

## ACTIVITIES IN A 'FOSSIL STATE': BALKRISHNA SAMA AND THE IMPROVISATION OF NEPALI IDENTITY

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### Introduction

This essay is a contribution to current debates on ethnicity and nationalism in Nepal. As in previous essays (Onta 1996a, 1996b) I turn to history for an understanding of the process which made the Nepali language and nationalized Nepali history two of the main components of the dominant national Nepali culture during the twentieth century. Dominant national rhetoric would have us believe that Nepalis have expressed an attachment towards the Nepali language and national history since time immemorial. This is how nationalism writes its own history, but social historians interested in historicizing Nepali nationalism itself need to recognize that both the love expressed for the Nepali language in Nepal and the phenomenon of a national history of Nepal are of recent vintage.

Historian Sumathi Ramaswamy has recently argued that "the attachments expressed towards a language are subject to negotiation and change" and the power a language "exercises over a specific body of people is itself culturally constructed and historically contingent" (1993:685). This argument is central to my essay as well. In it I describe one way in which we can understand how the Nepali language and nationalized history of Nepal written in the Nepali language came to exercise the power of *cultural attachment* over specific Nepalis during the twentieth century.

The rise to dominant status of the Nepali language in Nepal during the this century is usually attributed to the workings of the Nepali state (e.g. Burghart 1984; Bandhu 1989; Sonntag 1995). However for the first half of this century it would be a mistake to allow much agency to the state on this subject. For that era, we should instead focus on the agency of many Nepalis—both outside and inside of Nepal—whose life and work consolidated the Nepali language through contributions to its written form and literary corpus. Their work laid the foundation on which the post-1951 Nepali state built its cultural projects using both the Nepali language and nationalized Nepali history in the process (cf. Onta 1997a).

In a previous essay (Onta 1996a), I described how projects of improving the Nepali language and building the national history of Nepal

written in the *bīr* (heroic) mode were first started by a small group of expatriated Nepalis in British India in the early decades of this century. The Nepali language was first promoted by this early generation of Nepali nationalists as their unifying motif within an overall agenda of improvement and progress of the Nepali *jāti*. From the mid-1920s Darjeeling-based Nepali language activists such as Parasmani Pradhan (1898-1986), Suryabikram Gyawali (1898-1985) and Dharanidhar Koirala (1893-1980) made a decisive effort to rename their language as Nepali and rediscovered poet Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814-68) as a potent icon for their project. Using some particular works of Gyawali written in Darjeeling after 1930 as evidence, I argued that a *bīr* history of modern Nepal was constructed as part of the project of creating a respectable Nepali identity. That history celebrated personalities from the 'unification era' (c.1740-1816) of Nepal.

The powerful Rana rulers (1846-1951) of Nepal did much to ensure that the work of Nepali *jāti* activists in British India did not 'contaminate' the political sentiments and sensibilities of Nepalis within Nepal. But despite Rana efforts, the work of Gyawali and others did reach Nepal and was read by a small group of intellectuals on whom it had enormous influence. Members of this group of Nepalis were some of the most important producers of Nepali language-based materials. The latter's own understandings and imaginings of Nepal were increasingly influential in forging an image of the country that was more purely 'Nepali' in terms not only of the national language and literature, but also of culture in general.

Here I pick up the story where it was left off in that previous essay. My general subject is the fostering of the Nepali language and national *bīr* history *within* Nepal as part of the project of building a national Nepali culture during the first half of this century. A complete social history of the circumstances under which various social agents accomplished the enrollment of the Nepali language and *bīr* history for their projects of imagining the Nepali nation is not possible given the current state of our knowledge. However, we can begin to see the terrain that requires study by focusing on the early life and work of Balkrishna Sama (1903-1981), one of the founding fathers of modern Nepali literature.

This essay is organized in five sections. In the first section I present a brief review of the standard historical literature on the century-long reign of the Ranas. The main point I make there is that the existing dominant theme of this literature, one that describes that era as a 'dark age' whose end was brought about by a 'political awakening,' leaves out large

domains of the cultural history that was drawn upon by the post-Rana Nepali state. In section two I discuss Sama's early experiments with the Nepali language. To anticipate the argument I develop there, I will state here that by the early 1920s, Sama had begun to define Nepal as a place lacking 'pure' Nepali culture. As he developed as a writer in the next two decades, Sama made the Nepali language the center of his search for a new national identity for Nepal, and for 'pure' Nepali culture.

In section three, based on a long petition he wrote in late 1932, I discuss Sama's thoughts regarding the overall progress of Nepal and Nepali culture. In the fourth section, I discuss some of Sama's plays. In the 1930s, he used his meditation over the Nepali language in his play *Mukunda Indirā* to claim a 'pure' domain for Nepal, separate from the colonial 'impurity' and 'debauchery' of Calcutta. In the 1940s and the 1950s, Sama contributed to the elaboration of *bīr* history through full-length and short plays. These plays were performed in Kathmandu and were important media through which lessons on Nepali nationalism were dispersed among Nepali citizens. In the fifth and final section I conclude with some thoughts on what this study can teach students of Nepali literary history, and of the history of nationalism in Nepal and in South Asia in general.

### **Nepal under the Ranas: From "Fossilized Land" to "Political Awakening"**

In popular and scholarly writings it is fairly common to describe the Rana century in Nepal as a time of despotic rule by a small coterie of elites belonging to the Kunwar clan. After Jang Bahadur Rana established his oligarchic rule following a massacre in Kathmandu in 1846 in which he wiped out almost all of the leading political personalities of the day, he, his brothers and their descendents ruled Nepal until 1951. Rana strategy for the retention of power was a composite of complex diplomacy and ruthless control of public life inside Nepal. Wealth collected from intense surplus extraction from the country's peasantry (Regmi 1978) was almost fully invested into producing cultural capital via conspicuous consumption for the Rana oligarchy and its clients. In an effort to produce a ruling class sub-culture, Ranas consumed foreign objects, dress, insignia, European styled durbars and Hindi-Urdu theatre, among other things, while denying access to such items to the population at large, as part of what Mark Liechty (this volume) has described as a strategy of "selective exclusion" (cf. K. Malla 1979).

One of the central aspects of the Rana strategy of state control was the calculated isolation of Nepal from foreigners, one of whom, in 1887, stated:

In scientific circles, the jealousy with which the Nepali Government guards its territory against the approach of knowledge has long been notorious. Nothing, however, will dissuade the Nepalis from the belief that topographical surveys, geological examinations, and botanical collections, are either the precursors of political aggression or else lead to complications which end in annexation; and so the exclusion of the Nepali dominion from the gaze of science is religiously maintained (Temple 1977[1887]:105)

The Ranas scrupulously controlled travel inside Nepal for both Nepalis and foreigners. They allowed a handful of British visitors into Kathmandu in their official capacity as staff members of the Residency or to the southern Tarai as official invitees of the Rana state for big-game hunting. Nepalis had to obtain permits to travel into and out of the Kathmandu valley. Foreign researchers were scrupulously not allowed into Nepal except—and still in rare cases—when they were researching innocuous subjects or writing sponsored panegyrics.<sup>1</sup> Public education in Nepal was almost non-existent and the circulation of ideas that were considered to be detrimental to the reign of the Ranas was severely proscribed inside Nepal.

Deliberately kept inaccessible to ordinary foreigners, Nepal came to be seen as a "fossil land" by outsiders. In the 1950s, when the Rana regime had come to an end, this image of Nepal under the Ranas was kept alive in the travel writings that began to be produced in quantity. This image suggested that under the tyrannical regime of the Ranas, history had, as it were, stopped in Nepal. It is an image that still exists, as can be seen in the following passage found in a 1993 introductory college textbook on South Asia:

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1 Around the turn of the century Sylvain Lévi, a French orientalist, was allowed into Kathmandu to do research on its religious-cultural history. Writer Perceval Landon was invited to Kathmandu in the 1920s by Premier Chandra Shamsher Rana. He later published an account of Nepal with glowing descriptions of his patron (Landon 1976[1928]).

