

## Mahakavi Devkota's Tribute to Gandhi: Reflections from *Bapu and Other Sonnets*

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### Abstract

*This paper explores how Devkota envisions Mahatma Gandhi in the sonnets. Devkota has devoted exclusively to Gandhi who established himself as a father figure and is addressed as Bapu by Devkota in the sonnet form. Devkota depicts Gandhi in the image of Bapu (father) and Mahatma (great soul): a source of hope, courage and sublime for creating peace, justice and humanity to the people of the world. Drawing analogies between Devkota and Mahatma Gandhi, I investigate Gandhi's influence on Devkota in terms of philosophy and service to humanity. Devkota presents Gandhi how an ordinary human being can be an exemplary to fulfill his commitments for virtual ideals like non-violence, truth, passive resistance, humility and humanism in his personal as well as political life. So, Gandhi lives on to follow, use and adapt much of what he suggested, and helps resist injustice in the contemporary world. Further, I reiterate the Gandhian insights in Devkota, an inherent universal impulse to love and compassion.*

**Keywords:** Gandhian ideals, universal peace, resistance, non-violence, and humanity

Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959), lovingly known as Mahakavi or Great Poet for his significant body of powerful writings in Nepali and English, commands immense respect in the world. He is the first prolific writer of Nepali literature to produce a significant bulk of poems, essays, and plays written originally in English besides the great poet of Nepal. Among his published works written originally in English are *Shakuntal Epic* (1991), "The Lunatic", the fifth and the seventh bilingual issues of *Indreni*, a poetry magazine and *Bapu and other Sonnets*. Beside these, he also translated many of his own poems and his Nepali works are translated into English by others. Nearly half a century after he left the literary scene, Devkota's contributions in diverse genres of literature and many areas of Nepalese social and cultural life remain deeply felt and appreciated.

Devkota's literary oeuvre witnesses and exhibits a high realism where purified art encapsulates truth that transcends the local to universalize itself into a sort of ethos of the age. While Nepal remains at the core of his writing, Rome, Greece, the greater India, England, Russia, and many other literary and artistic arenas of the globe find a room in his writing. It is for this reason too that Devkota deserves a place among meritorious writers of the world. Ram Hari Joshy critically examines Devkota's creative genius when he points out, "it was always active, alert and reacting in the higher plane of thinking. Bapu is the fine creation of that creative genius" (v). Devkota was very passionate about taking Nepali literature to the world and that's why he worked very hard on translations, his own and others. He wanted to take Nepali literature to international heights and that required translation.

A humanist, a freedom-lover, a patriot, an architect of words, an anticolonialist and a man of action, Devkota is compared with Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore, Hindi *chhayavadis*, and western Romanticists. But he was not a photocopy of others. His writings are original based on his own style, Devkota's style. He was lover of Nepali traditions and was always against the Rana autocracy and expressed his anti-Ranarchy voice as an editor of *Yugbani*.

Mahakavi Devkota was nationalistic internationalist or going global. The thrust of his writing was for creating justice, peace and happiness in the world. Padma Devkota rightly points out the true spirit of Devkota's writing in his work *A Pond of Swans and Other Essays* when he says, "his concern for the ill-fated, poor and suffering mass of humanity" (187). Devkota never wrote and published for visibility and economic gains but for social change. He embraced the internationalism without forgetting the spirit of nationalism. *Bapu and Other Sonnets*, a collection that included 54 sonnets originally written in English, shows Devkota's proficiency in the English language. In *Bapu and Other Sonnets*, Devkota has devoted exclusively to Gandhi who established himself as a father figure and is addressed as Bapu by Devkota in the sonnet form.

A sonnet, "a 'pointed' form, even before it becomes explicitly associated with the epigram" (Spiller 11), refers to a poem of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter with one of several fixed rhyme schemes. There are two types of traditional sonnets, whether "Petrarchan" or "Shakespearean"—also called, respectively, "Italian" and "English"—is a fourteen-line poem in two parts: an *octave* (eight lines) and a *sestet* (six lines). The most common form of the English-language sonnet forms include the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet (rhymed ABBAABBA CDECDE, ABBAABBA CDCDCD) and the Shakespearean or English sonnet (rhymed ABBA CDCD EFEF GG) and or one of several other variants.

Generally the ninth line of a traditional sonnet often contains a *volta* or 'turn'-some kind of important change (rhetorical, imagistic) in the poem. Thus sonnets are often (though not always) conceived in terms of an 8-line and 6-line group. The octave often presents a problem or question, or situation; and the sestet answers it with a solution to the problem, an answer to the question, or a comment on the situation—a dialectical method. However, Devkota has experimented with his own form—an elegiac lyric poem of single stanza of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme with a dominant idea—though he sounds quite familiar with the traditional sonnet forms and structures. Devkota's sonnets, "linked together by exploring the varied aspects of a relationship. . . by indicating a development in the relationship that constitutes a kind of implicit plot" (Abrams 291) are on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style. They are a lens through which his great sensibility revolves around a heroic figure on whose actions and thoughts depend the fate of the entire human race through literary excellence. These sonnets are not only his personal but universal feelings.

