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## Writers, Readers, and the Sharing of Consciousness: Five Nepali Novels

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# Writers, Readers, and the Sharing of Consciousness: Five Nepali Novels

Michael Hutt

In his seminal book *Literature, Popular Culture and Society*, Leo Lowenthal argues that studies of the representation of society, state, or economy in the literature of a particular country or time contribute to our knowledge of 'the kind of perception which a specific social group—writers—has of specific social phenomena' and therefore to our knowledge of the 'history and sociology of shared consciousness' (1961: 143). This discussion will focus on five Nepali novels published between 2005 and 2010, i.e. during the final months of the internal conflict between the CPN (Maoist) and the monarchical state, and the period of political transition that followed. The novels were selected mainly because they have been widely read and discussed, at least in Kathmandu, and can therefore be seen as possessing sociological as well as purely literary significance. Three of them (Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*, Narayan Dhakal's *Pretkalpa*, and Krishna Dharabasi's *Radha*) won one or other of the two major Nepali literary prizes awarded each year, and the other two (Yug Pathak's

*Urgenko Ghoda* and Buddhisagar Chapain's *Karnali Blues*) have achieved a high public profile. The paper will summarize the content of these novels and provide some translated extracts. It will then analyze and discuss them, with a particular focus on (a) Dhakal's, Dharabasi's, and Pathak's use of the past (b) the influence of the Maoist insurgency and the imprint of Maoist ideology (c) the location of each novel's central protagonist in relation to urban metropolitan perspectives and (d) implied and actual readerships. The paper will explore the sociological significance of the commercial success of several of these books in light of the increasingly close relationship between Nepali literature and the Nepali print media. Finally, it will ask whether the expansion of the readership for Nepali novels in recent years is a sign that the Nepali novel is now breaking out of the narrow elite sphere of 'art literature' and becoming a part of what Ashish Nandy calls 'the popular.'

**Keywords:** Nepal, literature, fiction, history, Maoism.

## Introduction

For most of the twentieth century the production and consumption of literature in the Nepali language involved only a very small section of Nepali society. Before 2002, more than half of the Nepali fiction and poetry in print<sup>2</sup> was published by a single publisher, the government-owned Sajha Prakashan,<sup>3</sup> with the rest coming out of the [Royal] Nepal Academy ([Rajakiya] Pragya Pratisthan), and a number of small private publishers, of which Ratna Pustak Bhandar is the oldest example. Apart from a handful of notable exceptions,<sup>4</sup> its authors were male, either Brahman or high-caste Newar, and based in Kathmandu. Nepali literary criticism was the preserve of a small circle of scholars with very similar profiles.

The readership for Nepali literature was also very small. During the first thirteen years of the Panchayat period (1962-1975), two copies of any new book had to be presented to the Zonal Administration for its perusal, and its distribution and sale were not permitted until approval had been received. After the implementation of the New Education Plan in 1971, a selection of Nepali literary texts was transmitted to the wider population through the national curriculum, but the government became increasingly prescriptive with regard to this content. Rates of literacy grew steadily, but few Nepali citizens possessed either the inclination or the financial means to purchase books other than those prescribed by the schools and colleges in which they or their offspring studied.

All of this began to change after the abolition of the Panchayat system. The new constitution promulgated in November 1990 granted new freedoms of expression and publication; the state's near monopoly on the print media was broken, the size of the literate population continued to increase, doubling every ten years, and the economy of the Kathmandu valley saw unprecedented injections of cash, not least in the form of remittances from workers overseas. The massive growth of the Nepali print and broadcast media that came about as a consequence of these changes has been the subject of a number of empirical studies, conducted by both Nepali (see, for instance, the eight volumes of the Nepali language journal *Midiya Adhyayan* published by Martin Chautari 2006-2013) and foreign researchers (see, for example, Hutt 2006, Kunreuther 2004, Liechty 2003, and Wilmore 2008). However, much less attention has been paid to the transformation of the Nepali *upanyas*, or novel, which has moved from its longstanding status as a genre of art literature that enjoys 'distant respect' to a location closer to that of the more easily accessible 'popular' (see Nandy 2007).

In his book *Literature, Popular Culture and Society*, Leo Lowenthal argues that studies of the representation of society, state, or economy in the literature of a particular country or time contribute to our knowledge of "the kind of perception which a specific social group—writers—has of specific social phenomena" and therefore to our knowledge of the "history and sociology of shared consciousness" (1961: 143). This discussion will focus on five Nepali novels published between 2005 and 2010, during the final months of the armed conflict between the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) and the monarchical state and the period of political transition that followed. The novels were selected mainly because they were the most widely read and discussed of this period, at least in Kathmandu, and can therefore be seen not just as works of literary interest but also as elements of a contemporary socio-political discourse. First I will summarize the contents of each novel, and then I will proceed to a discussion of the relationship between their content and the 'shared consciousness' of early post-conflict Nepal.

### Narayan Wagle, *Palpasa Café* (2005)

The publication of *Palpasa Café* signalled a radical shift in the production and consumption patterns of Nepali literature. This was the first novel by the editor of Nepal's best selling daily newspaper, *Kantipur*, and it was published by a new private publisher, Nepalaya. Its main characters are Drishya, a male Bahun artist who runs his own gallery in Kathmandu, and Palpasa, a young woman of indeterminate caste and ethnicity who has returned to Nepal after her higher education in the USA. Both embody aspirational life styles for Kathmandu's new middle classes. They meet first at a beach café in Goa and the early chapters of the novel describe Drishya's growing infatuation with Palpasa after they return separately to Kathmandu. After the Narayanhiti palace massacre, one of Drishya's old college friends, Siddhartha, who is now a Maoist commander, comes asking him for shelter. Drishya takes him in but they argue about the rights and wrongs of the conflict and Siddhartha eventually tells Drishya to come to the hills and see the realities of village Nepal for himself. Drishya agrees, and there follows a lengthy account of this effete liberal urbanite being exposed to the realities of rural conflict-period Nepal, including Siddhartha's death at the hands of the Royal Nepal Army. When he decides to return to Kathmandu, he boards a bus on which Palpasa is also travelling; she has been out in the hills taking photographs. In a scene redolent of a Bombay movie, the bus is destroyed by a Maoist bomb: Palpasa is killed, but Drishya (who has stepped out to urinate) is unhurt. When Drishya returns to Kathmandu he

