyatha* as with the mythological play *Dhruva* (also published the same year, -1929), Sama came forward as an innovator and iconoclast of a dead body of conventional writing. Nepali drama till then had been confined to translations of crude adaptations generally of Sanskrit and Hindu plays, or bizarre versions of the Parsi theatre of Bombay. Nepali audience, who loved drama, were used to theatrical comedies and stage rhetoric, to grotesque buffoonery and grandiloquent poses. They were naturally startled by a play which presented a facsimile of Nepali life and society, characters being drawn from ordinary people speaking naturally and with ease; by a play which on top of this, was a tragedy. It was disconcerting to be presented with a play in which the characters were neither divine nor super-human, neither in buffoonery nor in miracles, speaking a language which was neither declamatory nor full of loud asides, endeavouring to create an effect neither macabre nor burlesque. By today's standards one may not consider Sama's peculiar blend of Sanskrit *anustup* verse and ordinary prose of Shakespearian and Ibsenian cadence as particularly

modern; but in the context of what was then accepted as good drama in Nepal, there is no doubt whatever that the publication of the *Mutuko Vyatha* is a landmark in the development of modern Nepali literature.

From this first epoch-making venture, Sama went on to other plays; domestic tragedies and comedies as well as mythological and historical dramas; plays written in simple and lyrical prose as well as in verse, all essentially emphasizing the virtues of love, earthly and ethereal. Although he went on to write poetry and fiction also, play-writing has always been his forte and first love; his genius is best expressed in drama. His use of the verse play had been by deliberate choice. In a country accustomed to the traditional play, it was much easier to touch and hold an audience through a verse form, more so because a verse play took less time to produce, its mnemonic quality much higher than that of the prose. And Sama has never been merely the literary dramatist; he has not written plays only to be read but always for presentation on the stage. Indeed, with two exceptions, all his plays have, in effect, been presented on the stage. The exceptions are *Ma*, (I, 1945), a social comedy in lyrical prose (which could not be staged for some unavoidable reasons despite all preparations in 1959); *Preminda* (Love obsequies, 1954), a long tragedy in prose, depicting the life of a Rana's harem of the period 1848-1908, having its hero alleged to be the author's own grand father, and designed on the Chinese pattern (or Hindu *Puranas*, cf. *Dasavatara*) to be staged consecutively on several nights; and *Tansenko Jhari* (Rain in Tansen), 1970, a social tragedy, equally grim like the predecessor *Mutuko Vyatha* but with much less intensity.

It may be useful at this point, even at the cost of a slight digression, to make a quick survey of Nepal's theatre tradition at the time when Sama appeared on the stage. The Malla kings of the Kathmandu Valley had been great patrons of the stage and encouraged the presentation of plays at all social ceremonies, rituals and religious festivals. Some of the kings were themselves writers of plays. There was thus in Kathmandu a tradition of artistic productivity of several centuries. Decay undoubtedly set in during Rana rule, presentation being restricted mainly to harems of the Ranas; the audiences being limited to the family circle and its periphery of maids and concubines, oligarchs and aristocracies, attendants and servants. The literary merit of the plays staged was irrelevant; choice was governed by the opportunities they provided to fulfill the baser instincts of the feudal patrons and to parade the beauties of the seraglio in varying degrees of provocative indiscretion. Naturally the commoner could hardly ever get a peep at these plays. The public was permitted at best to stage plays only during the brief period of the *gaijatra* (a religious festival originally observed to express devotion to the departed near and dear one), falling between August and September. Even at this time, plays were generally staged mostly by amateurs and sometimes mere school students, far removed from dramaturgy. The Ranas did not relish large

gatherings of common people lest unrest should take a collective form of some anomie, or some conspiracy be hatched for their outster.

Some plays by Sama which were staged against such a background were refreshingly satisfying both to the potentate and the plebeian. *Prem* and *Mukund Indira* were the first to be staged for the first time in 1937 exclusively for the private audience of the Rana Prime Minister of the day who permitted *Mukund Indira* to be shown to the public on ticket. This play, a domestic comedy which highlighted social idealism and nationalism, was a great success in print, as also on the stage, and brought to the author instant honour and success and recognition, besides promotion in military rank !