[Nepal's] buffer-state function and almost complete isolation in the days of the Raj preserved its *fossil status*, an exaggeration of that of some princely states within the Indian Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Panchayat-era state discourses contributed to the strength of this image, describing the century-plus reign of the Ranas as a dark age in which the development of Nepal had been stunted. Such a representational modality made the post-Rana Panchayati state and its ostentatious verbal commitment to an agenda of planned progress of Nepal in the 1960s look good.

One implication of this politics of image-making has been that the scholarly world has continued to treat Nepali history under the Ranas as something of a fossilized subject. Scholars continue to reproduce the image of an isolated Nepal and rarely examine its history in connection with those of the rest of the South Asian region. The logic at work here seems simple: since Nepal was not included inside the colonial borders of British India, its history during the Rana period need not be considered as part of South Asian history during the colonial era.<sup>3</sup> Hence while one major interest of historians who do research on modern Indian history in recent years has been the cultural and social history of Indian nationalism, one can hardly find a single good study of the history of Nepali nationalism for the same era.

To be sure, attention has been paid to the political oppositional activity that challenged the stronghold of the Ranas inside Nepal after the first World War (e.g., R. Shaha 1990; Upreti 1992; Fisher 1997; Gautam 2046 v.s.) and its linkages with the Indian Nationalist Movement (Mojumdar 1975; Singh 1985). As far as the political history of the claimants to the Nepali state at the centre is concerned, the level of detail available for this 'transfer of power' surpasses that which is available for all other periods of Nepali history. In writings by professional historians, it remains common to discuss these anti-Rana political projects within the framework of "Political Awakening" (e.g., Upreti 1992; Stiller 1993).<sup>4</sup>

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2 Farmer (1993:36) quoted in Des Chene (1995). Emphasis added.

3 The power of this kind of scholarly packaging becomes obvious when, even today, Nepal is routinely not included in South Asian studies programs in the USA and elsewhere.

4 Historian Prem R. Upreti's 1992 study of the process that led to the downfall of the Ranas in 1951 is called *Political Awakening in Nepal: The Search For a New Identity*. Upreti argues that the political awakening of the Nepali intelligentsia is largely responsible for the revolution that destroyed the Rana regime. He writes, "The

Stiller's 1993 book, *Nepal: Growth of a Nation*, although an introductory text written mainly for non-Nepalis, is an example of this genre. In the last two chapters where he talks about the difficulties faced by the Rana rulers in the last two decades of their rule (1930s and 1940s), he describes the activities of various groups of anti-Rana politicians but does not say a word about the cultural discourses within which they envisioned Nepal and made their claims against the political status quo. Shaha's *Modern Nepal* (1990) suffers from the same problem. This is partly so because political history is still the dominant paradigm in the historical scholarship of modern Nepal and adequate attention has not been paid thus far to the cultural and social grounds on which elite politics has been mapped or built (cf. Onta 1994a, 1994b).

The focus on the political history of the end of the Rana era, while necessary for our understanding of the process that brought about a major change in the political culture of governance and social life in Nepal, now seems too narrow.<sup>5</sup> The adherence to political history has meant that the historical development of nationalism in Nepal has, more often than not, been seen as a product of the career of the Nepali state (e.g., Adhikary 2045 v.s.). While the state, especially in the second half of this century, has been the strongest producer of a particular version of Nepali nationalism, it would be a mistake to think that it was the most powerful actor in the scene at other times in all realms of the social field. Hence historians willing to move beyond the confining turf of political history will discover the agency of certain historic actors whose contributions

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intelligentsia are to be distinguished from pure intellectuals or elites, who constitute the artistic, social, and political vanguard of a nation, in their commitment to a greater cause or in other words in their conviction to change and transform the existing way of life for the betterment of the masses. They, thus, reject the idea of engaging in literary and aesthetic pursuits for its (sic) own sake" (1992:16). He stresses that his use of the phrase "political awakening" does not suggest that Nepal was previously devoid of politics. Instead he uses it to highlight the difference between the objective of the traditional political order—"the attainment of political supremacy without the involvement of the masses"—and the "agitational politics of the twentieth century brought into focus with organization of political parties ... with modern tools of political agitation like mass-communication and *satyagraha*" (1992:x). Given the absolute nature of the Rana regime, Uprety argues, the early political mobilization amongst the Nepalis happened in North Indian cities.

5 For studies in "social history" of this era that deploy similarly narrow notions of the 'social', see Maskey (1996) and Shrestha (1997). For discussions on Nepali historiography that reduce it to a laundry list of works done or problems encountered in the process of research and writing, see Gautam (2051 v.s.:338-381) and Vaidya (1997). For criticisms of this type of analysis see Onta (1994a, 1997b)

provided, in diverse ways, vitality to the times in which they lived, and formed the basis for dominant Nepali national cultural forms and social sentimentalities of more recent years.

Among other things, historians of modern Nepal need to pay attention to the cultural configurations of Nepali nationalist thought. In this realm it is not only the agency of anti-Rana political protestors inside or outside of Nepal that is of importance, but also that of others who were cultural producers amongst the diasporic Nepali population in India, or inside Nepal itself. I have discussed the relevant aspects of the work done by Nepali cultural nationalists in British India elsewhere (Onta 1996a). This essay begins to explore the corresponding process inside Nepal. To highlight where and how the discourses on the Nepali language, literature and history were deployed and to discuss the terrain on which they gained a life, I follow the life and work of one of Nepal's most articulate nationalists, Balkrishna Sama.

### **Defective Nepal: Sama's Realization**

Balkrishna Sama (1959-2038 v.s. or 1903-1981 A.D.) was born in a Rana family in Kathmandu.<sup>6</sup> He was the son of Samar Shamsher (1940-2015 v.s.) who was a general in the Rana Army and an avid photographer, and Kirtirajya Laxmi Rana (1942-2000 v.s.). His grandfather, Dambar Shamsher (1915-1979 v.s.), was the half-brother of Rana premier Bir Shamsher (1852-1901 A.D., r.1885-1901 A.D.), both being sons of Dhir Shamsher (c.1828-1884 A.D.) who was the energetic younger brother of the first Rana premier Jang Bahadur Rana. Dambar was a participant in the 1885 assassination of his uncle Ranodip Singh (1825-1885 A.D., r.1877-1885 A.D.), successor to premier Jang Bahadur. It was after the killing of Ranodip that the Shamsher branch of the Ranas came to power and the Rana premiership remained with them until the end of their oligarchic rule in 1951 (Manandhar 1986).

Although Dambar Shamsher was the second among the seventeen sons of Dhir Shamsher, he was excluded from the roll of succession with respect to the premiership because he was the product of a non-marital union. His unhappiness with respect to this fact was compensated for by

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<sup>6</sup> For general information on Sama's life, I rely mainly on the two volumes of his autobiography (Sama 2023 v.s., 2029 v.s.). He changed his last name from Rana to 'Sama' immediately after the demise of the Rana regime in 1951. This was done in part as a respect to Nhuchheman, a fellow protestor of the Ranas, who was beaten to death (Tanasharma 2029 v.s.:5-7).

the money and respect that his half-brothers who did become premiers, including Bir Shamsheer and Chandra Shamsheer (1863-1929 A.D., r. 1901-1929 A.D.), bestowed upon him. He is said to have immersed himself in a life devoted to women, alcohol and musical entertainment in order to forget his unhappiness about this exclusion (Sama 2023 v.s.:8).