is arrested by the army and disappears, thus bringing the reader back to where he first came in: the novel opened with a Kathmandu journalist taking a call on his mobile phone which informs him that a well-known artist has disappeared. The publication of *Palpasa Café* was trailed in the Nepali media<sup>5</sup> and then warmly welcomed by many reviewers, who described it as a “modern novel of contemporary consciousness,”<sup>6</sup> a “sensitive image of life and reality in the broken down (jarjar) time of today’s Nepali history,”<sup>7</sup> a “postmodern war-narrative,”<sup>8</sup> and “fiction more real than fact.”<sup>9</sup> Interviews with and profiles of Wagle appeared in many magazines and newspapers during the same period.<sup>10</sup> Within three years of publication, *Palpasa Café* had sold more than 25,000 copies and an English translation had also entered a second edition. For many of its readers, *Palpasa Café* was the first book they had ever read in Nepali.<sup>11</sup> Much of the book’s success was attributable to the public profile of its author and the marketing strategy adopted by the publisher. To give one example, a series of whole-page advertisements appeared in the news magazine *Nepal*, a sister publication of *Kantipur*, during the summer of 2005. The advertisement published on 14 July 2005 consists of a photograph of a slice of melon and a copy of *Palpasa Café* with the sentence “It refreshes you” beneath the melon and “It refreshes your brain” under the book. At the bottom of each advertisement there appeared a paragraph extolling the virtues of reading:

There are many things that energizes/refreshes [sic] our lives, books are one of them. Examine the lives of successful people and you will find that the great majority of them acquire reading habit early in life. Reading aids mental growth; it helps one to think sensibly, to comprehend matters in depth, to analyse fruitfully and express oneself intelligently. It help us to understand the world better, it aids us in the development of ourselves, and our relationship with others.

Ostensibly, this was not an advertisement for *Palpasa Café*, but an initiative intended to promote the habit of reading, with *Palpasa Café* appearing simply as an example of a book that people might choose to read. At the foot of the page, however, readers were provided with contact details for the publisher and distributor of the novel. Although the book was written in Nepali and no English translation had yet been published, and although *Nepal* magazine is a Nepali-language publication with little or no English content, the text of these advertisements was in English. The advertisements were probably intended to reach out to readers who regarded English as the language of

modernity and had hitherto assumed that Nepali literature was the work of parochial traditionalists. Although such readers might be assumed to be regular consumers of the vibrant Nepali language print media, for them this was a sphere that was set completely apart from the world of Nepali books. Instructing educated readers of a leading Nepali-language news magazine to read books, telling them to do so in English, and then providing them with an example of a book in Nepali written by a leading Nepali journalist was a well-judged marketing ploy.



### Krishna Dharabasi, *Radha* (BS 2062, 2005-2006)

Dharabasi’s novel begins with news of a major archaeological dig in the eastern Tarai which is attracting large crowds of onlookers. The author casts himself as a journalist who has gone to cover this story. After he arrives at the scene, an iron box is unearthed that is found to contain a large number of metal plates inscribed in an antique script. A mysterious *sadhu* (Hindu ascetic) who has been sitting around the site for some days turns out to be able to decipher the text, and he reads it out to an ever-growing audience over the course of the night and the following day.

The story inscribed on the plates turns out to be Radha’s autobiography. It begins with the *ras lila* that takes place at night in the forest of Braj. Radha relates how Krishna took her and the other *gopis* (female cowherds) out into

the forest to dance with him all night, how she feared competition for his love, and how he took her aside into the dark for a while and assured her that she was his first and only love. Alan Entwistle points out that in the *Bhagavatapurana*, the primary source for the story of Krishna and Radha, Radha “has no independent function outside of her relationship with Krishna” (1987: 49). For an inventive novelist, this represents an opportunity to weave a story of his own. Once Dharabasi has dealt with Radha’s early dalliances with Krishna in Braj, for which he must defer to the standard narrative, she becomes an empty canvas onto which he can paint anything he wants. Dharabasi’s main task in this novel is to tell the story of what Radha did after Krishna left Braj, which is the point at which she disappears from all other narratives. His account remains faithful to the standard popular versions of Krishna’s adventures and exploits. Unlike them, however, it foregrounds Krishna’s repeated betrayals of Radha, portraying her as a strong and independent woman who is wronged by Krishna but who goes on, undeterred, to forge her own destiny.

In Dharabasi’s novel, Krishna’s godliness is played down and his miraculous deeds and celestial origins are presented in the form of beliefs, not as absolute truths. While in the *Bhagavatapurana* Krishna’s behaviour is not governed by the rules applicable to ordinary people, in this novel the local people, and particularly the parents of the gopis, are outraged by his transgressions. Radha, who is the daughter of the Pradhan of Braj, is forbidden from seeing him ever again, but Krishna continues to visit her in disguise.

After the Rishi Garga reveals Krishna’s true identity to him and tells him that Kansa now plans to have him killed, Krishna tells Radha that he and his brother Balram must go away. Radha pleads with her mother to help her to maintain her relationship with Krishna. Her mother cannot do so, but we learn from her response to Radha’s pleas that there was also a time in her own life when she yearned for freedom to take her own decisions:

She got up abruptly and walked away. Today I saw a strange conflict in my mother. She seemed to have closely remembered some old past of her own. I saw her as if she was merely doing her duty by her present life but had left her own life somewhere in the dark when she came here. I sensed that although she was the wife of my father Vrishabhanu, she was someone else’s darling. (*Radha*, 55-56).

