

Ecological Awareness in Laxmi Prasad Devkota

- Mohan Lohani, PhD.

Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to study, examine and analyse Mahakavi Devkota's ecological awareness as reflected in his poems. Two poems, namely Forest and People and The Swallow and Devkota have been taken up for close reading and analysis to arrive at the conclusion that Devkota's poems emphasis a symbolic relationship between the human world and the world of birds or Nature. In fact, human civilization can thrive on the harmonious relationship between man and nature, for which the eco-system needs to be preserved and protected.

Critics at home and abroad have not only recognized Devkota as a pioneering poet of romantic stream in Nepali poetry but have also admired his superb creative genius which led him to enrich Nepali literature in diverse forms such as poetry, essay, drama, fiction, the short story, and literary criticism. Research papers and critical essays have been contributed by university scholars and academics on Devkota's long and short poems, his epics and essays, sonnets and his songs. They provide us insight into Devkota's cosmic vision, his treatment of Nature, his outlook on contemporary life with all its appalling contradictions and his own views on language and literature as exemplified in his Nepali and English writings.

This paper attempts to focus on Devkota's ecological awareness as manifested in his two poems Forest and People and The Swallow and Devkota. Ammaraj Joshi wrote a brilliant paper on 'The Economy of Nature in Devkota' published in Devkota Studies in April 2008. Growing global concern, in recent years, about ecological imbalance, in particular climate change and its impact on the environment highlights the relevance of Devkota's ecologically inspired poems to the current emphasis on the need for ensuring and sustaining a sound, healthy and well-balanced eco-system. In fact, such is the magnitude of environmental degradation that never before has the importance of symbiotic relationship between man and

Nature been realized and studied in depth by the international community. The comprehensive Report of the UN Secretary General published last year categorically states that climate change has posed a serious threat to both present and future generations.

One of the principal causes of environmental degradation is deforestation which results in floods, land slide and soil erosion on a massive scale. Devkota glorifies and even deifies the forest in his song Forest and People. In the opening line, the poet personifies the forest by addressing it as ‘people’s brother’. The poet is able to establish personal rapport with the forest. In the next line, personal relationship characterized by warmth and a feeling of intimacy transcends the physical dimension and elevates itself to the spiritual plane. ‘What an exchange of soul!’ – this exclamatory expression reveals the poet’s sense of awe and wonder. The second line sets forth in unmistakable terms the poet’s conviction that there is mutual ‘give and take’ between man and Nature symbolized by the forest.

The forest is deified in the third line and is addressed as ‘The goddess’. The use of feminine gender is a deliberate poetic device to invest the forest with human qualities such as maternal affection, tenderness and selfless service to mankind. Besides, the green vegetation which is the forest’s distinct identity presents an image of beautiful goddess dressed in ‘green’ or colourful attire and who ‘bedecks herself in colorful flowers’. To quote the actual line from the song, ‘The goddess of the forest wears green to please the eyes’. The living presence of the forest is aesthetically pleasing and satisfying as well as spiritually uplifting. People keep gazing at the ravishing beauty of Nature in the form of the forest. The poet’s own admission is persuasive. ‘I have not seen God’s smile sparkle anywhere else like this!’

The message of the poem is loud and clear. Harmony between man and Nature is an absolute necessity to curb further deterioration in the eco-system. By affirming that ‘Forest and people live on earth in soulful embrace,’ the need for such continued ‘embrace’ or harmony is implicitly underlined. The poet’s critical tone is explicit in the succeeding line: ‘people and people do not live in harmony, those two do’.

Man – nature relationship is mutually reinforcing and yields positive results. This is exemplified in the following line: ‘Forest helps people, people help forest to grow and bloom’. There are other multiple advantages of the forest. The forest has been selected by sages as a source of ‘divine truth’ or illumination. People find the forest with its branches that nurture them more palatable and acceptable than mundane ‘lime and bricks’ of the city. Communication between man and Nature or, for that matter, people and the forest, unlike people who love contacts but cannot communicate with one another, is an edifying

spectacle as the following lines illustrate: ‘Goddess Naure, looking very beautiful in emerald,/ beckons, spraying perfumes, beaming to say something’. Finally, the close nexus between the forest and the river is emphasized in the song. The refrain ‘I shall go, I shall go’ expresses the determination of the poet to visit the banks of the river Bagmati which washes clean every object that comes on the way. Such is the strength of water that even the sky-rose blooms and looks colourful with dew-drops.

The Swallow and Devkota is a more complex poem. Devkota’s ecological awareness comes out more prominently in this poem as the eco-system implies more than the environment. It encompasses all elements – geographical location, cultural tradition, economy, social history or, in other words, time, space, situation and socio-cultural landscape. The poet’s persona is skillfully deployed to underscore the multi-dimensional relationship between the human world and Nature symbolized by the bird swallow. The poem under discussion establishes, to all intents and purposes, Devkota as a Nature poet. It proves aesthetically how man-Nature relationship is central to Devkota’s ecological awareness. Nature is a unifying force which is brought out vividly in the following lines ‘Sitting down does Nature thread / Both hearts in a string’.