During the early part of the century, Dambar Shamsheer's big five-storey mansion in the Gyaneshwar area of Kathmandu was full of imported goods and facilities. In addition to hundreds of personal servants, Dambar also housed an entertainment group referred to as *nāca* which was considered the best amongst such groups patronized by the contemporary Rana elite in Kathmandu (Sama 2023 v.s.:3). Conforming to the tactics of "selective exclusion", the Rana theatrical events represented a kind of foreign entertainment imported from colonial India, and accessible only to the small coterie of ruling elites. The Rana theatres, including the one in Dambar's house, used to present, in the main, *nāṭak* (plays) in the Hindi-Urdu languages. Occasional exceptions to this included a play put up by Motiram Bhatta (1866-1896) in the early 1890s in the theatre of Dev Shamsheer (1862-1914), younger brother of Bir Shamsheer, who later became the premier for a few months in 1901.<sup>7</sup>

Sama recalls that under Dambar Shamsheer, his house was like a real theatre where from early in the morning until late at night, music could be heard from one of its corners. Growing up in such an environment, he felt as though his "body was steeped in *nāṭak*" and the "gaps between the bones in his spine had become a theatre". Even before he began to learn the letters of the alphabet at the age of five, Sama writes, his eyes had become fascinated with the curtain, dance and acting of the theatre, and his ears had been filled with songs and artful poetic dialogues (Sama 2023 v.s.:8).

At the age of eleven, in early 1914, Sama joined Darbar School as a fourth grade student. The Rana rulers of Nepal were not interested in making public education available to Nepalis at large. Therefore, for most of their century-plus rule in Nepal, apart from the Darbar School (founded

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7 Dev Shamsheer became the premier following Bir Shamsheer's death in March 1901 but was deposed by his younger brother Chandra Shamsheer in mid June of the same year. Motiram had translated the Sanskrit-language play, *Abhijñan Sakuntalam*, into Nepali and had put it up in Dev Shamsheer's theatre but the former's sickness and death in 1896 stunted further work of this variety. The Nepali *natak* scene of this era is discussed in Dixit (2016 v.s., 2026 v.s.[2014 v.s.]:29-38), P. Malla (2037 v.s.:53-62) and Sharma Bhattarai (2048 v.s.[2037 v.s.]). For notes on the presence of foreign musicians and singers in Rana Darbars, see Darnal (n.d.). See also Sharma Bhattarai (2044 v.s.).



1853) which catered to the children of Rana and Rana-affiliated families and a few other Sanskrit and monastic schools, public educational institutions were largely non-existent (G. Sharma 2043 v.s.). In the first volume of his autobiography (2023 v.s.), without doubt one of the most brilliant books of that genre written in the Nepali language, Sama organizes much of what he has to say between two locales—his house and Darbar School.

Ethnographically rich in other ways, Sama's account remains silent about the real contents of the subjects he had to study in the school, but something can be learned from other sources. In the 1920s, the students in Darbar School were required to study the history of India and Britain but courses on the history and geography of Nepal were not taught there.<sup>8</sup> Bhim B. Pandey who was a student there in the late 1920s, writes:

Nepal's history and geography were not taught. The textbooks necessary for that purpose had not been written. I do not know whether this was because it was assumed that students could learn things related to Nepal on their own or because the Ranas feared that if they knew the real history and geography of Nepal, their rule would come to an end. We were taught the history of India and Britain thoroughly in the school. Darbar school students knew world geography by heart (B. Pandey 2039 v.s.:148).<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the non-teaching of Nepal's history and geography, even the Nepali language did not receive any special attention (B. Pandey 2039 v.s.:157). The *Nepālī Bhāṣā Prakāśinī Samiti*, a Rana institution, was responsible for the publication of the few heavily censored books in the Nepali language but none of the books it published covered Nepali history, geography or culture. Producing an educated sense of historical and geographical Nepal as a nation was not part of the Rana state's goals, not even for the education of its own elite. These absences are symptomatic of the cultural milieu in which people like Balkrishna Sama grew up.

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8 In the 1930s, history of India and Britain were taught at the Darbar School by Rudraraj Pandey (1957-2043 v.s.) and Basudev Bhattarai (1945-2029 v.s.). By the end of the decade both had produced relevant textbooks. On the lives and works of Pandey and Bhattarai, see respectively, Siwakoti (2049 v.s.) and Bhattarai and Bhattarai (1988). For some interesting facts about the Darbar School during the 19th century, see Sharma Bhattarai (2042 v.s.).

9 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Nepali language texts are mine.

Even before he was enrolled as a student in Darbar School, Sama had been attracted to poetry. Influenced in part by one of his tutors, Tilmadhav Devkota (father of the famous poet Laxmiprasad Devkota), his own father Samar Shamsheer, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sama started composing verses on different subjects. When he felt that the elders at home bestowed relatively more love on his elder brother Pushkar Shamsheer (1958-2018 v.s.) who was born with a disability, or when he began to realize the violence through which the Shamsheer Ranas had come to power and his grandfather's role in the same, he sought peace in poetry and its composition. In the winter of 1914-15, after having passed grade four and having been rewarded with all kinds of desired objects by his elders, he participated in a *nāṭak* at home, prepared by one of the outstanding members of his grandfather's *nāca* group. He acted the role of a princess who was kidnapped by a dacoit and had to sing a song—in Urdu of course. But he writes that despite such entertainment in the company of others, in the lonely confines of his room, he continued to meditate on the subject of poetry. That winter he translated Wordsworth's *Lucy Grey* which the students of grade five were required to read.<sup>10</sup>

About a year later, the woman who was his caretaker whom he called *didī* (elder sister) and to whom he was closer than to his own biological mother, became ill with tuberculosis. When a year of various treatments proved ineffective and she called him to advise him on what he should do after her death, Sama resorted to writing more poetry to deal with his unbearable pain. Later under the influence of *Sūkti-Sindhu*, a compilation of Nepali language love-poetry published from Banaras in 1974 v.s., he started reading and writing poetry about love. This became an addiction and he failed his seventh grade exams at the end of the 1917 school year. He repeated the same grade in 1918 and hoped to secure the highest grades in the half-yearly examination (which he did not). As a result of this he began to regret his obsession with love poetry. At that time, he got hold of some publications from Banaras including Suryabikram Gyawali's thoughtful essays, and a discussion on "Gorkhā-Bhāṣā" (Gorkha-language, as Nepali was then called) written by Krishnachandra Aryal (1939-2003 v.s.) and Baijanath Sadhain (1946-2010 v.s.). He also read the following from Devi Prasad Sapkota (1930-2010 v.s.):

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10 Darbar School's foreign-oriented curriculum, and activities like young Sama's translation of Wordsworth point to another subject that remains unstudied: the role of images of countries beyond the Subcontinent and their literatures, in the formation of a Nepali national culture and literature.

Clothes are foreign, so is the machine  
The paper is foreign, so is the pen  
Oh God even (my) *janai* is foreign (Sama 2023 v.s.:112).<sup>11</sup>

These writings left a mark on Sama and he began to drift away from his obsession with love poetry and instead to concentrate on other, not necessarily brighter, aspects of life.

In early 1919, the wedding ceremony of His Majesty the King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah (1906-1955) was held. Amongst all the celebrations that were held, Sama was struck by the play put up by the Imperial Opera House from India. The costumes of the actors, their make-up, and the props were all magnificent. The play's language was Urdu-mixed Hindi and the story involved the romance between a north Indian prince and a princess. In his autobiography published more than four decades after this event, Sama recalled that this play was not only "full of glitter, beautiful women and lust" but also "located far from Nepal and Nepali, from our language and culture" (2023 v.s.:130). He recalled further:

At that time, Gandhi's importance was growing in India. Fearing that his mass movement would also affect Nepal, Premier Chandra Shamsheer had started to become cautiously nervous. He had started to conjure up disastrous consequences of every small event or happening. He would hear the people's appeals in the Nepali language. He would find their consciousness and progress in Nepali art and culture. The education in the English—language and the theatre in Urdu were the results of this fear (2023 v.s.:130).