Meanwhile, Krishna and Balram prepare for war, setting up ‘training centres’ (*talim kendra*) for the young men and women they recruit to fight against the corrupt and oppressive Kansa. The combatants in the training camps

include Radha’s erstwhile friend Sushila, and Radha becomes jealous of her because of her closeness to Krishna. But they meet and are reconciled; Sushila’s dedication to the struggle and willingness to sacrifice herself are a form of repentance for having tried to usurp Radha’s rightful place as Krishna’s favorite gopi. After their conversation Radha reflects, “How did we suddenly become so old and come to be doing such big things?” (*Radha*, 115), and when Sushila is killed in battle Radha gives a rousing speech to her mourners:

We must be able to decide how we will look at life, how we will use life. Should we be born, live for a time like an ordinary creature and then just die and disappear, or should we die while broadcasting a great message of what it means to be born on this earth? ...Each one of us must be involved in the war that is going on in Mathura, assisting in whatever way we can, whether with our minds or our wealth. Braj must not weep over this war. A daughter of Braj has sacrificed herself in such a magnificent war, why should we cry? We should be proud. (*Radha*, 122)

Krishna and Balram are unable to defeat Kansa’s forces in open warfare and resort to guerrilla tactics. Eventually they infiltrate his bow ceremony, where Krishna breaks the bow and puts Kansa to death. Krishna now builds a new capital at Dwarika, but Radha stubbornly refuses to go to join him there, insisting that she will not do so until he has returned to visit and thank the people of Braj, which he fails to do. Radha bewails the constraints society puts upon women’s actions, saying:

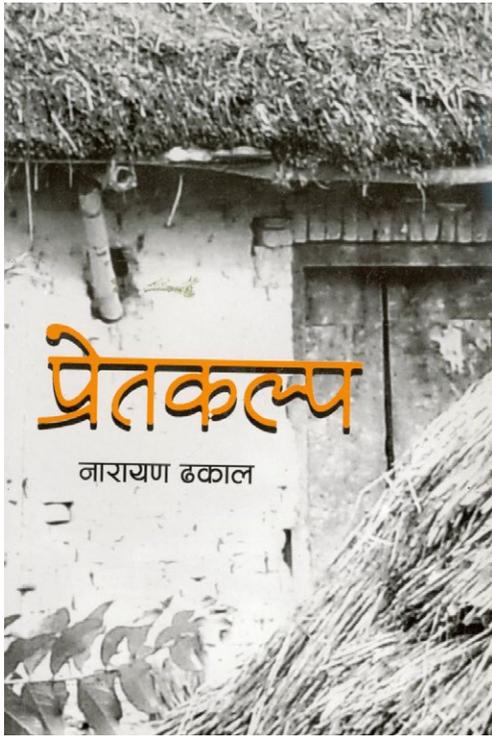
We are forced to stand in one place just like a tree, suffering the gales and storms, being pruned and trimmed, having our branches lopped, bearing fruit, breaking into pieces. What we have that is firmest and most secure is the ground that we stand on, our society. If we take even one step away from it, how insecure that step is. (*Radha*, 148)

Radha decides not to travel to Dwarika but instead takes a vow of renunciation and undertakes a long pilgrimage to the holy places of India. After many months she is persuaded to visit Dwarika at last, and there Krishna installs her in the palace he has created for her. Radha forgives Krishna but says that she cannot remain with him because his effect upon her is to make her forget her mind. She explains that she is going to resume her travels:

‘Throughout this journey I am going to go from place to place and teach love and non-violence. I am going to oppose the excesses committed against

women and teach women's awakening and consciousness. I am going to oppose this tradition in which men take women only as commodities for their consumption and women accept themselves accordingly. Krishna, if it wasn't for this tradition how would you have collected so many wives?' (Radha, 227-228)

Radha then takes her leave of her mother, declaring that she does not believe in heaven, Ishvar, or the gods, and that they will never meet again (228-229). Her story ends as she departs for the Kurukshetra battlefield, where she hopes to be reunited at last with Krishna. At the end of the book, we learn that the sadhu who has read Radha's story for us is none other than Ashvathama, condemned by Krishna to wander the earth for eternity in atonement for his sins.



### Narayan Dhakal, *Pretkalpa* (2008)

Set during the reign of Chandra Shamsheer in the early years of the twentieth century, *Pretkalpa*, published in 2008, tells the story of a young Brahman named Balkrishna Acharya who returns from his studies in Varanasi to his home village of 'Dukhpur' (an invented name meaning 'Town of Sorrow') in the north east corner of the Kathmandu Valley. He has been deeply influenced by the teachings of the Arya Samaj and brings with him many ideas of ways

in which he will set about reforming his native society. However, his decision to live his own life according to the tenets of the Arya Samaj does not find favor with the Rana government of the day, and ultimately the treachery of an opponent in the village leads to him and his family being expelled from Nepal.

The author explains that *Pretkalpa* is not a 'historical novel' because its central characters are all invented. However, it does set out to draw an authentic portrait of Rana-period rural Nepal. For instance, a number of historical figures (including the Rana Maharaja Chandra Shamsheer (1901-1929)) make frequent appearances in the narrative, and while 'Dukhpur' is an invented name, all other place names are real. The author maintains that the story he is telling was related to him by his grandfather, and at the end of each chapter he adds his own commentary on the events described.

After the failure of several early attempts to effect social reforms in Dukhpur, Balkrishna makes the first of two major decisions that represent serious transgressions of contemporary social convention. Balkrishna's nemesis, the politically ambitious and morally corrupt Shankhadhar, constantly tries to stir up opposition to Balkrishna in the village and sends reports of his activities to Chandra Shamsheer.

Balkrishna's first transgression begins when he attends the celebrations of King Tribhuvan's coronation in Kathmandu. There he comes across a Sarki boy who has become separated from his father in the crowds. When he discovers that the boy's home village is close to his own he takes him home with him, intending to hand him to his father in the morning. But next day the boy refuses to go to his own home because he says he is mistreated there, so Balkrishna decides to take him in, and renames him "Ashvini," after "the character who campaigned for Dalit liberation in the Rgveda" (73-74). Unsurprisingly, Balkrishna's family is harassed and ostracised by their fellow villagers for taking in the boy. Balkrishna argues with everyone that there is no basis for caste discrimination or social division in the Vedas, but not even the Sarkis are convinced. Undeterred, Balkrishna brings Ashvini up as a Brahman.

