

## Chapter 16

### Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl (1884-1965)

Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl is honoured as the poet who invested Nepali poetry with a "classical" quality, and a linguistic refinement and stylistic formality which previously it had lacked. His poetry possessed a formal dignity which had only been hinted at in the works of earlier poets such as Motīrām Bhaṭṭa, or in those of contemporaries like Dharaṇīdhara Koirālā. Many of his poems conform to the philosophy of orthodox Vedānta and are criticised by modern poets for their old-fashioned fustiness. A few are essentially original in their inspiration, but the best of Lekhnāth's poems achieve a kind of balance between the conventions of Sanskrit kāvya and the romantic spontaneity which was to be more fully developed by Devkoṭā. Although regarded in some quarters as the first poet of the modern period,<sup>1</sup> Lekhnāth is probably more accurately described as a traditionalist who established a developed form of classical Nepali poetry, from which later poets could make their departures.

Although Paras Mani Pradhan lists a Saṅkṣipta Jīvanī, "A Concise Life-History" in his bibliography of Lekhnāth's writings,<sup>2</sup> this autobiography has not been published and biographical details are therefore rather difficult to obtain. The events of Lekhnāth's first twenty-five years can only be outlined as follows.<sup>3</sup> He was born to a Brahman family in the west of Nepal (modern Gandaki ancal) in 1884 and received

1. Ratnadhvaja Jośī: Sāhitya Cintana, Kathmandu, 1975, p.91. Jośī states that noted modern critics such as Ishwar Baral, Rāmakṛṣṇa Śarmā and Churamani Bandhu all share this view.
2. Paras Mani Pradhan: Kavishiromani Lekhanath Paudyal, Kalimpong, 1979, p.77.
3. Biographical details are drawn from Pradhan's study (op.cit., 1979) and from an article by Ḍamaruballabha Pauḍyāl: "Kavi Śiromaṇi Lekhanāth Pauḍyāl", Bhānu (vol.3, no.8), Lekhanāth Viśeṣāṅk (1966), pp.127-131.

his primary education from his father. Fourteen or fifteen years later, he was sent to Kathmandu to study at the Rāni Pokharī Sanskrit Pāṭhśālā, a Sanskrit school, and then to Banaras to continue his higher education. This move to India seems to have been something of a disaster, for his young wife died while he was there, and he was no great academic success. Penniless, he decided to seek out his father's estate in the Nepalese Tarai, but to no avail. Eventually, he took up the post of private tutor to a family in Chapki, but he tired of "family feuds"<sup>4</sup> there, and subsequently spent some time seeking employment in India. In 1909, he returned to Kathmandu, where he was fortunate enough to find employment with the family of Bhim Shamsheer, as priest and tutor.

As an educated Brahman, Lekhnāth was highly literate, and well versed in Sanskrit literature. From an early age he adopted the habits of a poet, composing pedantic samasyā-purti<sup>5</sup> verses in Sanskrit, and he turned to his mother-tongue as a literary medium before his twentieth year. His first published poems, entitled Śṛṅgāra Pacīśī and Mānasākarṣini, were included in a collection, Kavitākalpadruma, while he was still a student in the capital, in 1904,<sup>6</sup> and two other poems, Viyogini Vilāpa and Vairāgya Vilāpa, appeared in Sundarī, vol.1, nos. 5 and 8 in 1906.<sup>7</sup>

These and other early poems came to the notice of Rām Maṇi Ācārya Dīkṣit who was then the editor of the literary monthly Mādhavī in Banaras. Rām Maṇi invited Lekhnāth to submit his compositions to him, with the result that several more were published in Mādhavī before its demise in 1909.<sup>8</sup> Lekhnāth's relationship with Rām Maṇi was to pay dividends later on, for he became one of the most influential literary figures of Nepal under the Ranas when he was appointed as the first chairman of the newly-established Gorkhā Bhāṣā Prakāśinī Samiti in 1913.

- 
4. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.9.
  5. These Nepali "riddle-poems" had been adopted from an older Sanskrit tradition, and popularised by Motīrām Bhaṭṭa and his contemporaries.
  6. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.3.
  7. Rām Maṇi Ācārya Dīkṣit: Purāna Samjhanā, Kathmandu, 1972, p.27.
  8. Ibid., pp.27-28.

Lekhnāth's first major composition was Varṣā Vicāra, "Contemplation of the Rains", which was later expanded and incorporated in the more famous Ṛtu Vicāra, "Contemplation of the Seasons" (1916). The thirty-seven verses of Varṣā Vicāra were published in Mādhavī in 1909.<sup>9</sup> Rām Maṇi and Lekhnāth were evidently in complete agreement about the kind of written Nepali that should be regarded as standard; Rām Maṇi led the halanta-bahiṣkāra movement, which, as we have seen, opposed the use of the halant. This problem may now seem to be a matter of mere orthographic pedantry, but the two schools of thought were quite bitterly opposed to one another's views on the question. Lekhnāth's advocacy of halant-bahiṣkāra was expressed in the following lines of Varṣā Vicāra:

herī naśakanū pārī parakhāla baḍe baḍe  
nepālī kavile khuṭṭā kāṭekā varṇa jhaiṃ laṛe<sup>10</sup>

"The high stone walls were destroyed;  
They fell like the letters whose legs had been cut by  
a Nepali poet."