Subsequent conversations with two of his senior friends who had returned to Kathmandu after studying in the north Indian city of Allahabad proved to be very influential on Sama. One was Padamdutta Ratori, son of his teacher Ishwaridutta Ratori, and the other was Rudraraj Pandey. Using Gandhi as a role model. Ratori lectured Sama on character, self-confidence, self-respect and personal will. Sama writes that this instilled self-respect and confidence in him and enabled him to speak in front of others as well as act on stage. After watching *nāca* in his house, Rudraraj Pandey declared:

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<sup>11</sup> The *janai* is the sacred thread worn by adult Brahmin and Ksatriya men.

What a sad case it is for us to have Hindi-language *nāṭak* in Nepal instead of Nepali-language ones. What is the use of writing poetry only? If we could write *nāṭaks* it would contribute a lot to the progress of the Nepali language (Sama 2023 v.s.:131).

Sama's elder brother Pushkar Shamsheer derided this idea by saying "Nepali *nāṭak*? How unsuitable and useless it will be." While Pushkar and Rudraraj debated on this subject, Sama writes, he remained silent because Rudraraj's exhortation had already excited him. Sama had decided to write plays in the Nepali language. It was then that he started reading Shakespeare's plays, partly with the inspiration of his school headmaster, Sharadababu. Shakespearean blank verses freed him, so he felt, from the tyranny of rhymes. In 1920 Dharanidhar Koirala's *Naivedya* reached his hands and the nationalistic messages of the poems contained therein influenced Sama (cf. Onta 1996a). More essays from the pen of Suryabikram Gyawali on the subject of raising the consciousness of the Nepali *jāti* also had their effects on Sama.

In late 1920 Sama's brother Pushkar went to Calcutta to take the school graduation examination which was handled by Calcutta University. Pushkar wrote to Sama praising the performance of a British theatre group which had put up *Romeo and Juliet*. Sama felt like writing a play before his brother returned from Calcutta and hence he started *Milīnad*. The story was one that arose from the context of his own house although the characters were given all peculiarly non-Nepali names. Although other members of his family liked it, his brother Pushkar did not think too highly of it.

After Pushkar returned to Kathmandu, he described Calcutta at length and said:

Brother, the place you imagined as being this or that is Britain and not Calcutta. Calcutta is just a bigger city. Otherwise it is as dirty as our own city. Nevertheless it is a fun place. You can find anything you want there (Sama 2023 v.s.:243).

Hearing this Sama looked forward to the day when he too could go to Calcutta to take the school examination and watch the theatre there.

In May 1921 Sama married Mandakini Thapa. Even as he studied in grade ten at school, he began to write a play, *Tānsenko Jharī* and a mini-epic, *Āryaghāṭ* at the same time. He completed the latter later that year and in November he went to Calcutta to appear in the final tenth grade

examination of Calcutta University. This was the trip of his life in many ways, a visit to a city that had captured his imagination since his childhood. He left with a few personal servants, leaving behind a pregnant wife. Due to the agitation of the Indian National Congress, his examinations were postponed by two months. Sama used the extra time to read more as well as watch dances, theatre and the circus. He writes that plays like *Kriṣṇa Sudāmā*, *Patibhakti*, *Nala Damayanti* etc. could not impress him because they seemed to be a repeat of what he had seen in his own house, only at a somewhat more refined level of music and acting in larger theatres. In contrast, *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* put up in Calcutta's Alfred Theatre by a performing group from Britain, influenced him greatly, even as he found the character who played the role of Othello unimpressive. The English *nāca* of the Empire Theatre also influenced his thinking on the subject of acting. But even then he wrote the following to one of his teachers in Kathmandu:

After seeing Calcutta, there is no peace inside me. The big roads of this city remind me of the small, untidy and dirty lanes of Kathmandu. I don't feel happy. The mirth and merriment and the high life of this city have not delighted me. They have just made me jealous (Sama 2023 v.s.:306).

Two days after his exams were over, he received a letter from his brother Pushkar informing him that his wife had given birth to their son but he had died soon after being born. The child was apparently fully grown but five days of labour had damaged his brain. Pushkar wrote that on the morning of the fifth day the doctors in attendance gave a "Pitruṭen" injection to Mandakini but it turned out to be a date-expired one. When the mistake was realized and a new one was given in the evening, it was already too late. After he was born, the baby moved a bit and then died. Sama was greatly distressed by this news. In his autobiography, he captures his feelings in this way:

My country! If this baby had been born in Calcutta, it would have lived. My country's misery even in this century killed my son....This event brought a big change in my life. Revolution began to simmer inside me (2023 v.s.:308).<sup>12</sup>

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12 Strikingly, he writes only of the impact of the death of his son, and not of the five days of labour endured by his wife.

Atheism, which had found its first roots in him when his caretaker had died some years ago began to grow inside Sama after this event. Sama realized that to fill the space from which god had been removed, what was needed was serious study, and a humanism that was more deep than god itself.

This then, in brief, was Sama's personal journey of discovery of a defective Nepal. Sama's was a mind that had been sensitized by all kinds of childhood *du'kha* (hardship, understood here more as a state of one's emotions rather than a physical condition). In his teenage years Sama had become quite aware of the absences of 'Nepal' and 'Nepali culture' in his own life in Kathmandu and had been able to draw linkages between these absences and the pervasiveness of Urdu-Hindi theatres in the elite Rana homes and of English language teaching in the Darbar School.<sup>13</sup> The writings of people like Gyawali and Dharanidhar which had been published in India were quite influential in helping him understand his world in this manner. Sama had been able to figure out the selective exclusion strategy of Premier Chandra even as he was not able to resist his fetish for things from Calcutta and beyond.

Having first found solace in poetry composition, he slowly turned to writing plays in the Nepali language. Shakespeare became the instigator of his theatrical imagination. The expectation of being able to watch professional theatrical shows in Calcutta captured his mind for some time until he himself was able to visit the city in 1921-22 in connection with his appearance for the school graduation exam in 1922. Although he enjoyed the performance of some British theatre groups in Calcutta and felt that he learnt a lot from what he saw and observed, the city itself disappointed him. He became nostalgic for Kathmandu. Then the news about the death of his newborn son reached him in that colonial city. It was at the moment of this great personal loss that the ambivalence of his love for Nepal became obvious. His son's death, which he blamed on his country's continued misery, left a permanent scar inside Sama.

In April 1922 Sama returned to Kathmandu. Some time later, news of his having passed the exams in first division arrived. He joined the Tri-Chandra college in Kathmandu (which had been opened in 1919) as a first year student in the science faculty. During 1922-23 he finished writing the play *Tāsenko Jharī*, and passed the first year exams in college. He continued to write poetry and was encouraged to do so by his Nepali

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13 For a criticism of English usage in the late Rana-era, see Devkota (2050 v.s.[2002 v.s.]:55-62).

language teacher Tirthaprasad Dhungana. In 1923 while he continued to write, he had not amassed enough courage to publish anything because of the caution necessary to do so in the then prevailing environment of censorship under Premier Chandra Shamsher. In the second volume of his autobiography he remembers those days in the following manner:

I was feeling suffocated in the environment then prevailing in Nepal. The red blood inside me used to criticize that situation every moment. But Premier Chandra Shamsher's beard used to entangle my pen and would not let it move forward. The piercing look of his eyes, ones that seemed as capable of destruction as a rocket, could dry up the ink that had even arrived at the tip of my pen. But I managed to keep writing somehow (2029 v.s.:22).

Even as his writings were making the rounds amongst his friends, elders and teachers, Sama was preparing for the second year final exams in college in early 1924. In April of that year, his father took him for a *darśan* (viewing service) of Premier Chandra Shamsher who, it seemed, had heard about Sama's writings through his own channels. In an effort to stop Sama's career as a writer, Chandra Shamsher made Sama a captain in the Nepali military and ordered him to be sent off to Dehra Dun in India for military training. Two days later, abandoning his ambitions to complete his education and again leaving behind a pregnant wife, Sama was on his way out of the Kathmandu Valley in a state of shock. Life took an unexpected turn for him.