Devkota depicts Gandhi in the image of Bapu (father) and Mahatma (great soul): a source of hope, courage and sublime for creating peace, justice and humanity to the people of the world in the sonnets. He employs an important poetic structure of implicit binaries in order to privilege Gandhi in the world. The sonnets show the concept of inherent binaries: light and darkness, human soul and human culture and knowledge and ignorance. In the first sonnet, Devkota addresses Gandhi as "priceless thing" and "great Mahatma" (Kohinoor 1) because Gandhi is the "pure gem" that provides and gives light to the dark world. Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on January 30, 1948 in Delhi by a fanatic Hindu. The assassination of such a saintly person brought

the melancholy and saddest gloom everywhere. Devkota meditates on Gandhi when he writes there was a great deluge:

For every home had lost a father then.  
 There passed a mighty melancholy wave.  
 No sadder day for mankind ever was.

We touched no food. An eclipse came to pass. ("When thou departest" 11-14)

This stanza, however, not only visualizes the demise of the fatherly figure as an end of life, rather it gives energy, insight and vitality to fight back against the evil of the world. It prepares and leads the people to resist against the injustice. On the whole Devkota's aim is to criticize the evil doing of the human being that killed Gandhi "a fighter with no weapon sharp and keen" ("Great Men Have Come" 1). He emphasizes the positive virtues in such a way that there is no need of further saying that evil is bad.

This resolutely courageous man endowed with an indomitable spirit kept fighting for the Hindu Muslim unity until he was assassinated. Gandhi, however, achieved in death what he could not achieve in life as Devkota muses:

When thou departest from our mighty land,  
 Thy work was done. Emancipated men  
 Stood dignified, triumphant, visioned sane.  
 Thou joinest. . . ("When thou departest" 1-3)

Devkota presents Gandhi as the source of knowledge and light in contrast to the dark and ignorant world. It is quite evident that Gandhian vision and legacy includes the brilliantly waged struggle against institutionalized racism in South Africa, the Independence movement of India, the establishment of a democratic form of government in Nepal and widespread application and practice of active, faith-based nonviolence and interreligious dialogue for positive social and political change.

Gandhi's influence is so great and sublime that Devkota also reiterates the wide spread application of Gandhian non-violence as the most powerful tool for positive social change. Gandhi's non-violence was not just political: it was deeply rooted and grounded in spiritual, which is why he exploded not just onto India's political stage, but onto the world stage, not just temporarily but for all time:

Non-violence is a force, a working power  
 It is the soul's direction to a law  
 It means not Death, no sleep to all the hour,  
 It means spiritual potency without a flaw. (Non-violence 1-4)

Gandhi's greatest contribution to humanity is his message of non-violence as the way to peace, justice and God. Devkota further justifies, "Non-violence is no dead law in the soul./It is a living force, a working power" (Shall I 5-6). Non-violence offers a new way to fight injustice through the practice of loving resistance as a mass scale. It is a core attribute not just a tactic for Gandhi.

It is Gandhi who took seriously the Hindu tradition of *ahimsa* (non-killing) and applied renunciation of violence to his own heart and life as well as to South Africa, India and the world. But he thought that non-violence is not just refusal to kill: it is the action of love and truth as a force for positive social change. Indeed he insisted that non-violence was the most active and powerful force in the world. Gandhi's life was devoted to a search for truth. He believed that

truth could be known only through tolerance and concern for others, and that finding a truthful way to solutions required constant attention. He dedicated himself to truth, to non-violence. Devkota envisions Bapu as the soul who is committed for the cause of his people:

A fighter with no weapon sharp and keen.  
 A rock proof to the winds. An adamant,  
 A true sincere Promethian man who smiles  
 And bids the world. . . (Great men 8-11)

Like Prometheus who suffers for his theft from the God in Olympian pantheon, Gandhi as the abstract soul accepts all sufferings working for the freedom and emancipation of his people.

Since he saw non-violence as the force of God, the method of God, the power of God at work for good among the human race, he concluded that non-violence is more powerful than nuclear weapons. If people of the world practice non-violence and resist the production and maintenance of nuclear weapons, peacefully, publicly and actively, disarmament would be assured. Non-violence always works because it uses the method of suffering love to melt the human heart. So Devkota questions the readers: "Do you believe in war? In killing? In violence? In the power of steel?" (Do you 1-2) and quickly answers, "Bapu Believed in non-violence as he saw" (14) in the same sonnet.