A collection of Nepali poems which was published by the Gorkhā Grantha Pracārak Maṇḍalī<sup>11</sup> in Bombay in 1912 under the title Lālitya, "Delicacy"<sup>12</sup> included several of Lekhnāth's poems which had previously appeared in Mādhavī. One of these was Kavi Kavitalāpa, in which it is evident that Lekhnāth had become critical of the erotic śṛṅgāra poetry which was still popular. The poem describes a dialogue between a poet and the personification of Poetry, assumed to represent the Goddess Sarasvatī.

Kavitā-

bhaddā avanatikārī rasiyā jastā kitāba kā bhārī  
dina dina baḥḍā dekhī aghora manamā uṭhyo sekhi

9. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.13.

10. This verse from Varṣā Vicāra was included in Ṛtu Vicāra as verse no.97 of the description of the rainy season. Lekhnāth Paudyāl: Ṛtu Vicāra, Nepal (2nd edn.), 1934, p.51.

11. "Gorkhā Book Propagation Committee."

12. The 1912 Lālitya should not be confused with the two volumes of Lekhnāth's poems which were published with the same title at a later date.

Kavi-

śikṣā vicārasālī lekhanu mihineta mātra ho khālī  
gardacha ko ruci yasamā, chan saba bokre kathā-rasamā<sup>13</sup>

Poetry:

"A great welter of books I saw, of ugly and degrading frivolity,  
Day by day they increased and a terrible contempt arose in my mind"

The Poet:

"To write thoughtful education is merely an empty labour,  
And who takes any interest in it? All are immersed in worthless  
stories."

After Rām Maṇi had been appointed to the Samiti, Lekhnāth was offered a post in the institution. The offer was made on the strength of his poem Rāma Rājya Pancāśikā, which had been included in the 1912 Lāliya collection, but was composed specifically for perusal by the Samiti.<sup>14</sup> Lekhnāth declined the offer; as an employee of Bhim Shamsher, he felt unable to "cross the floor" to join Chandra Shamsher's Samiti, as the two Ranas headed rival factions within the clan.<sup>15</sup> Besides, his post was secure and moderately well-remunerated, and he retained it for twenty-five years. His decision does not seem to have<sup>had</sup> any adverse repercussions, for his links with Rām Maṇi were unaffected. Soon after the appointment of the latter, they collaborated on the production of a series of four literary textbooks for schools, entitled Gorkhā Śikṣā. Seventeen of Lekhnāth's poems were included.<sup>16</sup> He also contributed a condensed translation of the Bhagavad Gītā for inclusion in the Saṅkṣipta Bhārata which the Samiti published in 1918.<sup>17</sup> This

---

13. Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl: Lāliya (vol.1), Birāṭnagar (3rd edn.), 1967, pp.46-47.

14. Dīkṣit, op.cit., 1972, p.31.

15. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, pp.8-9.

16. Ibid., p.10.

17. The 5th edition of the Saṅkṣipta Bhārata was published by Sājhā in 1966.

Gītā Sāra, a poem of nearly 400 four-line verses, earned him a stipend of Rs.300.<sup>18</sup>

One of Lekhnāth's most popular poems is a departure from his usual style as it is a satirical allegory, in which he bewails his lot as an employee of Bhim Shamsher. In Pinjarāko Sugā, "The Parrot in the Cage" (1916), it is quite evident that the parrot who has no choice but to make its profound utterances according to the whim of its masters is none other than the poet himself. The following two verses of Pinjarāko Sugā<sup>19</sup> should demonstrate the allegorical device,

(16) śuṣka cha ghāṅṭī bandhana carko, bolnaiparne jharko arko  
boli nabole laṭṭhi ujāī, huncha tayārī piṭnalāī

"Dry is my throat and onerous my constraint; to be obliged to speak is an added irritation,  
But should I refuse to utter a word, the stick is brandished,  
all ready to beat me."

(20) daiva! diethyau timile eka, miṭho bolne śakti viveka  
pāirahechu sohidvārā, bandhana, gāli, dhamkī sārā

"Oh Fate! You gave me only the power of melodious speech, and discrimination,  
And what do these obtain for me, save confinement, abuse and constant threats!"

The style of Lekhnāth's poetry changed very little in the years following the publication of Lālitya. Rather, he sought to perfect his art in the particular style he had chosen, and he continued to work on the alaṅkāra or "embellishment" of his ornamental language, remaining quite unaffected by notions of social reform or literary modernity until the 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

18. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.38.