Once in Dehra Dun, he met Padmadutta Ratori who had earlier inspired him as mentioned above. This time Ratori introduced Sama to photography—an art which despite his skills, Sama's father had refused to teach him. One day they went to visit the remains of the old fort at Nalapani. Ratori told Sama about the bravery of Balbhadra Kunwar during the Anglo-Gorkhā war of 1814-16 and how Garhwal and Kumaon, including Dehra Dun, had fallen into the hands of the British after the war concluded with the Treaty of Sagauli (cf. Onta 1996b). Then Sama remembered his wish of an earlier era—"One day I should fight in a war and die in the battlefield."<sup>14</sup> After this trip, writes Sama, the fighting spirit of Balbhadra entered him. He asked himself, "When the country's head cannot be held high, how can high quality poetry be written?" (2029

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14 This refers back to Sama's childhood wish after seeing a photograph in the *Illustrated London News* of the Gurkhas crossing a river with their *khukuris* in their mouths during the first World War (Sama 2023 v.s.:70; cf. Onta 1996c:ch. 3).

v.s.:27-28). After this realization, Sama began to enjoy his life as a soldier and began to pursue training challenges in a new spirit. Ratori advised him, with examples from Greece, that the pen of many people had become more refined after an experience with the sword. After hearing about the story of Nalapani, Sama wanted to lift weapons against the British but he realized that the circumstances were not conducive toward such a goal. He felt depressed because he and his colleagues in the Nepali army were not being trained with the idea of keeping Nepal's head high. He wrote:

Not only the Gurkhas in the British army but also the Nepali army, which was trained in the English language and wore English uniforms, was designed to assist the British. We had become their blind followers. Supporting one premier's [Chandra Shamsheer's] selfish goals, decorating his chest with various medals, the British had managed to dance on top of the chest and head of all Nepalis. Revolt stirred its head up inside me (2029 v.s.:33-34).

This moment of realization is an important episode in the life of Sama and we shall have to remember it while evaluating his later works.

In September 1924, after a five-month training in India, Sama returned to Kathmandu. While serving in the army he continued to write, but at a slower pace than before. After the spring of 1927 he returned to writing with the old dedication and began work on a new play *Muṭuko Vyathā* (The Anguish of the Heart). His reading of English literature had influenced him greatly but it was not a straightforward influence or a matter of simple emulation. He writes:

I wanted to create a new Nepali consciousness, a new Nepali philosophy that would stand not only against those *paṇḍit* poets who were steeped in the culture of Banaras and believed that only a death in that holy city would provide freedom [to the soul], but also against those blind Anglophiles who believed that our literature was nothing in comparison with Western literature. In this land of the *Paśupati* a belief that a third eye should be opened to look at the erstwhile history of Nepal found a place inside me....This national consciousness had arisen in me as a result of the inspiration from many sources (2029 v.s.:75).



Seeing every facet of what he considered as Nepali life and culture neglected under the rule of his foreign-loving Rana relatives, a revolt grew inside Sama but he restrained himself.

Thinking that good work, deep commitment and patience would be necessary to achieve his goals, he dedicated himself to his writing. Once again he remembered that as far as mass education was concerned there was no medium as effective as the *nāṭak*, the theatre. Hence he continued the writing of *Muṭuko Vyathā* with renewed perseverance. When news that his college friends had passed the M.A. exams trickled in during late 1927 and early 1928, a sense of regret emanating from a realization of a missed opportunity came to haunt him. He tried to resolve this suffering of his heart by working continuously on *Muṭuko Vyathā* and by April 1928 it was ready (Sama 2050 v.s.[1986 v.s.]). After one misfortune in Banaras where it had been sent off for printing, the published version—his first publication—finally arrived in Kathmandu by late summer of 1929. Many of his elders, including some of his teachers and renowned personalities of the day, praised him for this original tragic play in the Nepali language. He then completed two other plays, *Amalekh* (Emancipation) and *Dhruba*.<sup>15</sup> Even before they were printed, Chandra Shamsher died in late November 1929. An era of Rana politics came to an end. Sama petitioned the new Premier, Bhim Shamsher (1865-1932, r.1929-1932) that he be allowed to teach Nepali literature and grammar in the Darbar School and in his former college where he had been unable to complete his studies. In late spring of 1930 he got permission to do so. A new chapter in Sama's life had begun.

### **Developing Nepal: Sama's *Bintipatra***

In mid-June 1930 Sama began to teach both at the Tri-Chandra College and at the Darbar School. He immediately worked toward solving what he saw as the three most important sources of confusion amongst his students: the question of a standardized grammar of the Nepali language, the absence of the feeling that the Nepali language was a unifying medium in the face of immense respect for the English language on the one hand and some pro-Newari language work done by the likes of Shukraraj Shastri (later executed by the Ranas in January 1941), and the continued dominance of Hindi and Urdu in the theatres of the elite Ranas.

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<sup>15</sup> *Amalekh* dealt with the emancipation of slaves in Nepal which Chandra Shamsher had ordered in 1924. *Dhruba* dealt with an elaboration of a popular story from Hindu mythology featuring a wicked father and a son who pursued truth as religion.

To change all this, Sama required his students to follow the grammar published by Hemraj Sharma in his book, *Candrikā*, almost two decades earlier and taught them how the Nepali language had become a *lingua franca* amidst the many other languages of Nepal. Using examples from elsewhere he argued that the Nepali language deserved to be developed as the unifying language of all Nepalis. Furthermore he told his students:

Education should be mandatory in our country. The country cannot move ahead unless [its people] are educated or literate. The easiest means of education is through stage performances of *nāṭaks*. This way education is made enjoyable.... If our country does not have its own *nāṭaks*, the people will be engulfed by the entertainment provided by foreign *nāṭaks*. Then even if we are politically independent, we will be culturally dependent. It is for this reason that I have written a few *nāṭaks*; now everyone should write *nāṭaks*. The days when we can perform our *nāṭaks* will come for sure (2029 v.s.:112).

He read to his students the preface to his play, *Dhruba*, in which he had argued that the theatre is also a kind of a school and that Nepali too was a language in which good literature could be produced.

Thirty-three months after he had become the premier, Bhim Shamsheer died in September 1932. His younger brother Juddha Shamsheer (1875-1952, r.1932-1945) became the premier. On more than one occasion he implored one and all to provide him with suggestions for work that would lead to the country's development. Sama took advantage of this request by writing a long *bintipatra* (petition) which he later described as a bold statement written with a patriotic pen full of ink steeped in *deś bhakti* (devotion to the nation). He submitted it in December 1932 with some trepidation but Juddha indicated that he liked it. In many ways it is a very crucial text for our efforts to understand Sama's thoughts on Nepal, his ideas for its progress and his later literary creations.

In the main body of his petition (Sama 2029 v.s.:142-146), Sama celebrated the independence and territorial sovereignty of Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom. He stated that although it is a poor and illiterate country it contains the most ancient civilization and culture. But he added that although there is much ancient glory to be proud of, much of the pride in celebrating Nepal's independence was simply talk. He argued that in reality, at the level of practice, there isn't much that demonstrates this pride. In our houses, in the streets, in our clothes, in our customs, in the way we talk, in our foods, in our music, Sama wrote, we used to copy the Islamic civilization and culture previously and now we copy the English

civilization and culture. The more we can copy, he added, the more we think we have become civilized. He then stated that his petition had been written because of the fear that such practices would gradually help make the country and Nepalis extinct.

With respect to the architecture of the buildings built by elite Ranas, Sama argued that Nepali art and systems of design had been sidelined in favor of the European style of building. He then argued more forcefully for a complete adoption of a Nepali language based education system both at the school and college levels, one in which Nepali history, literature and culture would also be taught. Arguing that a single *nāṭak* can be a microcosm of the entire society, Sama repeated his criticism of the Hindi-Urdu plays patronized by the elite Ranas and suggested that a permanent theatre and theatre group should be established in the country. To purify Nepal, as it were, from "foreign" impurities and forge a strong Nepali culture based primarily on the Nepali language both as a medium of education at the school and college levels and the medium for *nāṭaks* was in sum, the project advocated by Sama in his *bintipatra*. For the purposes of this essay it is important to remember that the creative activity of Sama in the years that followed was in keeping with the project he set out in 1932.