Balkrishna's second major transgression is his marriage to a young Chetri widow named Damayanti. Their relationship begins when he supports her in an argument with Shankhadhar over who should have the first use of a pair of ploughing oxen that the village households borrow turn by turn. Later, Balkrishna gives a public reading of the *Puranas* and notices Damayanti in the audience just as he is

speaking of Mira's love for Krishna. The next day he draws upon examples from many of the sacred texts to show that widows should be allowed to re-marry and that women should have more freedom to choose their own destinies.

When Damayanti realises that Balkrishna is in love with her, she is frightened and refuses to meet him again, but one night he rescues her from drowning in a monsoon flood and their love affair begins. He visits her secretly every night and in due course, Damayanti becomes pregnant. It is decided that she will be brought to Balkrishna's home to live as his wife, but Shankhadhar makes a complaint to the palace and soldiers are sent to arrest Balkrishna, who is taken away with his father. As they are marched away, an increasingly long column of Dalits takes up behind them. The implication is that although Balkrishna has not succeeded in liberating the Dalits from their untouchable status, his championing of their rights has earned him their loyalty. Further down the road, they encounter the village headman coming the other way. He orders the soldiers to release Balkrishna and then go back and tell their master that he will take responsibility. Balkrishna is freed and returns to his new wife. They work together in the fields and enjoy domestic bliss, but the villagers no longer call upon Balkrishna to perform the life cycle rituals or read the *Puranas* for them.

Chandra Shamsher's first response to the threat represented by Balkrishna and his new ideas is to try to co-opt him. Thus, Balkrishna is summoned to Singha Darbar and the Maharaja offers him a position as an advisor. Balkrishna's decision to turn this offer down arouses suspicions, and the palace keeps him under observation thereafter. For many years Shankhadhar's attempts to have Balkrishna and his family ostracised by the village and punished by the government are repeatedly thwarted, either because the village headman protects him or because many local people—particularly the Dalits—recognise the goodness of his intentions, although they are too afraid to follow his lead.

The village headman, Jimval Vishnubhakta, is the most interesting character of the novel because of the ambiguity of his position. As it becomes clear towards the end of the novel that his political fortunes are in serious decline, he reflects on his actions over past years:

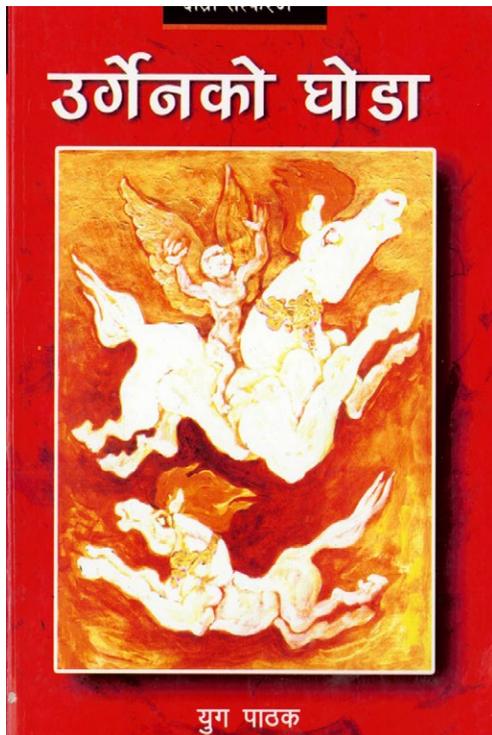
Now as he came to the last period of his life he could no longer fit into Shri Teen's administration. Was this all because of Pandit Balkrishna? Was Balkrishna this weakness of his? Why did he refuse to give up the Pandit? ... But the questions are all

meaningless. What did the Pandit do wrong after all? To stand up in a person's crisis, to talk about the reform of society, to serve society: were these treason? The Pandit is very clearly on the side of the beautyfulness of life, on the side that says that the perfume of justice should spread in society, is this a crime? The Pandit is a new kind of sanyasi. How could the legitimacy of Vishnubhakta's local regime have been maintained by opposing him? Should he have publicly taken the side of untruth? (*Pretkalpa*, 190)

In the end, Shankhadhar manages to worm his way into Chandra Shamsher's favor through trickery and theft, and the way is open for Balkrishna to be seized and banished. He is taken away in the night by soldiers, insulted and beaten on the way to Singha Darbar, and confined in a filthy cell. Ashvini is arrested, tortured, and interrogated. Shankhadhar is made the new village headman and Balkrishna's family are stripped of their caste, banned from rituals, and not permitted to farm their fields.

When the family is finally expelled from the village, Shankhadhar comes to watch them go. In a turn of events that rather strains the reader's credibility, he begs for forgiveness, but Balkrishna's father tells him:

This is a crisis we brought upon ourselves. Shri Teen invited Balkrishna to go and work in the Bharadari Sabha but he didn't go. The main thing is that Shri Teen Chandra does not have any vision or plans for change. He is in the grip of traditional ideas and the ambition to remain in power. That being so, what could Balkrishna have done if he had gone to work in his sabha? He'd have received an income. He'd have been given a lot of land. He would have taken himself and his family to a new world of luxury, comfort and infidelity, that's all. But even I know how dangerous that path is. Courtiers gain power and accumulate wealth through conspiracies, and this fosters bloodshed and murder. Who is surviving without any obstruction today? Do you think Shri Teen Chandra lives a life free of fear? Do his courtiers? Isn't it possible that there will be another Kot Massacre in Singha Darbar? That's the limit of my interest. You do not have to ask for our forgiveness. You and your family are not to blame. Our society, nation and state are structured in such a way that one person can only progress by depriving another. (*Pretkalpa*, 211)



### Yug Pathak, *Urgenko Ghoda* (2009)

The events of this novel's central narrative take place during a 'People's War' in a country that is clearly recognizable as Nepal. Mhendo, a dedicated platoon commander of Tamang ethnicity, is the central character of the novel and Pallavi, a Brahman from the eastern Tarai, is her closest comrade.