The same year *Mukund Indira* was presented by the students of the Darbar School for a prize-giving ceremony of the School. The year 1939 saw the presentation of the mythological plays *Prahlad* and *Dhruva*. *Prahlad*, however, disturbed the Rana oligarchy as a whole and made the top polearchs particularly deeply suspicious of the author's intentions. Emphasizing as it did the principle of non-violent struggle against the oppression of the tyrant demon, the play appeared to the Ranas to be charged with dangerous political overtones, with nutrients for subversive activities and possibilities. *Dhruva* was also presumably purported to be a social satire, if under the camouflage of an innocuous mythological play, and hence on the face of it nothing to do with the real present-day world, but the depiction of the henpecked king under the influence of his feline junior queen, who was virtually a tyrant, reflected the evils of the social life of the Ranas themselves, if only implied. And so the next play of Sama, the dark domestic tragedy *Andhaveg* (Wild Passion, 1939) was prohibited even though it had already been scheduled for show, presumably due more to its violation of traditional mores, value and norms of conduct, as well as to wild fires of passion of an adulterous wife who fell in love with a cousin of her husband that led to conjugal estrangement and finally to her morbid state of mind leading to suicide. Traditionalists out and out, the Ranas might have found the letting loose of the grim elements in the play likely to cause social discontinuities and thereby an invitation to social disquiet and cataclasm. Such an apprehension was not a guarantee to their continued rule and if any social disquiet was allowed to burst, it had all the potentialities of emancipating the common people as a whole from their traditional thoughtpattern and unquestioning loyalty to the authority. Indeed, no other Nepali play has so far exposed the violence and vulgarity, decay and degeneration, of social life as has been done by the *Andhaveg*.

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This period coincided with the birth of the Praja Parishad, a secretive political organization set up in Kathmandu by some local youths. In 1940 all the few who had clubbed themselves together were arrested and tried; some were sentenced to the

gallows, some shot dead; those who were Brahmins, and therefore not liable to the death penalty under the existing Laws of the Realm, were awarded life sentences and condemned to solitary cells in heavy fetters. Those who had been awarded such sentences were all allegedly anxious to overthrow the obscurantist regime and military dictatorship of the Ranas, in order, as was claimed by the survivors, to restore the powers and privileges to the King which had been usurped by the Ranas since 1846, in addition to creating a condition for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in the long run. The year of the trial of the Praja Parishad associates had seen the staging of the *Prahlad*, to be followed by *Dhuva*. Some of the persons alleged to be active sympathisers of the Parishad had also been taking part in the plays; it appeared to the Ranas natural to suspect that the inspiration for subversion had come from the plays which were therefore immediately proscribed. Other religious plays, including a few social ones, by other playwrights were permitted to be staged after heavy scrutiny; but as none of those was of the same stature, the Ranas felt they could relax a little.

After lying low for about four years, Sama again sought permission to stage a play; this time *Bhakta Bhanubhakta* (1944), an historical play presenting the life of the great Nepali poet, Bhanubhakta. It was pleaded that the play was devotional and not concerned whatsoever with any theme that could be considered treasonable even in imagination. This play was followed by a romantic melodrama, *U Mareki Chhaina* (She Is Still Alive), which has not been published so far; but after that contemporary events again led to a total ban on all plays for the next two years.

Another play, *Chinta*, was written and rehearsed for staging in 1948 but was not allowed to be put up, nor has it been published thus far. In 1950 came the great Revolution started by the Nepali Congress; as a result, the century-old obscurantist Rana rule was overthrown and apprenticeship in democracy started in the country in February 1951. The fundamental rights for which the people had undergone suffering and sacrifices were now available for the first time in country's history and writers were free to express themselves freely and frankly, without fear or favour of the rulers. Sama at last got the opportunity not only to produce his plays but also to act in them; an ambition long and deeply cherished but impossible of fulfilment under the Ranas. For could a Rana himself behave like a commoner on the stage or move in the company of such persons who were *duniyadars* (subjects) taking part in the play with their paramount roles? He made his debut on the stage as the hero in 1953 in his own play and later with some of the members of his family as well. Since then he has produced and appeared in the *Andhaveg* and four other plays depicting grand characters of Nepal's history, taking in all these the leading role himself, always entertaining the audience, presumably following Aristotle that the pleasure of his audience is the poet's only aim and contending like Racine that the first rule of the drama is to