19. Taken from the Royal Nepal Academy's collection of Nepali poems entitled Ādhunik Nepālī Kavītā, Kathmandu, 1971, pp.15-16.

20. Ratnadhvaja Jośī: "Kaviśiromaṇi Lekhanāth: Bhāṣāsāilī" in Kṛṣṇacandrasingh Pradhān (ed.): Sājhā Samālocanā, Kathmandu (2nd edn.), 1977, p.26.

Lekhnāth embarked upon one of his most important contributions to Nepali poetry at quite an early stage of his career: his first khaṇḍa kāvya, entitled Ṛtu Vicāra, "Contemplation of the Seasons", was published in 1916. The khaṇḍa kāvya genre of poetry owes much of its prestige in Nepali to Lekhnāth; the term is best translated as "episodic poetry" and the main difference between it and mahākāvya, "epic poetry" is the greater length of the latter. A khaṇḍa kāvya generally treats a single theme and is divided into "episodes" which are usually of approximately equal length.

Ṛtu Vicāra was one of the earliest Nepali khaṇḍa kāvya and it demonstrated a maturity in the poetry of Lekhnāth which was almost without precedent. Varṣā Vicāra was evidently a "prototype" for Ṛtu Vicāra, as it was enlarged to one hundred verses to form one of the six "episodes" of the longer work. Lekhnāth's primary source for the composition of Ṛtu Vicāra was probably the Ṛtusamhāra,<sup>21</sup> "The Garland of the Seasons" of the Sanskrit poet Kālīdāsa (4th-5th centuries) and his aim seems to have been to endow his poetic language with the same delicacy and dignity which had distinguished the works of the great poets of classical Sanskrit literature. Each of the six "episodes" of Ṛtu Vicāra describes one of the six seasons (vasanta (Spring), grīṣma (the hot season), varṣā (the rains), śaraḍ (Autumn), and the winter seasons of hemanta and śiśira), and comprises one hundred couplets in anuṣṭava metre.

Many of the similes which Lekhnāth employed in his descriptions of the seasons were borrowed from the Sanskrit poetry with which he was so familiar, for example:

pratyeका पुष्पाको रूपा, रेखा, रांगा अनेका चा  
तारा साundaryako jyoti unamā bhitra eka cha<sup>22</sup>

21. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.13.

22. Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl, op.cit., 1934, p.5 (Vasanta Vicāra 28).

"Various are the shapes, the outlines and the colours of  
each and every flower,  
But it is the same light of beauty which is within them all."

hilaimā bhyāguto bascha hilaimā kamala-sthiti  
sthānale mātra ke garnū? bhinnai cha guṇako gati<sup>23</sup>

"Both the frog and the lotus dwell in the mud,  
But of what import is their mere location? The progress of  
their virtue differs utterly."

The poetic language of Ṛtu Vicāra is frequently praised for the  
subtlety of its alliteration, and the dexterity with which Lekhnāth  
constructed his internal rhymes:

divya ānandako raṅga divya-kānti-taraṅga cha  
divya unnatiko ḍhaṅga divya sārā prasaṅga cha<sup>24</sup>

"Divine the colours of bliss, divine the ripples of lustre,  
Divine the manner of their progress, divine the entire occasion."

The poet's use of onomatopoeic vocabulary is also worthy of note:

andhyārā rātamā sundā varṣāko jhanjhāvaṭa  
paramānandakā ḍhokā svayaṃ khulchan khaṭākhaṭa<sup>25</sup>

"Hearing the strumming of the rain in the dark night,  
The gates of bliss open immediately, of their own accord."

Although Sanskrit literature wielded a great deal of influence over  
Lekhnāth, he used some original Nepali similes, and also contrived to give  
this classical description of the seasons a recognisably Nepalese context:

bihānai śiramā pardā sūryako kiraṇāvali  
mūrtidhārī tapasyā jhaiṃ jhalkanchan himakā cullī<sup>26</sup>

23. Ibid., p.17 (Vasanta Vicāra 99).

24. Ibid., p.3 (Vasanta Vicāra 13).

25. Ibid., p.47 (Varṣā Vicāra 75).

26. Ibid., p.59 (Śarad Vicāra 47).

"As a multitude of the sun's rays fall upon their heads at dawn,  
The snowpeaks shine like images of asceticism."

Lekhnāth's second publication of 1916 was Buddhi Vinoda, "The Enjoyment of Wisdom", another khaṇḍa kāvya which was republished in a revised and enlarged form of 101 verses in 1937.<sup>27</sup> The poem represents the poet's exposition of and inquiry into Saṅkhyā philosophy and the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā. Its questioning tone is exemplified by the first verse:

kaḥāṃ thiyo bāsa aghī ma ko thiyem?  
kaso hundā yo pinjaṛā lino bhayem?  
kaḥāṃ cha jānū? kun sātha līkana?  
taṃlāī mālum cha ki? yo kurā mana!<sup>28</sup>

"Where was my home and who was I before?  
How did I come to inhabit this cage?  
Where am I to go? What should I take with me?  
Oh my mind! Do you know these things?"