Mhendo is pregnant but is very reluctant to forsake her duties. The Party decides to send her to the part of Nepal that it calls Tamsaling, that is, the ancestral homeland of the Tamang which in the New Nepal it hopes to create will constitute a self-governed federal unit. When the two comrades reach Nuwakot, they learn that according to local legend, a Tamang warrior named Urgen was slain along with his king and other warriors by the Khas invaders beside the Yabeng Khola three centuries ago. A local basket weaver explains that the blood of the Tamangs' ancestors flows along the river and that people who cross it never return. Beside the Yabeng Khola, Mhendo has a vision of the bodies of Urgen and his white horse lying on the riverbank, and of Urgen's severed head spinning in a whirlpool. Here, Pathak draws upon his readings of research on Tamang oral history and his own travels through Makwanpur. This made him realize that people from Nepal's many ethnic communities were seeking out their own history, but that so many facts were not known that there was "room for a novelist to play" (recorded interview, Yug Pathak, Kathmandu, 5 March 2011).

Mhendo and Pallavi settle down in a Tamang village and Mhendo gives birth just as the Army is preparing to attack. She and her baby are whisked away to live with a Tamang woman named Silikmo who lives in an isolated house high in the mountains. A rebel commander visits them there and tells Mhendo she must now work to recruit Tamangs to support the creation of Tamsaling. She leaves her daughter in Silikmo's care and moves through the villages explaining Tamang history and the need for the people to reclaim their ancestral territory of Tamsaling:

Turning his wrinkled face towards me, another Mheme grandfather asked, "We're going to fight the king?"

"We are already fighting!" I answered proudly.

He became more interested. "If we play at war will a Tamang country come?"

"It won't be a separate country Mheme. We will have our own separate state within Nepal. We will get back our language, culture, identity and honour. The king is the leader of the clever (*taathaabaathaa*) people. If we get rid of the king's power (*sattaa*) over us and then bring in another king, what will be the point of that? Now we say that we must govern ourselves, make our own rules, develop ourselves and stand on our own feet. Isn't it a good idea to bring in government by the poor, by the proletarian class?" (*Urgenko Ghoda*, 137)

Mhendo is believed to possess a special magic that protects her in battle, and from the age of 18 she begins to have regular visions of the magical figure of Urgen's white horse. This appears to symbolize the Tamangs' historical consciousness and longing for liberation. As the narrative unfolds, these visions heighten the dramatic impact of an event or revelation. At first, their effect upon Mhendo is to make her feel giddy and ill. However, after she has begun her campaign of educating the local Tamangs about the need to struggle for Tamsaling, the visions serve to strengthen her resolve.

After a ceasefire breaks down, the party leadership decides that it is time for the rebels to capture Yambu itself, and Mhendo returns to the battlefield. The scene is thus set for the final great battle between the insurgents and the king's army, in which Mhendo performs acts of great heroism but eventually loses her life. She is transported to a flower garden and reunited there not only with her husband and daughter, but also with Urgen and his horse.

The novel contains several subplots. One relates the activities of Rupchand Bista, the real-life politician and social activist who was active in the hills around Makwanpur

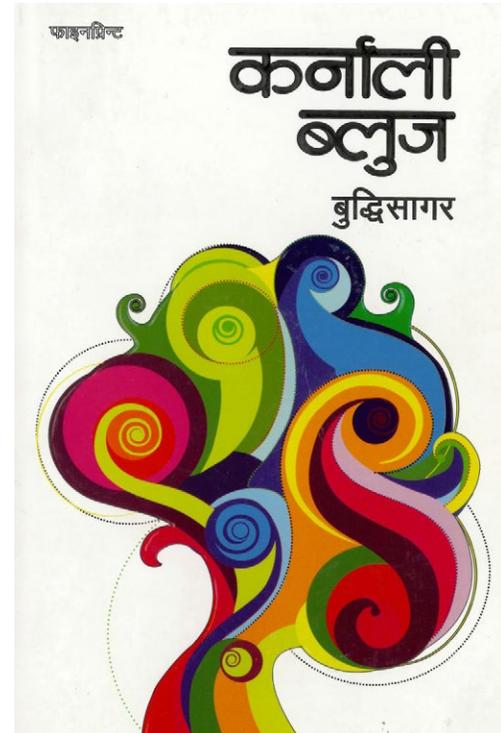
during the 1970s and 80s. 'Rupchan' teaches the Tamangs that they must liberate themselves from oppression. He informs them that to do this they need *thaha*, (knowledge) and he scolds Mhendo's father, Phurba, for his lack of *thaha* about even his own children, several of whom were taken away from the village by contractors and whose whereabouts are now unknown. After Rupchan departs, the village elders hold a meeting and decide to catch the *dalals* (agents, traffickers) and demand the return of their sons and daughters.

That night Phurba and his wife wept late into the night remembering their children. Mhendo was sitting beside them and crying too. They had never cried like this before, not because they did not love their children, but because this new consciousness of their love had never come before. This weeping emerged from 'thaha.' Thought (*bichar*) was necessary even in order to cry. (*Urgenko Ghoda*, 62)

While the content of this novel is a mixture of 'faction'<sup>12</sup> and magical realism, its structure reveals traces of postmodernist influence. A sub-plot that weaves its way around the central narrative consists of a series of incidents in which various individuals read and respond to the story as it unfolds. Thus, the novel opens with a conversation between Yaman, the editor of the *Sumeru Post*, and two local poets. Yaman gives them each a copy of a banned magazine called *Lal Paila* which contains the first part of a novel, *Urgenko Ghoda*. After this, the central narrative pauses from time to time to introduce us to its readers. These include one of the aforementioned poets and his wife (50-55), a police officer named Dalsingh Tamang (65-67, 86-89, 95-97), a group of women escaping from jail (107-111, 148-151), senior army officers who are trying to track down *Lal Paila*'s author (162-164, 182-183), and a pair of students (197-200, 240-241). The story has different effects on each of them. For instance, it causes Dalsingh Tamang to reflect upon the casual racist abuse he receives from senior officers and arouses thoughts of rebellion in him, whereas one of the students objects to what he sees as the story's glorification of violence and destroys the magazine, much to the annoyance of his roommate.