please. With these stage appearances Sama may be said to have fulfilled himself at last. As a hereditary Rana himself, he had to live a double life till the long-awaited emancipation in February 1951, singing as often as was required the encomium of the ruling clan and remaining aloof from the common people. And yet his sympathies were always with the oppressed and suppressed and downtrodden; and he remained true to his calling as an artist. It was due to his merits as a literateur that he continued to be held in great personal esteem by the people, besides being respected as a great artist, even during the illiberal Rana rule. If he connived at any wrong to his people and incurred some of the odium attaching to his behaviour of aligning himself with despotism, it was forgiven and forgotten without any rancour.

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Sama's poetry is held in equal esteem; and in poetry he has also revealed the same superb techniques which distinguishes his plays, though it would seem that he himself had never the same love that he has had for the form of the plays he has produced. He began to contribute poetry to the *Sharada*, a literary magazine which started publication early in 1935 and may be said to have been the pioneer of modern Nepali literature. Sama began with regular metrical verse from the age of ten years; but when fifteen, he broke away to forge his own technique of blank verse. In the early period his poetry had the romantic flavour characteristic of the work of Lakshmi Prasad Devkota and Siddhi Charan Shrestha, followed by Bhikshu. But, in spite of his romantic allegiance, he wrote highly experimental works and also gave expression to his rebellious *elan* in several disguised forms, in the use of startling imagery—which derived its strength from a remarkable fusion of thought and feeling—and an expressive but unfamiliar vocabulary and diction. He perfected a purity of style—a purity which was his and own which no Nepali writers to date have achieved. His subjects were also unconventional and sometimes apparently common-place, but self-consciously innovative: "The Broken Flower Vase", "To the Crow", "Monologue of a Madman", etc. Unlike his contemporary romantics, particularly the triumvirate referred to above, he did not regard Nature as divinity (for he was an atheist), nor melancholy as the pervading mood for poetic utterances. But his poetry did reflect the attraction of the strange and the wonderful, the sublime and the mysterious, the exotic and the grotesque, the stern and the magnificent. His great imaginative sensibility and fine aesthetic perception were supported by a vast capacity of acute observation and understanding and insight into the beautiful and the ecstatic.

Sama's romanticism, however, was of a very short duration. About 1938 he suddenly stopped writing verse and for a period corresponding roughly to the duration of the Second World War, he did not publish any poem at all. Thereafter, he published verses indicating a variety of experimentation and widely divergent direction of

searching of self and fundamental truths. Poems of this period suggest, variously, an interest in symbolism, occasional essays into metaphysical verse, profound intellectual exercises, emotional seriousness, some didactic efforts and short aphoristic utterances, and frequent patriotic sallies manifestedly directed to accuse the Ranas of their pestilential policies of sucking in advantages for themselves. It was really since the political change-over in February 1951 that Sama really found an atmosphere congenial to his poetic genius, and by his literary output during the period ending 1960 became the most outstanding figure in the literary scene in the country. The years following have been strikingly unproductive compared to the earlier blossoming.

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Sama is a meticulous and impeccable craftsman, always anxious to evolve some new forms, introspective and disciplined at the same time. He never hurries to publish unless self-satisfied by his own self-imposed rigorous standards. His writings see the light after months of composition and sometimes after years of industry has been spent on their perfection. And no small wonder, many of his complete works are still unpublished. A creative artist, he has his own evaluative orientation and set standards for appreciating a literary genre. His long and scholarly introduction to his plays *Prahlad* (in its second printing) and *Dhruba*, and the *enclaireissement* of a character in one of his works (*Madhuparka*, October-November 1973, pp. 7-12), show him to be a literary critic of fine perception.