### Elaborating *Bīr* Nepal: Sama's Plays

To present a detailed analysis of all of Sama's subsequent literary output is well beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>16</sup> Just discussing a few examples will give us some idea of the scope and influence of his work. In particular I concentrate on some of his very famous and influential works, ones that were central to his project of elaborating *bīr* Nepal. *Mukunda Indirā*, first published in 1937, deserves to be discussed first (Sama 2019 v.s.[1994 v.s.]). When this play was staged in Kathmandu in the late 1930s it was considered a major event and its impact on those who watched it was significant (P. Malla 2037 v.s., Rajav 1995).<sup>17</sup>

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16 See R. Sharma (2023 v.s.), Tanasharma (2029 v.s.), I. Baral (1974, 2052 v.s.[2025 v.s.]), K. Pradhan (1976[1967]), Anjudevi (2036 v.s.), G. Bhattarai (2039 v.s.a), Nepali (1985), Hutt (1988, 1991), M. Thapa (2049 v.s., 2052 v.s.), Khanal (2049 v.s.[2034 v.s.]:103-112), Kunwar (2050 v.s.[2023 v.s.]:1-7), K. Baral (2051 v.s.), P. Malla (2051 v.s.), G. Neupane (2052 v.s.), Upadhyaya (2052 v.s.[2045 v.s.]), and B.B. Bhattarai (n.d.), among others, for various useful comments on Sama and his *oeuvre*.

17 For various comments on the history and other aspects of Nepali *natak*, see, among other, Tanasharma (1964, 2026 v.s., 2027 v.s., 2050v.s.[2027 v.s.]), Joshi (2021 v.s., 2037 v.s.), Tripathi (2033 v.s.), B. Rai (2034 v.s.), B. Malla (2036 v.s.), P. Malla (2037

As many literary historians and critics of Nepali literature (e.g. Tanasharma (2029 v.s., 2050 v.s.[2027 v.s.]); G. Sharma 2044 v.s.; R. Pradhan 2048 v.s.; H. Pradhan 2049 v.s.) have noted, a patriotic celebration of Nepal is the central message of *Mukunda Indirā*.<sup>18</sup> The story is one of a separated couple. Mukunda is the son of Newar parents from Patan, a city inside the Kathmandu Valley. He had gone to Calcutta to study but had stayed on, living a life of debauchery. His wife, Indira, in the meantime lived with her in-laws in Patan and waited patiently for her husband's return. In Sama's formulation, not only had Mukunda forgotten his duties toward his wife and his family, but also toward his country. Indira, on the other hand, is portrayed as the paragon of womanly virtue and purity. Realizing how the absence of Mukunda was eating away the soul of the family, Bhavadev, a family friend, volunteers to go down to Calcutta to fetch Mukunda. While initially Mukunda refuses to return to Nepal, Bhavadev describes to him the virtues of Indira and makes a deal with him whereby Mukunda himself would return to Nepal in disguise to test her fidelity. If she passed the test, he would have to stay at home but if she failed, he could return to Calcutta. Mukunda agrees to take up this deal and returns to Nepal where after many attempts to seduce his wife in his disguise, he fails. Her passing the test ensures a happy ending to the story as he agrees to live with her.

This portrayal of Mukunda and Indira is a conservative aspect of the play. Sama has, quite rightly, been taken to task for this non-progressive representation of gender relationships (Tanasharma 2029 v.s.:194-195). What has received less attention from previous commentators, however, is Sama's crafting of "pure" Nepal (tied to the world of Indira) *vis á vis* "dirty" colonial Calcutta (tied to the world of Mukunda). Celebration of Nepal's independent status as a Hindu kingdom and the birthplace of hundreds of brave sons is somewhat expected given that Sama was quite familiar with the work in this mode emanating from Banaras and Darjeeling from the pen of Suryabikram Gyawali and others. What is original here is Sama's portrayal of Calcutta as a site of the absence of morality against which to imagine the pure Nepali nation.

We might recall the discussion earlier in this essay regarding how Sama had felt in his first visit to Calcutta as a student in 1921-22. After

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v.s.), Kandel (2040 v.s.), K. Pradhan (1984), Parajuli (2045 v.s.), Satyal (2045 v.s.), H. Pradhan (2049 v.s.), and Neupane (n.d.). For comments on the Nepali *natak* scene in Darjeeling see Mukhiya (2033 v.s.), K. Pradhan (1982), and I. Rai (1984).

18 For another assessment see B. Malla (2036 v.s.:12-19). See also Adhikari (2046 v.s.).

being in the city of his dreams for some time, he had written that the mirth and merriment and the high life of Calcutta had not delighted him. Instead he had just been jealous of the city and nostalgic for Kathmandu. Then the news regarding the death of his newborn son in Kathmandu had complicated his love for Nepal with some degree of ambivalence. In the decade and half between those events and the crafting of *Mukunda Indirā*, Sama had, intellectually speaking, managed to purge much of that ambivalence from his thoughts and had designed a progress-blueprint for Nepal in his 1932 *bintipatra*. In keeping with the project set out there—which in its entirety could be summarized as an effort to generate a culturally pure and unique Nepal from the degenerate mix it had become under its Rana rulers—*Mukunda Indirā* brought into play an image of a pure Nepal that was free of the cultural vices associated with the colonial city of Calcutta. It is this complex imagery that is of special significance when one thinks of Sama's contribution to the national cultural identity of Nepal.

Remembering the "pure Nepal" firmly established as a setting by *Mukunda Indirā* we can evaluate Sama's contribution to the elaboration of the *bīr* pantheon of Nepali heroes first identified by the *jāti* activists in Darjeeling (Onta 1996a). Among his many works the two full-length historical plays, *Bhakta Bhānubhakta* (Sama 2049 v.s.a[2000 v.s.]) and *Amar Siḍha* (Sama 2049 v.s.b[2010 v.s.]) highlight one aspect each of the two-pronged project of the writing of national history: the Nepali language itself as a medium of unification, and the *bīr* mode of representing Nepal's past. In the first play published initially in 1943, celebration of the life of Bhanubhakta as one who rendered the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the Nepali language is Sama's project. In the second play, Sama highlights a moment from the "unification era" in Nepal's history as his contribution to the consolidation of the *bīr* pantheon of Nepal.<sup>19</sup>

As I have described elsewhere, Bhanubhakta Acharya, the man from the central hills of Nepal who had first rendered the *Rāmāyaṇa* in beautiful and colloquial Nepali in mid-nineteenth century, had been rediscovered and cultivated as the iconic figure for the Nepali language activists in Banaras and Darjeeling in the early decades of this century (Onta 1996a). This elevation of Bhanubhakta was part of the project of crafting a self-conscious identity of the Nepali community in British India. In the late 1920s the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan of Darjeeling republished the 1891 biography of Bhanubhakta and in the 1930s, Bhanubhakta's *Rāmāyaṇa*

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19 For a survey of Nepali historical plays, see V. Pradhan (2039-40 v.s.)

itself was reprinted. In 1940 Suryabikram Gyawali published an edited volume from Darjeeling as a memorial to Bhanubhakta. Some intellectuals from Kathmandu, including Balkrishna Sama, contributed to this volume. For anyone in Kathmandu during the early decades of this century who was interested in the progress of the Nepali language, the developments regarding the rediscovery of Bhanubhakta by Nepali *jāti* activists in British India and the careful nurturing of his name as a *jāti* icon by Gyawali and others in Darjeeling would have been a welcome and exciting phenomenon. In an intellectual terrain where such hero worship could not happen too openly lest the Rana rulers of Nepal feel slighted, Bhanubhakta could be cultivated as a Nepali hero only with some caution. Sama's 1943 full-length play emerges from all these circumstances.