At the very end of the novel we learn that the author of the story is actually Yaman, the newspaper editor we met at the very beginning. He was in custody by the time its fifth and final part was published and while writers and journalists campaigned for his release, he was tortured to try to make him identify the characters of his story. This experience appears to have made him wonder whether they would actually be found if they were searched for. Doubt also creeps into the reader's mind as to whether or

not they are intended to be entirely fictitious. After Yaman is released from jail, he sets out to find Silikmo. He finds the hut he described in his story, and there a small girl chooses the white winged horse from among the toys he has brought, crying, "Urgenko Ghoda!"



### Buddhisagar, *Karnali Blues* (2010)

Buddhisagar Chapain's first novel is a fictionalized autobiographical account of growing up in a Pahari family in the west Tarai. It is set in recent times and centers upon the central character's relationship with his father, who lies dying in a hospital bed. Each of its ten chapters begins at the father's bedside, then resumes a narrative of the central character's boyhood. He grows up in the villages of Matera and Katase in the Kailali district of Karnali zone, where his father runs medical stores. Katase bazaar suddenly begins to depopulate and his father's business fails, so the family moves to Manma in Kalikot district, where his father opens a clothing and general store. This thrives for a while, but begins to fail as the conflict impinges increasingly on daily life, with the Maoists cutting off the town and the army moving in. Eventually the central character passes his SLC and travels to Kathmandu to continue his studies. In a poignant scene at the end of the novel, his father dies in a jeep on the road to Surkhet.

Indeed, the overall tone of the book is one of poignancy in its portrayal of a father-son relationship that is typified

by the son's search for approval, the father's small acts of kindness and forgiveness, and the son's fears for his father's dignity as his fortunes fail. The following passage describes how his family receives the news that he has failed his end of year school exams:

"Come here," Ba called me as soon as he saw me.

I climbed up with a miserable face.

"You failed, didn't you? You didn't put your mind to it when it was time to study. Everyone passed, you failed."

The skin on my face tightened.

Ba stroked my hair. "I thought my son would study and become an important man, but you're on your way to being a cowherd."

My eyes filled with tears.

"You have saddened my heart, son."

I sobbed.

"All right, off you go. You'll pass next time." Ba pushed me gently away. "I'll bring you a watch next time."

I went down the stairs wiping my eyes.

"You've made us cry today." That was all Mother said.

"Study well from now on, you hear?" Sister looked at me, with the *abir* not washed very well from her face. "I'll teach you."

I cried all night. From time to time I thought of Chandre. His father must have beaten him badly. If only he had a father like mine—he didn't beat me, but he slapped my heart. (*Karnali Blues*, 84)

Several sections of the narrative end with statements such as "there is no one in this Madera who is more loving than my father" (after he gives him a watch, 86), "there's no one in this world like my father" (after he gets him moved up to class five despite failing grade four, 142), "no one in the world has a smile like my father's" (192) and so on.

Many of the stories within the novel (e.g. the death of a young girl, Mamata, whose parents refuse to seek medical help; the departure of his sister to her marital home; the arrest and death of a local man at the hands of the army on the mistaken pretext that he is a Maoist insurgent) are overwhelmingly sad. But the novel also contains a wealth of stories (Ome Sahu's acquisition of the village's first

television set, the central character's arrest for stealing a duck, his exploits with school friends such as the lame Chandre and the roguish Ekraj, and so on) that are clearly designed to entertain. Some of the characters the reader encounters in the course of the narrative are among the most carefully drawn and convincing in all of Nepali literature.

*Karnali Blues* is ethnographically and linguistically rich in content. In Kailali, the central character's Nepali-speaking Pahari family lives among many people who speak Tharu in the text and are therefore only partially comprehensible to this foreign reader. However, they do not speak at great length, and the gist of what they say can usually be gathered from the context of the broader narrative. The Jumli dialect of Nepali is also used to some extent in the speech of the novel's central characters, but more so in the speech of others, such as the porters who carry the family's belongings up to Kalikot. The novel thus displays a sensitivity to the sociopolitical context of its time by representing ethnic and linguistic diversity with no supporting apparatus such as translation or notes.

### "The most telling truths"

Because the insights provided by 'art literature' are intended for an elite audience, one immediate objection to a sociological approach to it might be that it has a limited readership and can therefore have only limited impact. This is of course true of works by all of the great writers of the past, regardless of the society from which they emerged. However, the fact that a novel is not read by the majority in a society does not mean that it holds no meaning for them. As Lowenthal points out:

...the most telling truths about society and the individual are contained in a literature that is not read by the broadest strata; the realization of the ideal—an entire society aware of the profoundest truths about itself—lies still in the future.