The poem continues with questions and philosophical observations, and Lekhnāth experiments with new Sanskrit vocabulary. The content of Buddhi Vinoda is abstruse in places, and the poem is consequently less accessible than Rtu Vicāra.

In 1917, Lekhnāth made a temporary diversion away from poetry, and he wrote several plays. Two of these, Bhartṛharī Nirveda (1917) and Abhijāna Śakuntalā (1918), were translations of Sanskrit dramas, the latter being the fourth Nepali version of the Śakuntalopākhyāna.<sup>29</sup> The prose drama Lakṣmī-Pūjā, "The Worship of Lakṣmī", was an original

---

27. Pradhan, op.cit. 1975, p.15

28. Quoted in ibid., p.15.

29. The other Nepali versions of the story of Shakuntalā were translated by Pahalmān Singh Svāra (1878-1934), Śambhuprasād Dhungel (1889-1929) and Khaḍgamān Malla. All of these are now overshadowed by the popularity of Lakṣmīprasād Devkoṭā's Śakuntalā (1945).



composition which contained much of merit. The clear distinctions which Lekhnāth presented between the speech of the uneducated rural characters and that of the sophisticated city-dwellers in his story of Nepalese villagers showed a skill in the composition of dialogue which was to remain undeveloped. Lekhnāth was influenced by the popularity of Hindi drama in the Nepal of his time, and he also wrote five Hindi dramas which are as yet unpublished.<sup>30</sup>

A third khaṇḍa kāvya, Satya-Kali-Samvāda, "A Dialogue Between the Age of Truth and the Degenerate Era", was published in 1919. It is considered inferior to his other khaṇḍa kāvya, and Pradhan suggests that it was written at a much earlier date.<sup>31</sup> In 374 stanzas, Lekhnāth preached Hindu revivalism, deprecated foreign domination and suggested the adoption of modern technology in Nepal. It is the first poem in which he addresses himself to social issues and the following verse, concerning the fate of the poor during the degenerate Kali Yuga, is often quoted as the most outstanding of the whole work:

kali....kārḥī tarakka pasinā dinarāta ḍoko  
boke panī udaragarta rahancha bhoko  
pāyo jahām jasari jo saba tyo capāyo  
niskyō upadra bhīṣaṇ rog āyo<sup>32</sup>

"He carries the basket day and night, sweating profusely,  
But still his stomach is hungry,  
He ate anything he could get, anywhere and in any way,  
Resulting in calamity and the advent of terrible disease."

A modern critic, Ratnadhvaja Jośī, observes that the language of Satya-Kali Samvāda remained relatively undeveloped in comparison with that of Ṛtu Vicāra, but he allows that the poem as a whole emphasised the ability of the poet to compose a lengthy discourse on a subject which would seem to be limited in scope.<sup>33</sup>

---

30. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.77.

31. Ibid., p.14.

32. Puṣkar Shamsheer (ed.): Nepālī Padyasaṅgraha, Kathmandu (3rd edn.), 1949, p.68.

33. Jośī in Pradhān (ed.), op.cit., 1977, p.26.

Lekhnāth neglected to develop the promise of his early khaṇḍa kāvya until much later in his life, but he continued to compose a great number of poems which were published in the literary journals which were beginning to emerge in Nepal and India. Pradhan enumerates his contributions to a few of these: sixteen poems were published in Bhāratī from 1949-57, at least thirty-five in Śāradā 1935-51 and so on;<sup>34</sup> dozens of his compositions appeared in the many short-lived journals of the period. Many others were probably never published and may now be lost. Two collections of his poems, Lāliya, vols. 1 and 2 were published in Birāṭnagar, in 1953; these contain a total of one hundred poems. Many of Lekhnāth's most famous compositions have been included in other published collections: Sājhā Kavita (1967), contains four, Ādhunika Nepālī Kavita (1971) includes ten, and so on. No comprehensive collection of his poems has yet been published; perhaps the publication of a third volume of Lāliya would be in order.

The miscellaneous poems which Lekhnāth wrote in such large numbers until his death in 1965 cover a variety of topics and convey all of the nine rasa. He composed devotional poems, philosophical poems and patriotic poems, poems about money, science and Nepal, poetic descriptions of the beauty of the natural world, poems about himself, and so on.

Despite their didactic content, some of these poems have a whimsical charm and many of them are deliberately couched in uncharacteristically simple language. One such poem was Gaunthalīko Ciribiri, "The Chirping of a Swallow", which was first published in Śāradā in 1935. The bird propounds the Vedāntic philosophy of impermanence to the poet:

timile bhanchau yo ghara mero  
ma pani kahanchu yai ghara mero  
vāstava timro ho vā mero  
khūba lagāū manamā phero<sup>35</sup>

---

34. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, pp.43-47.