Sama's verse has a profusion of imagery imbued with deep feeling, and yet rich with surprise. Though his technique reflects the precision of a seasoned craftsman, his use of various devices for supreme accomplishment and mastery of technique sometime tends excessively to an affected formal style with bloated rhetoric, elaborate concrete detail to this side verbal jugglery and fiddle-faddle. This is perhaps his chief pitfall. Because of this his long philosophical poem *Ago Ra Pani* (Fire and Water, 1956), and the social epic *Chiso Chulho* (The Cold Oven, 1985), though both scintillating with deep feeling and having as their purposes of expressing sympathy and compassion for the weak and the mute supinely submitting to the *status quo* and the powerless living in a cruel world, have failed to achieve the quality of true works of art.

This tendency appears to be on the increase in more writings, especially of the period following 1960. Long descriptions, interspersed with a didactic flavour here and there, seem not only to impair artistic sensibilities but sometimes even lead to obscurity and absurdity. He is always serious and the element of humour is conspicuous by its absence in his writings. On the other hand, his language is smooth, elegant, powerful, elevating, charged with meaning, and having rich qualities of cadence.

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Sama has written some effective short fiction, one-act plays and a few remarkable personal essays. His philosophical prose writings are contained in an aetiological work *Niyamit Akasmikta* (Regular Casulness, 1947). Sama took up painting quite early and as a parallel activity to writing. His earlier efforts were imitative of foreign masters; but this factitious presentation helped him develop his own eclectic style and he may now be recognized as an accomplished and highly sensitive artist.

Sama's personality as well as his artistic creations have a complexity which has not encouraged followers. While his distinguished contemporaries have all been mostly imitated and followed, Sama stands in a splendid isolation, hard to be emulated, almost alone among living writers and in an unassailable position, maybe partly due to his antecedents of nobility and alignment with despotism. It is in his highly cultured and distinguished family that his tradition is growing and flourishing: his son and his daughters have all shown artistic proneness with a flair for poetry, drama, acting, music and painting. Such a gifted family is as rare amongst the Ranas of Nepal as Balkrishna Sama himself; as one who is at once poet, playwright, painter, photographer, philosopher, actor, musician and sculptor, and simultaneously a standard-bearer of renaissance. Sama thus is a unique figure in Nepal's world of letters which in a generation has produced no such artist of stature to rival him. If at times his genius has been all open to question, his consummate artistry and technical mastery of his profession, and fastidiousness as a perfectionist and formalist, in whatever field, are all indisputable.

Unfortunately for the present, however, signs of decadence are visible in contemporary Nepali literature. Voices of writers, appearing dragging on at a low level of ennui and anaemia, are ineluctably echoing jejune alienness in content and spirit, all abstracted from the real situation in society. It has been as such hard to hope that Sama would revive his verve to maintain the touch he had during the 1950's. He seems to have tended to be less and less forthright, embogged by the *zeitgeist*. Sama, from his occasional writings, however, gives the unmistakable impression that he is not at all spent up and resigned to the existing state of affairs. He twits them, if veiledly, but very discreetly. Indeed, gone are the days when he used to react to similar situation, indefatigably support the causes he so loved, inspire iconoclasts, and profoundly challenge social injustices. Even to a casual observer it would be immediately obvious that there has been a sharp and real decline in Sama's poetic conscience and he has hardly ever recaptured the brilliance and majesty of his passionate and provoking writings which brought him unprecedented achievement during the apprenticeship in democracy in the 1950's. Nevertheless, he has learnt to live with ups and downs of life, as also with his varying functions and fortunes; and if his past life is any guide, it is just as reasonable to hope that he would be loyal to his own self, should opportunity arise. Whatever opinion posterity may form of his style of behaviour and whatever the modernists



may have to say about his recent writings, he has consistently been successful for more than forty-five years. Whatever men may say of him today or in future years, he has the faculty of putting into his works deep-felt anguish, torture and misery. He has a deep and warm humanity, an unflinching courage in recording truth. He has the psychological sense of unravelling secret thoughts and deeds and terrible depths and fires of passion, and above all he has sympathy with and understanding of human frailty.