(Lowenthal 1961: xiii-xiv)

Khagendra Sangraula argues that the readership for Nepali literature has broadened considerably and that although individual writers may favor one ideology over another, "in the end they compete for the attention of all groups of readers" (Sangraula 2012). However, little can be said with any great confidence about the readership of these novels. A glance at Facebook on 17 July 2013 revealed that *Karnali Blues* had nearly 4,000 'likes,' *Palpasa Café* had 1,620, *Urgenko Ghoda* had 505, *Radha* had 308, and *Pretkalpa* only four. Seven months earlier *Palpasa Café* had had nearly twice as many, so 'liking' on Facebook clearly isn't forever.<sup>13</sup> If we assume

that most Nepali Facebook users are the urban young, this may tell us something about the demographic profile of the readership of each book, but it probably tells us just as much about its access or lack of access to the internet.<sup>14</sup>

Each novel has as its central protagonist an 'enlightened hero' whose passions and sufferings are described at length: in this respect they have much in common with the 'sentimental novel' of late eighteenth-century Europe (Iser 1974: 85). Each protagonist reveals a new reality to the reader, which is in some measure different from the world he or she is used to. In *Pretkalpa*, the caste-based conservatism of Dukhpur appears to be as novel for Balkrishna as it is for the reader, and in *Palpasa Café*, Drishya's journey is a rediscovery of his own village roots and an education in the mortal dilemmas facing the people of the conflict-torn hills. The 'implied reader' of both texts is one for whom these are both foreign territories, and this establishes a link between the central characters' and their readers' reactions to what is described. For the central protagonist of *Karnali Blues*, however, it is Kathmandu that is foreign territory, and the novel charts a journey towards the centre from a geographical and cultural location that a Kathmandu perspective constructs as marginal. To put it simply: Buddhisagar's hero 'comes in' while Wagle's 'goes out.'

Interestingly, the authors of *Urgenko Ghoda*, *Pretkalpa*, and *Radha* have all delved into the past and drawn lessons from it for contemporary Nepali society. Recourse is made to Tamang myth and legend to portray the marginalization of an Adivasi Janajati group, the oppressiveness of a rigid caste hierarchy is described against the backdrop of rural society under the Rana regime, and constraints on women's freedom are challenged in a new representation of Krishna's consort. Moslund has argued that the conventional distinctions between "story and history, fiction and non-fiction" as modes of rendering the past are blurred, "there are no differences between the historian's and the realist novelist's textual capturing of their object of study" (Moslund 2003: 24). Indeed, every review I have read of Pathak's novel to date assesses it either in terms of the faithfulness of its representation of Nepal's internal conflict or in terms of its likely ideological impact upon readers,<sup>15</sup> and every reviewer of Dhakal's novel reserves special praise for its historical authenticity.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, all three novels adopt narrative devices which allow them to resonate and connect with contemporary Nepal. In *Urgenko Ghoda* we see people from various walks of life in conflict-torn Nepal reading Mhendo's story in *Lal Paila*; at the end of *Pretkalpa* the author discovers a handwritten epilogue composed by his grandfather on

2 February 2005 (20 Magh 2061), the day after Gyanendra Shah attempted to take back full executive powers (the grandfather writes that Nepali society still has not changed); and in Dharabasi's novel *Radha*'s story is read out by a sadhu to a crowd of people in present-day Nepal. Despite the ending of the ten-year conflict between the Maoists and the state, Nepali society does not yet have a coherent base from which the social evils of the past can simply be relegated to history (see Green 1997: 5). The authors of these novels could be said to be addressing the present from points of difference in the past, disclosing "the solidarity of [the past's] polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day" (Jameson 1981: 18). As descriptions of the social conditions of past eras, all three novels allow the past to exercise a "rigorous judgement" on the present, reminding us of "what we are not yet" (Green 1997: 249) and warning that any disregard of the past may result in continued oppression.

Pathak's and Dharabasi's texts clearly also set out to provide counter-histories. They revolt against master narratives which cast the Tamang as a marginal people on the one hand and *Radha* as a submissive female on the other. But they each run the risk of creating their own biased versions (see Moslund 2003: 26).

Despite the richness of its ethnography, much of *Urgenko Ghoda* is strongly redolent of Chinese Maoist 'worker-soldier-peasant' literature. Its central characters are stereotypical revolutionary combatants, totally dedicated to the party leadership and to the cause of revolution and ethnic liberation. Their personalities and motivations contain no ambiguities and few complexities; in fact, their characterization closely resembles the self-depictions offered by the authors of the Maoist memoirs I have discussed elsewhere (Hutt 2012). The novel idealizes ethnic assertion as part of a rebellion against a feudalistic and autocratic state that seems to differ very little from that of the early twentieth century Ranas, and its central character is a heroic, selfless stereotype who espouses a consequentialist ethic strongly redolent of Mao-era Chinese fiction (Knight 2006: 147).

When considering Dharabasi's *Radha*, one is tempted to compare it to the 'oppositional' retellings of the *Ramayana* described by Paula Richman, Velcheru Narayana Rao and others. These recast the story in ways that, to quote Richman, "leave room to question selected aspects of normative behaviour and conventional interpretation" (Richman 2000: 11). But Dharabasi's *Radha* is also a somewhat two-dimensional feminist paragon prone to

longwinded moralizing monologues. Of the three novels of historical fiction, it is in *Pretkalpa* (despite the presence within it of archetypal villains) that we find the highest level of realistic pluralism and ambiguity.

At a public discussion with two progressive booksellers in Kathmandu,<sup>17</sup> I was interested to learn that *Radha* and *Palpasa Café* were commonly read by Maoist combatants. It was not hard to imagine that a description of preparations for the war against the tyrant king Kansa could contain meaning for individuals engaged in an armed rebellion against the state, and that the strong notes of feminism, religious scepticism and social rebellion in many of the speeches delivered by Radha might also have struck a strong chord with such readers, especially the women amongst them. However, it did not seem very likely that *Palpasa Café* would find great favor with such a readership. Leftist commentators tend to construct its marketing and positive public evaluation as a conspiracy among 'reactionary' Kathmandu liberals. For instance, the Dalit poet Ahuti published a scathing review in the September 2005 edition of the leading leftwing journal *Mulyankan*. He described the novel's plot as weak and lacking in credibility and its characters as unrepresentative and poorly developed, and criticised the novel for taking no ideological position other than "sitting in stubborn silence." He concluded his review by dismissing the novel as "this psychology of middle class hue and cry" (Ahuti 2005).