35. (verse 3) Lāliya, vol.2, Birāṭnagar (3rd edn.), 1968, p.2.

"You say this house is yours,  
I too say that it is mine,  
To whom, in fact, does it belong?  
Turn your mind to this!"

bhautika sampati araba kamāū  
jala, thala, nabha saba ṭamma jamāū  
tyasmā timro unnati chaina  
tyo saba sapanāko ho caina<sup>36</sup>

"Acquire worldly wealth by the billion,  
Fill the waters, earth and sky right up,  
But your progress will not result from it,  
It is all the relief of dreams."

The language of Lekhnāth's devotional poems is more Sanskritised; they are admired for their beauty and the sincerity of the emotions which are expressed. Sarasvati-Smṛti, "Recalling Saraswati", is a fine example of this type of poem,

mihīṃ prāṇai bīṇā, mana mṛdu nakhī, kampa kalanā,  
garī lākhaṃ jhikti svara-madhurimā smerabadanā!  
rasīlo phakreko hṛdaya-kamalai āsana garī  
basekī vāgdevī kṣanabhara nabirsūṃ junibharī.<sup>37</sup>

"She plays upon the lute of the tender soul,  
Plucking thousands of sweet sounds with the gentle nails of  
the mind,  
As she sits upon the fully-opened lotus of the heart;  
May I never forget the goddess Saraswati, through the whole  
of my life."

Lekhnāth's language becomes most ornate when he describes the beauty of Nature; prākṛti varṇana, the genre of poetry which celebrates natural beauty, became a vehicle for his experiments in alaṅkāra. A typical example of this kind of allegorical verse was his poem Aruṇodaya, which was first published in Śāradā in 1935:

---

36. (verse 23) Ibid., p.7.

37. Royal Nepal Academy, op.cit., 1971, p.3.

- (1) jaya jagadīśvara! manako rahamā  
śūnya gaganamaya bhitrī tahamā  
palapala śītala kalanā-laharī  
kalakala garchan ṭhaharī-ṭhaharī
- (2) madhura dhvaniko śravaṇa-vivaramā  
rekhā khinciyo pancama suramā  
jati-jati ḍubikana herdachu bhitra  
uti-uti mildacha bhāva pavitra<sup>38</sup>

"Glory to the Lord! In the pool of the mind,  
On its innermost surfaces, like the empty sky,  
Cool ripples splash from time to time,  
Gurgling and bubbling here and there.

Within the ear, a mellifluous sound  
Is drawn out in the fifth note,  
And the more I immerse myself to look within,  
The more I experience a holy mood."

The whole poem represents an obscure philosophical abstraction and the meaning of the work may be interpreted in several ways; the commentator in Himāl Culi, a literary textbook, relates the rising of the sun in the poem to the publication of Śāradā monthly.<sup>39</sup> Lekhnāth was not averse to more straightforward poems of prākṛti varṇana, however, and those which deal with an aspect of Nepal often bear patriotic overtones. One such is his description of the Himalaya mountains, Himāla, first published in a journal, Siṃhanāda, in 1961:

latreko māthadekhi padataka himako svaccha seto uparnā  
motikā hāra jastā tharithari uramā jhaljhalākāra jharnā  
phusro dhussā sāmānai kamara jaghanamā phusphuse meghajāla  
dekh dai āscarya lāgdo aṭala cahakilo dhanya hāmro himāla<sup>40</sup>

38. Ishwar Baral (ed.): Dīpikā: Nepālī Sāhitya ra Himāl Culi, Darjeeling, 1970, pp.62-63.

39. Ibid., p.69.

40. Tārāprasād Jośī (ed.): Nepālī Kavita Saṅgraha, Kathmandu, 1973, p.14.

"A scarf of pure white snow hangs down from its head to  
its feet,  
Glistening cascades grace its breast, like strings of pearls,  
A net of drizzling cloud surrounds its waist and hips, like  
a grey woollen shawl,  
It is amazing to see, immovable and bright, our blessed  
Himalaya."

Although the vocabulary which Lekhnāth employed in this kind of poem is by no means colloquial, it is less abstruse and does not attempt to offer a profound philosophical insight. The poem is purely descriptive, with much use being made of similes and allegories which had often been coined by Lekhnāth himself.

Later in his life, Lekhnāth became more overtly nationalistic, and utilised his poetic skills to appeal to the many Nepalese who had emigrated to India. The final verse of the poem Pravāsī-Bandhusita, "To My Brothers Abroad", is another description of the Himalaya, with a patriotic overtone:

yo lambā himasailakā cahakilā aglā hajāraṃ culī  
yī chāṅgā, chaharā, yinai nada, nadī muskānako bhāva lī  
timrai purvajakā kathāmaya miṭhā gāthā suselchan saba  
svāpnāmā pani bandhuvarga! na bhule nepālako gaurava<sup>41</sup>

"The myriad immovable and lofty peaks of this long Himalaya,  
These waterfalls and cascades, these streams and rivers;  
Cheerfully, they all whistle the sweet narrative songs of  
your ancestors;  
Oh my brothers! Never forget the pride of Nepal, even in  
your dreams."