Gandhi was a brilliant political strategist visionary and revolutionary in his unique reliance upon God in his public practice of non-violence. Gandhi was not just a tactic but spirituality, a way of life, the center of his religion. Gandhi insisted Non-violence succeeds only when we have a real faith in God. Gandhi stands on the world stage as a prophet and as non apostle, a messenger from God telling us that God is non-violent and wants us to become non-violent even on the political, national and international levels. Gandhi's influence is so great and yet so sublime that his contributions to modern spirituality include not only his impact on social movements around the world through the political strategy of active non-violence and Satyagraha, but his transforming influence on religion itself:

Religion is the way to Truth and God,  
 The way to universal good, the healing balm.  
 It lies in doing good to another Man,  
 In turning soul of service to His rod  
 Not in the field of conflict, not in war,  
 Not in the pride of race, Religion lies:  
 But in broad sympathy without disguise  
 In love, in variety, no racial war. (Religion 1-8)

Gandhi insisted that if our worship to God is honest, if our faith is sincere, if we want to be people of prayer, indeed, if we want to be fully human, we need to become people of nonviolence. Gandhi worshipped the God of non-violence and announced that every major religion was rooted in non-violence. He taught that non-violence would be put into practice at every level of human life in our own hearts, among our own family and friends, in our local communities as well as nationally and internationally. Gandhi urges us to get rid of our guns and bombs, stop hurting those around us, simplify our life styles, enter the public struggle for disarmament and justice, and pursue the depths of non-violence.

The biggest threats we face are violence and destruction of planet earth on which life depends. Gandhi provides insights and guiding principles to help us avoid the disasters and

create a sustainable fairer less violent world order fit for our time. Gandhi presents fertile ground and offers a vision of political action that includes the search for truth as integral to political life. "Truth and God" are synonymous. The path that leads to Truth is "love" and "broad sympathies." This is the path that Bapu treads. Gandhi's notion of truth echoes the Hindu understanding of truth as all-pervading force of divine consciousness that holds the universe together.

He who walks the right path of non-violence inspires the masses with simplicity and sacrifice like Gandhi has done. The poet himself seems to offer non-violence, through the example of Bapu, as a panacea for the evils of the world. However, the poet also insists that this is so only if it is practiced in real life, not only preached as a great principle of life. Bapu, for example, has overcome the weakness of the flesh by subjugating the self to "universal welfare" (The highest law 7) and by abandoning "the bar of self" (13) for something better:

The highest law is not the penal law  
 But that which soul evolves in vision great,  
 \* \* \* \* \*

The greatest lawyer is no human tongue,  
 It is the heart of man, the speaking soul,  
 The stand on truth, the steadying to its pole,  
 And judging all things to a judgment strong. (The highest law 1-12)

Gandhi was a lawyer who pined for justice. Devkota too had completed his Bachelor of Law, but the poet kept his "stand on truth" always above "the penal law."

Conflict has been a constant phenomenon in the history of human race. Human social interaction encounters many situations of conflicts and tensions. The societal systems all over the world are imperfect and many forms of social injustice, discrimination and inequality prevail. The technique of social living has always been predominantly non-violent otherwise human life would not have sustained all along. In Gandhian theory of peace, human values take great prominence. Non-violence (*ahimsa*) is a way of life rather than a tactic and together with the search for truth (*satyagraha*), makes the difference between passive submission to injustice and an active struggle against it. This struggle excludes both physical violence and casting the opponent in the role of enemy, and hence presupposes compassion and self-criticism.

The notion of welfare to all (*sarvodaya*) sees peace as incompatible with exploitation or inequality of wealth. Peace is not seen as an end state, but as a continuous revolutionary process where ends can't be separated from means. Gandhian approach to peace that peace can be achieved through non-violence and human conflict can be settled with non-violence. So non-violence is not just simply an absence of physical injury, but an active force of love to words all creatures. *Ahimsa* means resisting oppression non-violently through love - non-violence in thoughts, words and deeds. Gandhi always fought for peace, justice and humanity.

Gandhi makes the same connections between truth and goodness and untruth and evil like the Buddha established an essential link between goodness and truth on the one hand and evil and untruth on the other. So, Devkota elevates Gandhi as demi-Buddha:

You were a demi-Buddha, calmed all strife,  
 Enlightened yourself and enlightened race.  
 Your mercy was as religions strive.  
 You laid no creed but walked your creed alive. (I know a man 8-12)

By portraying Gandhi as an enlightened figure of mythic proportion, Devkota tries to establish Gandhian ideal as the model for the whole humanity that is being threatened by the evil forces of selfishness, corruption, dishonesty, treachery worldwide. The enlightened soul can prepare the foundational path for people to the state of higher kind. The carnal desire is the great enemy for man so it is to be conquered to attain the godhood which Gandhi did and he enlightened not only himself but the whole race.

Gandhi has been given the title name of Bapu by Devkota not for his visible contributions to Indian Independence for his incessant and strong determination to abide by certain rules and regulations. He never compromised his humility to any sorts of things. Gandhi showed the world that an ordinary human being can be an exemplary to fulfill his commitments for virtual ideals like non-violence, truth, passive resistance, humility and humanism in his personal as well as political life. So, Gandhi lives on: and one might say that there are many contemporary Gandhi's as people consider his thought and his example, and are motivated to follow, use and adapt much of what he suggested, and they seek to resist injustice in the contemporary world. He is now recognized as a major practitioner of and thinker about non-violence as a firm of managing conflict and resisting injustice. Thus the fact remains in the history with visible black letters that Mahatma Gandhi, a very determinant and all committed human soul ascends this material world and becomes timeless and universal, and reigns in the heart and mind of billions and billions of people all around the world.

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