Perhaps the boundary between the sphere in which Nepali novels are conceived and consumed and the sphere within which Maoist tenets regarding literature hold firm sway is less distinct than a generic distinction between 'bourgeois literature' and 'Maoist literature' might suggest. It is tempting to explain this in terms of the influence of Maoist literature being something new that has somehow crossed an ideological dividing line and come to bear upon 'bourgeois' Nepali novelists. However, it is more likely to be true that few Nepali novelists, whatever their political orientation, can escape the more general influences of socialist realism (*samajvadi yatharthavad*) that have pervaded Nepali fiction since the 1950s.

## Conclusion

This discussion has focused on the five most commercially successful Nepali novels of the period 2005-2010. It is important to note that despite the prevalence of a discourse of inclusion in Nepali civil society during the period in question, none of these novels was written by a woman, or by a member of a marginalized or minority group. A number of important novels were published by female and

Adivasi Janajati authors during the period (Prabha Kaini's *Anaabrit* (BS 2067 (2010-2011)) and Rajan Mukarung's *Hetchakuppa* (BS 2065 (2008-2009)) are two examples) but they have not achieved the commercial success of those discussed here. This suggests that male authors from what Mahendra Lawoti characterizes as the 'Caste Hill Hindu Elite' (Lawoti 2005) still dominate Nepali literary production, which has remained the bastion of male Bahuns and high-caste Newars for generations.

At a time of massively expanded print and broadcast media production, it is also significant that four of these authors are reputed journalists. As already noted, Wagle was editor of *Kantipur* at the time he wrote *Palpasa Café*, while Yug Pathak, Narayan Dhakal, and Buddhisagar all contribute opinion and editorial columns to broadsheet dailies. For some, the increasing porosity of the boundary between 'journalism' and 'literature' in Kathmandu is symptomatic of a new literary populism which implies a decline in literary standards; for instance, the literary critic Vishnu Prasad Paudel mixes his praise for *Karnali Blues* with some criticisms of its use of English vocabulary and the occasional 'vulgarity' (*ashlilta*) of its content (Paudel BS 2069 (2012-2013): 46-47). For others, it is the sign of an enriching globalization that makes audible a greater multiplicity of voices: ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional, gendered (Bhattarai 2005).

Although these novels' authors come from the same ethnic, caste, and class backgrounds as the generations of Nepali writers that preceded them, the new Nepali discourse of equality and inclusivity has clearly had an effect upon the *content* of their writings. In these novels readers will find articulations of minority, gendered and regional perspectives that have only rarely been found in this genre of Nepali literature before. It is to be hoped that a survey of this kind conducted five or ten years from now will discover a greater multiplicity of voices and a continued florescence of new perspectives. But while the New Nepal of which so many have dreamed struggles to emerge from the conflicts of the past and the unprincipled compromises of the present, perhaps the new Nepali *upanyas* provides evidence of a shared consciousness that provides its proponents with some grounds for optimism.

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## Endnotes

1. This research was conducted as a part of a British Academy South Asia International Partnership Project [IP090191] involving my home institution, SOAS, and Martin Chautari in Kathmandu, on the creation of public meaning in Nepal.
2. The most comprehensive collection of Nepali books and publications is housed in the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya, which lists some 27,000 titles on its website. Deepak Aryal records that some 15,000 titles were published in Nepali before 1990, and a roughly equal quantity since 1990. Between 1990 and 2010, an average of 133 titles in English and 737 titles in Nepali were published in Nepal each year (Aryal 2011: 48).
3. Sajha Prakashan was established in 1964 under the Sahakari Ain 2016 (1959) as a successor/replacement of the Nepali Bhasa Prakashini Samiti founded in 1913, from which it inherited over 200,000 books. Since 1971 it has been Nepal's main distributor for school textbooks. It is now the largest publisher of Nepali literary works, with more than 1,200 titles published by 2005. As a quasi-governmental organisation, Sajha has an extensive network of shops and distribution centers all across Nepal, but suffers from all of the ills of a Nepali civil service department. On the history of book publishing and distribution in Nepal, see Shilpakar (2010) and Gautam (2010).
4. Bhupi Sherchan, Parijat, and Indra Bahadur Rai are among Nepali literature's best known writers, and all come from Janajati backgrounds. However, Parijat and IB Rai

both hail from Darjeeling in India, not from Nepal.

5. See, for instance, "Coming soon: Narayan Wagle's Palpasa Café." *The Kathmandu Post*, 17 July 2005.
6. Dhruvachandra Gautam in *Deshantar*, 21 August 2005.
7. Abhi Subedi in *Kantipur*, 23 July 2005.
8. Bishnu Sapkota in *Kathmandu Post*, 28 July 2005.
9. Kunda Dixit. *Nepali Times*, 15 July 2005.
10. e.g. *Drishti*, 26 July 2005; *Samay*, 28 July 2005; *Saptahik Bimarsha*, 29 July 2005; *Nepal*, 31 July 2005.
11. <<http://blog.com.np/2006/06/11/palpasa-cafe-and-nepali-book-reading-habit>>.
12. The term 'faction' has been coined to refer to non-fiction novels which include both real and fictional figures and events. For a discussion of the blurring of fact and fiction in historical novels, see <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/19/author-author-antony-beevor>>.
13. Devkota's classic *Muna-Madan* (1936), still probably the most loved work ever written in Nepali, had 176,400 'likes' on 17 July 2013.
14. The 2011 Census records that 12.11 percent of urban households and 1.24 percent of rural households have internet access, giving a figure of 3.33 percent for Nepal overall <<http://cbs.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Major-Finding.pdf>>.
15. See Hari Roka: "'Urgenko Ghoda'le uthaeko svar." *Kantipur* 28 Chaitra 2066; Taranath Sapkota, "Purano yugko flashback." *Drishti* 2067 Jeth 18; Jhalak Subedi, "Yugachetanako Khoji" *Mulyankan* 26 (purnanka 180), April-May 2010, 62.
16. "The story of a rebel." *The Kathmandu Post*, 11 May 2009.
17. Ganesh Chitaur and Gunaprasad Acharya "Nepalma Bampanthi Pustakko Bajar" Martin Chautari Media Discussion Series, 5 May 2011.

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