Lekhnāth also took up specific issues of nationalism in his poems; his Rāṣṭrabhāṣāko Bhaviṣyaupara Ekadṛṣṭi, "A View on the Future of the National Language" is a case in point.

---

41. Lālitya, vol.2 (3rd edn.), Biratnagar 1968, p.16.

himālakō svaccha upatyakāmā  
jo khelcha ṭhaṇḍā himako havāmā  
tyo rāṣṭrabhāṣā baliyo na holā  
bhanne jagatmā kuna mūrkhā holā?<sup>42</sup>

"In the fresh Himalayan valley  
It plays in the cool snow breeze,  
Where in the world is the fool  
Who would say that the national language will not be strong?"

This account of the poetry of Lekhnāth's "middle period" is necessarily cursory, for his work was prodigious, but certain generalisations can be made about these poems. Lekhnāth was, in the first place, not an āśukavi, a "Poet of the Flood"; he approached his work in the deliberate manner of a craftsman, constructing his verse with great attention to metre, vocabulary, alliteration and rhetoric. Many poems were rewritten several times before the poet was satisfied with them. His primary concern was to create a "sweetness" in his poetry and he chose his vocabulary and constructed alliterative rhymes to that end. He also contrived to communicate certain philosophical insights to the reader of his poems; these were almost always traditional Hindu interpretations of the world, borrowing greatly from Vedānta, and they remained generally unaffected by the new ideas which were becoming popular among the educated Nepalese and Indian élites under a growing western influence.

In 1950, Lekhnāth was invested by king Tribhuvan with the title of Kavi Śiromaṇi, "Crest-Jewel Poet", which is frequently translated as "Poet Laureate" and is indeed roughly equivalent to that English title in the Nepali literary world.<sup>43</sup> Since Lekhnāth's death, however, no other poet has received the title, and so it would seem that it is his in perpetuity. He is still referred to as Kavi Śiromaṇi Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl.

---

42. Ibid., p.23.

43. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.65.

As it was for many other poets, 1950 was a kind of "watershed" for Lekhnāth. The newly-invested Kavi Śiromaṇi again turned his hand to khaṇḍa kāvya and it was during this period that he composed his most highly-regarded work. As the "Poet Laureate", Lekhnāth was more free to express his own opinions on current affairs, and after 1950 the "establishment" became somewhat more liberal in its world-view. Hence his first composition of post-1950 was a poem of 87 verses entitled Amara Jyotiko Satya-Smṛti, "Remembrance of the Truth of Undying Light", which expressed grief and outrage at the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Under the Rana regime, this might well have been open to mis-interpretation as expressing support for the Nepali Congress party, but under the new government, such fears were no longer a major consideration for Nepali poets.

Two years later, in 1953, Lekhnāth's "magnum opus" was published. This was a lengthy verse composition of nearly six hundred stanzas entitled Taruṇa Tapasī, "The Young Ascetic".<sup>44</sup> The whole work is structured as if it were intended to be a khaṇḍa kāvya in nineteen episodes, but its substantial length means that it is often referred to as a mahākāvya. Lekhnāth himself coined the term navya kāvya, "New Poetry" with reference to Taruṇa Tapasī, but this new category failed to win many adherents.<sup>45</sup>

Taruṇa Tapasī has been the subject of one of the most famous works of Nepali literary criticism, Taruṇa Tapasī Mīmāṃsā, by Cuḍānāth Bhaṭṭarāya, who is of the opinion that the work represents Lekhnāth's highest achievement.<sup>46</sup> It is still regarded among the very best of all Nepali poetic works, and it does indeed constitute a summary of all the talents of its author.

---

44. Or: "The Ascetic Tree". Although taruṇa means "young", taru means tree. The title may have been a deliberate pun on this word.

45. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.48.

46. Published in 1961.

The plot of Taruṇa Tapasī is as follows: a poet is stricken by grief at the death of his wife, and he goes to sit beneath a tree by the wayside. As he sits there, an ascetic (who later turns out to be the spirit of the tree), appears before him. This ascetic tells his life-story to the poet; as a tree, rooted to one spot, he has experienced all of life's vicissitudes, and has observed the actions of the people who have rested beside his trunk. Thus, after long years of meditation, and the insights which his observation of the world has afforded him, he has become spiritually enlightened. His homily contains much worthy instruction for the poet and expresses Lekhnāth's own beliefs.