Reflecting caution, Sama entitled the play *Bhakta Bhānubhakta* which can be glossed as "Devotee Bhanubhakta" (2049 v.s.a[2000 v.s.]). In this rendering of the title, Sama could be seen as highlighting Bhanubhakta's own celebration of the Ram story and thus being eligible to the title of a '*bhakta*' himself.<sup>20</sup> While this trick might have saved Sama from the wrath of the ruling Ranas, his main goal was to celebrate the Nepali language itself through a focus on the work of Bhanubhakta. Sama's play, which spans the life-time of Bhanubhakta from the time he was eighteen years old to the moment of his death, is largely based on the biography of Bhanubhakta published by Motiram Bhatta in 1891. To this life-story, Sama allowed his imagination to add a few more details. Amongst these, Bhanubhakta's meeting with the infant Motiram is most noteworthy. By adding this encounter, Sama draws an imaginary link between Bhanubhakta and the person who later in his life was to popularize his life and work. From today's vantage point, Sama's crafting of this meeting and the play he later wrote on Motiram in the mid-1960s (Sama 2052 v.s.[2033 v.s.]) can be viewed as efforts to establish two individuals who served the Nepali language as heroes within the national *bīr* pantheon. These two were brave not because they held the sword on behalf of Nepal, but because of their service to the Nepali language which was the real hero, not only of Sama's play on Bhanubhakta but of Sama's very life and imagination.

The other full-length play by Sama mentioned earlier, *Amar Siḍha*, was published in 1954, some three years after the end of the Rana Regime

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20 Cf. the introduction that Suryabikram Gyawali (2049 v.s.[2010 v.s.]) wrote to the second edition of *Bhakta Bhānubhakta*. For additional comments, see Sharma Tripathi (2033 v.s.) and B. Bhattarai (2046 v.s.).

(2049 v.s.b[2010 v.s.]). If in the previous play, Bhanubhakta's life was a vehicle through which Sama could celebrate the Nepali language and its place in his imagination of the Nepali nation, in the latter play Amarsimha Thapa (c. 1751-1816) is made a vehicle through which he can celebrate the *bīr* era of the history of Nepal and the Nepali *jāti*. The work of *jāti* activists in Banaras and Darjeeling had influenced Sama's own gradual adoption of cultural projects that recovered a common past for all of the Nepalis. He had written his play on Bhanubhakta under this influence and had taken Bhanubhakta's biography published by Motiram in 1891 as the basic source. Similarly Sama acknowledged the influence of Gyawali's (2000 v.s.) biography of Amarsimha on the composition of his own play. Sama had this to say in his preface to the play:

I might have heard the name of Amarsimha Thapa somewhere previously but I got the inspiration to write this play after [reading] *Amarsiḍha Thāpāko Jivanī* written by our famous historian Sri Suryabikram Gyawali. Before writing this play, I read unpublished *vaḍḍāvalīs* in the Nepali language and the published histories of Nepal written in English. I also read the work of our *itihāśīromaṇi* Shri Baburam Acharya. But I have made Gyawali's book the basis of my play (2049 v.s.b[2010 v.s.]:13).

The play begins with a scene in Kathmandu where discussion is being held amongst Nepal's ruling elites regarding the desirability of the proposed war with the British. The faction which advised against the war acknowledges that it has lost the debate and hence the war must happen (cf. Stiller 1976). It then covers different scenes from the war and the eventual signing of the treaty acknowledging Nepal's loss. But from the vantage point of Amarsimha who had initially argued against the war and later led Nepali forces in the western sectors, the surrender signed by the ruling coterie in Kathmandu was premature. This coterie, in the estimation of those who had initially opposed the war, had failed to provide the necessary supplies and personnel to support what were essentially thin lines of communication spread over a large region in west Nepal. At the close of the play, the death of Amarsimha by the lake of *Gosāiḍkunda* to the north of Kathmandu is depicted as a sad ending to one of Nepal's greatest war commanders from the unification era.

Sama packs his play with dialogue that brings out the *bīr* ethos realized in Amarsimha's life and work. This ethos is intricately demonstrated to be tied to his love for Nepal and his belief that the

country could be saved from disaster in the war if only there was adequate preparation. By including other personalities such as Bhakti Thapa (1741-1815) who died in one of the fronts in the western hills, Sama weaves a completely plausible scenario in which the real Nepali warriors who need to be placed in the *bīr* pantheon are shown to have used their reason to advocate caution before the war but, once it had begun, had participated whole heartedly in trying to save Nepal from the hands of the British invaders.<sup>21</sup> Coming about a decade after Gyawali's biography of Amarsimha had been published and acknowledging its influence (as well as that of Gyawali's other writings), Sama contributed directly to the elaboration of the *bīr* pantheon of Nepali heroes through this play. *Nepal Kalāmaḍal*, a theatre group established by Sama after the demise of the Rana regime, staged this play in Kathmandu. Later it was staged in the Darjeeling area. Audiences everywhere responded warmly and enthusiastically to these performances (P. Malla 2037 v.s.:77-8).

In the early 1960s, Sama published a one-act play entitled *Nālāpānīmā* as part of a collection (Sama 2020 v.s.), elaborating the brave performance of military commander Balbhadra and his soldiers at the fort in Nalapani during the very first Gorkhā-British encounter of the war in the fall of 1814 (cf. Onta 1996b). Sama made many other references to this war and the *bīr* history associated with it, most notably in the epic, *Ciso-Culho* (Sama 2025 v.s.). In his essays too, he continued to advocate his project, now for a post-Rana Nepal, with respect to the Nepali language and national Nepali culture. In one of them he stated:

We are members of the Nepali *jāti* of Nepal. We are of a freedom-loving nature; we are one. We want the Nepali language, dress and culture to spread in Nepal and amongst members of the Nepali *jāti*. We first want the progress of Nepal. For this project we will spend our lives' resources—as sweat during moments of success, as tears during moments of defeat, and as blood when it is necessary (Sama 2010 v.s.:14).

An acute sense of a lack of a 'pure' Nepali culture on which a 'pure' Nepali consciousness and philosophy could be founded had first led Sama to design a blueprint of 'what needed to be done' so that a "third eye" could be opened within the country to look at the history of Nepal. His *nāṭaks*, each one of them, are the products of this lifelong project in which the

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21 See also Gyawali (1956[1949]) and Upadhyaya (2032 v.s.:65-75).



Nepali language became the medium of comprehending at a sophisticated intellectual level, the problem of Nepali national imagining. Seeking historical depth for his own Nepali consciousness, led Sama to an elaboration of the *bīr* pantheon of heroes first identified in British India by Gyawali and others. But they were recovered as *Nepali* heroes in his plays, not as Gorkhāli heroes. As such they became, in Sama's artful hands, the foundational figures of a Nepali nation.

Sama was not the only one who contributed to the elaboration of the *bīr* pantheon through literary writing.<sup>22</sup> In this essay I have focused only on Sama's work because it has proved to be an important medium through which this particular version of Nepali history has been dispersed. Sama, as one founding figure of modern Nepali literature, has been widely read and the *nāṭaks* discussed here—*Mukunda Indirā*, *Bhakta Bhānubhakta*, *Amar SiŌha*—are canonic texts in the history of Nepali literature. They are routinely included in college-level courses in Nepali language and literature.<sup>23</sup> While the population directly reading or watching Sama's plays may still be a small one *vis ā vis* the whole Nepali population, their indirect influence should not be underestimated. Writers of the simpler stories of Bhanubhakta, Amarsimha and other *bīrs*, found in school textbooks, would be among those who were familiar with and influenced by Sama's works.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

An American philosopher of history, the late Louis Mink, once said that even though a historian might try to summarize his conclusions in the final section of his narrative, "they are not conclusions but reminders to the reader (and to the historian himself) of the topography of events to which the entire narrative has given order" (Mink 1987:79).<sup>25</sup> Hence here

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22 See Devkota (2026 v.s.) for another example of work in this genre.