Nature is pervasive and influences all, living and non-living beings, on earth. Big and small, strong and weak, rich and poor are woven together by the ‘thread’ of Nature into a ‘string’ that is well-knit, balanced, symmetrical and coherent. No less fascinating and appealing is Nature’s beauty which has enhanced Nepal’s international image. Birds and human beings, from far and near, throng to this country to celebrate their honeymoon after wedding. The place is suitable because of tall mountains and a healthy climate: ‘To pass your honeymoon you chose Nepal / The place that is healthy and high’. Devkota’s love of Nature beggars description and the lines quoted here from the poem amply justify it. The underlying message is a lesson for all. Nature should not be tampered with and pillaged. The forest, the river and the fertile land are bounties of Nature preservation of which is essential and crucial to the economy, the eco-system and the folk culture of the county nurtured on Nature with its pristine qualities.

The county’s geographical location provides a congenial environment for the richness and growth of its flora and fauna. The poem under discussion draws our attention to the unique topography and eco-system of the country. Nepal’s topography consists of the Himalayan region, the low hills and valleys and the plains known as

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Terai-Madhes adjacent to the southern neighbor of the country. The climatic variation is suggested in the following lines: 'Falling low, coming downward there's / Fire in the world, / Going high beyond limits, there's / the cold snow of eminence / Living in the middle / Modest fluttering, / One lives in pleasures sweet !' The central region is neither too cold nor too hot. The temperate climate of this part, a unique feature of the eco-system, offers 'pleasures sweet' for anybody to live in.

The eco-system is bound up with the economy of the nation. Expressions like the 'moistened earth', 'The mud trodden by every feet' clearly suggest how the rain-soaked land or field is arable or fit for cultivation. Such 'moistened earth,' the opposite of drought-stricken earth, is 'gazed upon by the heaven through tears'. Agricultural productivity is, thus, not disrupted by imbalance in the eco-system. The heart 'smells' it and so does the human heart pleased to see the productive land and eager to sustain the eco-system. In a traditional system, the farmer knows the fertility of the soil by 'smelling' it. The 'mud' symbolizes the basic material for man and the bird to construct their dwelling-place. That is why 'Through all days / The heart pecks and pricks / for the means to make love's mansion / in the mud'. The mansion thus created is dear to the hearts of both man and the bird. It is in the interest of both to make sure that the mud does not dry up. Agricultural practices continue if the eco-system is not disturbed.

Devkota makes use of 'water' imagery to convey the message of a healthy eco-system. The tiger and the lamb representing the ferocious and gentle features of Nature quench their thirst from the same river bank. No creature on earth, man or animal, can survive without water. In other words, water sustains life, irrespective of what species one belongs to. We have noticed how the river and the forest are part of the eco-system in the song Forest and People. Water is the life-blood of civilization. Water transforms itself into energy and this solves the mystery of 'how live currents flow in the long, thin electric wire'. Likewise, there is no mud without water. Even heaven's 'tears' are rain drops from the sky. The swallow and the poet as the 'loving couple' reach the 'sea-shore' and finally 'sink in the sea' with a wider connotation of water imagery.

The mundane and the spiritual are brought under the broad sweep of the poem. While earthly components are suggested by expressions like 'the moistened earth', the 'mud trodden by every feet', 'the spring', 'the forest' and 'the sea-shore', the link with the spiritual or unearthly realm is indicated in expressions such as 'silently does the tie spiritual', 'the starry sky', 'Trying to lift the clay softened by heaven's tears'. While the

‘clay’ in this line is something visible and palpable, ‘heaven’ can only be imagined or is visible to ‘the eyes of imagination’ referred to in the third stanza of the poem. This, in brief, is the unique eco-system that enhances and enriches Devkota’s ecological awareness

The social landscape comprising pains and pleasures, human suffering and other aspects of social life which are imaginatively painted in the poem is inseparable from the overall eco-system. We are told in the opening lines of the poem: ‘The swallow and Devkota / share the same nest and the same trait’. They share the same feelings, passions and reactions. They bring up their siblings with the same care, ‘We in fondness wish / to take them to the forest to make them fly’. Social harmony is suggested when the tiger and the lamb ‘drink water’ on the same bank. Propelled by a cause which may not be fully justified the bird and the poet remain awake ‘at midnight in a room’. As the bird and the human being are bound by the laws of Nature, their family ties, parental responsibilities and social obligations are not different. After fulfilling their social responsibilities, man and the bird destined to live under the same eco-system look back at ‘the forest of human beings’ with tears in their eyes, proceed to renounce the world by ‘sinking in the sea’ and feel happy as their ‘souls submerge’.

Devkota has given a suitable title to the poem which artistically brings out the close relationship between the two worlds – the human world and the world of birds. The eco-system remains safe and sound only when the two creations of Nature learn to live together, learn to enjoy ‘chasing the spring’ and sing ‘the song of Gauri-Shankar’ symbolizing the age-old union of Prakriti and Purush. All the rhetorical devices, in particular the use of striking images in the poems discussed above display and dramatise the heightened ecological awareness of Great Poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota.

Works Cited

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