In Taruṇa Tapasī, Lekhnāth weaves the many strands of his talent together to form a complete work in which no one facet predominates over the others. The poem also contains much which can be readily construed as symbolism, allegory and autobiography. The descriptions of the changing seasons, which are reminiscent of Ṛtu Vicāra, are said to represent the advent and departure of the various rulers of Nepal, and the poet who has lost his wife almost certainly represents Lekhnāth himself.

The following extracts from Taruṇa Tapasī should serve to convey some of the characteristics of the poem. In episode one, the ascetic introduces himself to the poet,

...saphā nīlo tārā-jaḍita gaganai chādana kasī  
banāyeko rāmro bhuvana-kuṭiyāko ma tapasī<sup>47</sup>

"I have clothed myself in the clean blue star-studded sky,  
I am a renunciant, with the beautiful world for my house."

jahām janmeko huṃ, vidhi-vaśa uhīm chu ajha khaḍā  
sahī lākhaṃ carakā viśada athavā saṅkaṭa kaḍā<sup>48</sup>

"Fate has it that I still stand where I was born,  
Having endured thousands of difficult and cruel crises."

---

47. Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl: Taruṇa Tapasī, Kathmandu, 1953, p.9.

48. Ibid., p.10.



The ascetic tells the poet of many of the events of his life which had taught him the philosophy of liberation. In one such episode, a hunter had come to the tree to shoot the birds which were nesting in its branches. Lekhnāth composes the bird's lament,

na śakchau yo āṃśū ṭapaṭapa ṭipī cappa piuna  
na śakchau māśūle dina bhara aghāyera jiuna  
na śakchau yo bhutlā liikana kunai vastra siuna  
cuṇḍyau vyarthai mero manuja! timile jīvana kina?<sup>49</sup>

"You cannot snatch up these tears to drink them,  
You cannot be sustained by this meat or live on it even for a day,  
You cannot sew a garment from these feathers,  
Why, oh man, did you so uselessly cut my life short?"

Later on, some fruit-pickers came to the tree and they took far more than they needed, instead of distributing the surplus to others more needy. The following verse has unmistakable political and social overtones,

jatī jo cahinthyo jaṭhara-hariko khātira utī  
liye khāye pugthyo, muphata kina tyo sancaya ati  
tyasaile gardāmā kati garibako bhāga hariyo  
vidhātāko khātā upara saba tyo pāpa dariyo<sup>50</sup>

"If enough to propitiate the Lord of the stomach  
Had been taken and eaten, it would have sufficed, what need  
is there for hoarding what has been freely provided?  
In acting in this way, how many of the poor have lost their share?  
All those sins were entered in the Book of the Creator."

The ascetic goes on to condemn those who are obsessed by transient worldly pleasures,

ma khāūṃ, mai lāūṃ, sukha, sayala vā mauja ma garuṃ  
ma bāncūṃ, mai nācūṃ, aru saba marūn durvala harū

49. (Episode 6) *ibid.*, p.46.

50. (Episode 10) *ibid.*, p.82.

bhanī dāhvā dhasne abujha śaṭhadekhī chaka parī  
citā khitkā chāḍī abhayasita hāṃsyō marimarī<sup>51</sup>

"I will eat (good food) and wear (fine clothes), I will be  
happy, enjoying excursions and luxuries,  
I will be saved; I will dance as all the other weak people die"  
Astonished by the evil of the fools who say such things to  
press their claims,  
The funeral pyre abandoned its restraint and fearlessly  
laughed aloud."

The morality of the whole poem is probably best summed up by the  
following two verses;

dharitrīmā sattya śrama ra pasināko bhara parī  
tapasyā jo garchan sarala manale jīvana bhari  
tinaiko tyai sattya śrama ra pasinā-rupa tapako  
cirasthāyī yai ho pariṇati ujjālo gajabako  
garī jhuṭṭā, vāṅgā, chala, kapaṭa vā jāla, bahanā  
piyekāchan jasle muphata arukā uṣṇa pasinā  
yahāṃ tyastā dambhī puruṣa dharaṇīkā dhanapati  
kunai chainan, jyādai tala cha tinako garhita gati<sup>52</sup>

"Those upon this earth who depend on truth, labour and sweat  
And practice a simple devout austerity throughout their lives,  
Their asceticism of truth, labour and sweat  
Has a radiant and wondrous final transformation which lasts for ever.  
Those who lie, and practice perversion, fraud, deceit, trickery  
or pretence,  
And partake of the hot sweat of others, freely given,  
No such conceited man can be the God of Wealth,  
The progress of their evil merely drags them down."

---

51. (Episode 18) ibid., p.152.  
52. (Episode 15) ibid., p.130.

According to the ascetic, these words are inscribed upon the gates of Paradise; thus, they can be assumed to represent Lekhnāth's personal creed.