23 See Dahal (2053 v.s.: 42-55), M. Gautam (2054 v.s.: 1-16), Prakash and Bikas (2050 v.s.:46-51), T. Sharma (2052 v.s.: 182-188; 2054 v.s.: 87-97), and Sharma and Dahal (2052 v.s.: 63-74) for examples of how Sama's plays have been used as college-level teaching materials in recent years.

24 For one example of an author who has written both a biographical essay on Sama as well as a chapter on Amarsimha in a Nepali language textbook for seventh graders, see G. Bhattarai (2039 v.s.a) and (2039 v.s.b) respectively. Bhattarai's essay on Amarsimha in the textbook begins with the statement, "Nepal's history is the history of bravery" (2039 v.s.b:48).

25 The relevant passage from Mink's work reads as follows:

I too shall merely remind readers of the 'topography of events' to whose order I have tried to exhibit, before bringing the essay to a close with a few additional observations.

Early in his life Sama first sought personal attachment to the Nepali language in a milieu where the social legitimacy of this language and his personal emotional investment in it were both open to mockery and interrogation. He initially experimented with culturally familiar literary forms of the Nepali language as his way to negotiate a minimum but critical attachment to it. As the power the Nepali language exercised over Sama and his own personal attachment to it became greater, an increasingly more confident Sama explored this relationship in the culturally and linguistically novel form of dramas or plays, and used his writings to further the promotion of *bîr* history, among other things. Sama's plays and other writings, in turn, proved to be particularly important media with which the literary and intellectual elites of Nepal could cultivate and celebrate their own attachments towards the Nepali language in late Rana-era Nepal.

As Sama's written corpus in the Nepali language grew in size, larger historical contingencies following the end of Rana rule in Nepal in 1951 contributed to the Nepali state's increasing enrollment of the Nepali language, literature and history into its own projects of building the Nepali nation. In this context his works earned a wider readership through their inclusion in the curricula of educational institutions and through general dispersion via print and radio media. Hence Sama's works became instrumental in how particular ways of imagining the Nepali nation, its literature and history gained legitimacy in post-Rana Nepal (cf. Anderson 1983; Balibar 1990). After 1951, the Nepali state made its modernist claims by ostensibly committing itself to the theme of national development. Multi-year plans were drawn up in the 1950s for the

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"But despite the fact that an historian may "summarize" conclusions in his final chapter, it seems clear that there are seldom or never detachable conclusions; not merely their validity but their meaning refers backward to the ordering of evidence in the total argument. The significant conclusions, one might say, are ingredient in the argument itself, not merely in the sense that they are scattered through the text but in the sense that they are represented by the narrative order itself. As ingredient conclusions they are exhibited rather than demonstrated. Articulated as separate statements in a grand finale, they are not conclusions but reminders to the reader (and to the historian himself) of the topography of events to which the entire narrative has given order" (Mink 1987:79).

development of various sectors of the society as part of the modern modality of statecraft in Nepal. Given the educational imperative of Nepal's planners in the 1950s with respect to nation-building, *bīr* history was available for deployment even as the *bikās* plans were being conceived. With foreign money and models pouring in, in the name of development, it was *bīr* history that provided the cultural space for the country's *bikās* to be appropriated as a 'Nepali' process. And this *bīr* history was available, in its most persuasive form, in the works of Suryabikram Gyawali and Balkrishna Sama, among others.<sup>26</sup>

What other additional conclusions might we draw from the study presented here? First we must note that research into the social process through which the Nepali language and literature came to dominate the high forms of Nepali national culture and identity can simultaneously illuminate the agency of those individuals who made Nepali language the vocation of their lives, and that of the Nepali state which has taken upon itself the task of being the chief nation-maker in recent decades. Such research will help us understand the process through which love for the Nepali language and national history was *first* socially constructed in specific individuals in early part of this century within Nepal through the influence exerted by the work of India-based Nepali nationalists and only later (in post-Rana Nepal) inculcated in a larger group of Nepalis through the use of the nationalized education system and the media. We need more historically specific studies of both aspects of this process *before* making broad sociological generalizations regarding the history of Nepali nationalism in the twentieth century. More detailed and specific studies should gradually generate a body of knowledge that will make a macro-level description of this process possible and plausible.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime, agentless history of how the Nepali language and literature came to be one of the dominant markers of the Nepali identity and histories in which the Nepali state is given excessive agency in this process should be critiqued for their lack of attention to cultural history

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26 The dispersion of the *bīr* history of Nepal through a post-Rana nationalized education system and some of its consequences for the Nepali state's attempt to produce its citizens in a particular mode have been discussed elsewhere (Onta 1996b).

27 For an even more complete understanding of the history of Nepali nationalism, we will have to take into account the simultaneous histories of the making of other nationalities/ethnic groups inside Nepal. For the case of Newars and their 'rediscovery' of Newari literature in the period under study here, see N. Pradhan (2049 v.s.), among others.

and, indeed, to the nature of the state itself (the very focal point of such histories).

Secondly, I have exhibited Sama's work and its reception as an example of how the history of Nepali literature—its high form—is enmeshed with the history of Nepali nationalism. Research into Nepali literary history has been one of the most fertile fields of historical inquiry in Nepal, but it has also been one of the most isolated fields of research. This is so mostly because literary historians have largely failed to include in their studies of Nepali literary history questions of broader social historical significance, ones that pay attention not only to changing forms of narrative expression within the various genres of Nepali literature but also to changing use of the language, literary forms and contents as evidence of transformations in national Nepali cultural attachments. Hence in the pedagogic world related to Nepali literature, the canonic location of Sama's plays gets highlighted only within the history of Nepali literature and more particularly within the history of Nepali plays. Here I have tried to recapture them for a history of the social imagining of Nepal, highlighting their specific contributions to the *bīr* history of Nepal, one which celebrates both the Nepali language and a heroic national history as inseparable elements of the Nepali identity. The way in which I have read these plays—as emanating from the projects outlined in Sama's autobiography and his 1932 petition—allows us to understand them, and the man who created them, as part of the social history of Nepali nationalism. It is also a way to read the social history of the Nepali language and national culture of Nepal as they unfolded in Nepali literary works produced during the first six decades of this century within Nepal. Hence we might conclude that this study has contributed toward an analysis of Nepali literary history, using Balakrishna Sama's work as an example, in a way that hopefully will begin to break its isolation and locate the place of Nepali language and literature squarely within the social history of Nepali nationalism. Researchers interested in various *janajāti* languages, cultures, and histories and their relationship to the dominant Nepali language, culture and history also need to take account of this point if they are not to reduce their analyses to isolated terrains of knowledge (cf. Des Chene 1996).

Finally historians doing research on nationalism need to note that the history of nationalism in South Asia is not territorially confined within the erstwhile colonial borders of British India. Studies of this subject limited to the era and borders of colonial India dominate the field and end up standing for the history of South Asian nationalism. As this study has

shown, there is history of nationalism elsewhere in South Asia as well. For the case of Nepal, the history of nationalism has to be thought of in more nuanced ways than as a 'derivative discourse' of colonialism (Chatterjee 1986).<sup>28</sup> To insist on this fact is not to subscribe to the way in which the dominant Nepali nationalism celebrates Nepal's non-colonial history. Instead it is to insist that the history of Nepali nationalism should be thought of as being both influenced by the colonial presence in South Asia and also one that was socially constructed in conscious opposition to it in ways that we could, decisively, call 'Nepali'. This much is evident from the above discussion of Sama and his positioning of 'pure' Nepal *vis á vis* a colonially 'impure' Calcutta. To take recognition of this particular fact of the history of Nepali nationalism is also to take seriously Nepal's non-postcolonial present (cf. Des Chene 1995) within South Asia.

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<sup>28</sup> See Sarkar (1997) for a criticism of Chatterjee and the later variety of Subaltern Studies.

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