Taruṇa Tapasī was succeeded by two other khaṇḍa kāvyā before Lekhnāth died; Mero Rāma, "My Rāma", is his concise version of the Rāmāyaṇa, which incorporates all of the most important events of the story in a total of 278 stanzas in śraṅghara metre. Pradhan states that the composition of Mero Rāma took seven years, and it was eventually published in 1954.<sup>53</sup> The Rāmaṅgītā, in which the underlying philosophy of the whole work is expounded, is the most developed portion of the book, comprising 41 verses. The second khaṇḍa kāvyā of this period was never completed; the first four cantos and a portion of the fifth canto of Gaṅgā Gaurī were published in the literary quarterly Kavitā between 1964 and 1967. Gaṅgā Gaurī retold the story of the goddess of the Ganges river, with a great deal of borrowing from Sanskrit sources.<sup>54</sup>

Lekhnāth was further honoured by the Nepali literary world when he became the focal point of a peculiar procession in Kathmandu in 1954. The old poet was seated in a ratha, a kind of religious chariot, and was paraded through the city, the vehicle being pulled by many of the poets of the day, and even the Prime Minister, Mātrikā Prasād Koiralā.<sup>55</sup> In 1957, he was awarded a post in the new Royal Nepal Academy. These honours are a mark of the peculiar reverence felt by the poets and academics of Nepal for the man who more than any other represents a "classical" genre of their poetry. He can no longer escape the scorn of the young for the old-fashioned, however, and his poems are no longer imitated by aspiring poets. The following words of Lakṣmīprasād Devkoṭā defend him from his critics:

"Modern novices accuse him of innumerable failings: he is overly cautious and unspontaneous, making too much use of ornamental rhetoric. His poetry is ostentatious, and he is excessively

53. Pradhan, op.cit., 1979, p.60.

54. Ibid., pp.89-90.

55. Ibid., pp.65-66. Pradhan states that Lekhnāth was also awarded 5,000 rupees.

dexterous in his use of alliteration. Modernity is entirely absent from his poetry, which suffers from a preponderance of Sanskrit and is chequered by similes. His mellifluous language is too sweet, and far from its spoken counterpart. His metrical constructions fragment the expression of his philosophy, making the emotions seem stilted and halting. The daintiness of his vocabulary is decadent.....

Accusations of unspontaneous craftsmanship are not entirely without substance, but this is not merely a work of construction, it is Art. One cannot complain that something which is founded on natural laws is over-ornamented or ostentatious....

Modernity is a term which has only recently been coined, so a lack of modernity should not be regarded as such a major flaw. If we are contemptuous of Sanskrit, we are doing nothing but depriving ourselves; although a branch of literature could quite feasibly exist in pure or colloquial Nepali, we would lose the refinement which is necessary in profound or advanced composition; it would seem a little odd....whether poetry should be composed in colloquial language is still a matter for dispute: we praise attempts which are made to utilise the melodiousness of rural or mountain dialects, but this, after all, is not our only resort. Even if one believes that the metrical construction of poetry fragments its flow, it remains true that less blame can be attached to the poet whose emotions emerge in rounded, developed, smooth and illuminated forms than to the poet who expresses himself in an undeveloped torrent of primitivism."<sup>56</sup>

These comments from one of Lekhnāth's most illustrious contemporaries would seem to summarise both attitudes which are now current among modern Nepali writers to the poetry of Lekhnāth Pauḍyāl.

---

56. Lakṣmīprasād Devkoṭā: Lakṣmīnibandhasaṅgraha, Kathmandu, 1945, pp.222-223.

Lekhnāth continued to compose poetry right up until his death in 1965, and several of these later poems are explicitly personal. The title of Vayoyrddha Koilīko Bilaunā, "The Lament of an Aged Cuckoo", speaks for itself. The last verse gives a fair indication of its tone,

diśā tyo mahendrī, udayagirimā  
tyo sunaharī -  
uṣākā uṭhdai chan  
ati mṛdula āloka-laharī  
ma bolūṃ bhandai chū, tara saba galā gharghara cha yo  
kaṭhai! tyo ānandi madhura vaya mero saba gayo<sup>57</sup>

"In that land of Mahendra, on the peak of Dawn  
Arise the waves of splendour,  
The gentle gold of the sun.  
I was going to sing, but this throat is hoarse,  
Alas! All my sweet years of happiness have passed."

Lekhnāth's last poem was posthumously given the title of Ākhirī Kavītā, "Last Poem". It is very short and should be quoted here in its entirety, as it is rather a fine epitaph to the Poet Laureate of Nepal,

yo dukha bhogne parameśvarai ho  
yo deha usko rahane gharai ho  
yo bhatkandā dukha avaśya māncha  
suṭukka sāmāna liera jāncha<sup>58</sup>

"It is God himself who endures this pain,  
This body is the very house he inhabits,  
By its fall he is surely saddened,  
He quietly picks up his things, and goes."

---

57. Royal Nepal Academy, op.cit., 1971, p.22.

58. Ibid., p.23.