

## Echoes of Historicity in Bhim Birag's Sworsamratako Samjhana

Tara Lal Shrestha<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu

\*Corresponding Author: shresthatara@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*A piece of art or a literary piece is an important source of politico-cultural context where/when an artist or author exists. One of the instances is Bhim Birag's memoir Sworsamratako Samjhana (The Reminiscence of the Vocal King of Nepal). This paper firstly discusses how Bhim Birag turned to be an artist, shifting from Birgunj to Hetauda, and how not only the place and people associated with him determined his personality but power within a politico-cultural atmosphere also shaped his personal association and artistic activities. It primarily discusses the contexts associated to the text Sworsamratako Samjhana with reference to the information gathered through personal interviews, group discussions and interactions along with published documents. Secondly, it presents instances of friendship between Bhim Birag and Narayan Gopal, which began from Birgunj, nurtured in Hetauda and continued till the end of their life that altered not only their future but also shaped the history of modern Nepali music within the Panchayat period. Finally, the paper attempts to analyse the instances about the association between them and the influence of the politico-cultural context in their biographies and creations.*

**Keyword:** Art, artist, creativity, historicity, power.

### 1. Introduction

The content, theme, meaning or motif of an art or a literary piece is not universal, that cannot be derived from the text alone. A text or a piece of art is often connected to the context; all texts are therefore a product of the creator's politico-cultural time and situation. The interpretation and analysis of a text or history as well is often influenced by various politico-cultural factors of the time and space. Politico-cultural context very importantly exists while interpreting or analyzing a text, too, because power structure is pervasive, which not only resides at the top of society, but also circulates up to the bottom layer of the society and all people are engaged directly or indirectly in the maintenance of the existing power structure or try to oppose it. Did artists like Narayan Gopal and Bhim Birag and their close friends explicitly or implicitly plays a prominent role in the maintenance of the existing power structure, or try to oppose it? How did they foreground certain ideologies back grounding others that help to maintain the status quo of the dominant group? How could one see their subtle role in maintaining the existing power structure rather than countering the elitist hegemony? These are issues this

researcher often encountered while conducting field research, desk review and analysis of Birag's biography and his creative masterpieces. During the personal interviews, group discussions and interactions on Birag's biography and his selected texts, the concerned informants often linked his universal looking texts to the politico-cultural contexts.

An artist or a writer often tries to cross the boundaries of politico-cultural historicity claiming their piece of artistic or literary work a universal piece, and ultimately he/she comes to be an actor of a losing battle. One interesting instance is Birag's memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana* (The Reminiscence of the Vocal King of Nepal). Birag never declared himself as a royalist; all of his texts look universal; the expressions from the depth of his painful life seem to be the feeling of everyone; but his works show subtle maintains of the status quo of the power structure. As Fredric Jameson (1981) commences, literary critics should not ignore the politico-historical context from where a literary work was produced and published; Birag's biography, the context of the Panchayat period, his association with the King Mahendra and his relational atmosphere with his friends and artists including Narayan Gopal cannot be universal from a new historicist perspective. His biography and creations exist relative to the existing politico-cultural forces, not universal.

This paper presents instances of politico-cultural forces that played a role to neutralize Birag and Narayan Gopal along with many other artists at that time and place. They were implicitly engaged to continue the hegemony of the power bloc of the Panchayat system. The biography of the author also shows how Birag was attached to the power, which shaped his viewpoint and his literary productions. Firstly, this paper presents the biography of Birag and his texts that are not beyond the grip of the power hegemony of the Panchayat utopia. The place and people he was concerned with have not only influenced his personality, the politico-cultural context also has shaped his personality. His biography itself is the best example of it. Secondly, this paper attempts to explore the instances of the relationship between Birag and Narayan Gopal during the Panchayat period, which not only shapes their future, it also has a significant impact on the modern Nepali music history. Finally, this paper presents the contingencies and continuities of their creativity within politico-cultural forces, which cannot go beyond the boundaries of historicity and fails to be universal despite their efforts and claim of establishing their works as universal, beyond politico-cultural forces.

### **1.1 Bhim Birag and His Biography**

The (auto) biographical figure via his/her life writing involves in an in-depth investigation into the nature of self and others, the transformation of self-awareness into identification with others (Horner, 1997). An autobiographical or biographical figure's life itself is a unique history, politics, geography, language and whatnot (Allen, 1996). Birag via his memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana* presents an essence of friendship, with reference to his friendship to Narayan Gopal along with his relationally to other artists, which not only shapes their futures but that also has impact on the history formation of modern Nepali music.

Birag, born on 28 January 1935 at Maisthan in Birgunj, became disabled after he got an accident in a football tournament at the age of 13 when his left leg's joints broke down. He could not get proper treatment and began to walk limping. Gradually, spondylitis expanded through the bottom of backbone up to his neck. His backbone was

bending day by day and he was becoming more vulnerable. He could not stand up straight, nor could walk well. He was living a life of bed tied in poverty in Birgunj. His father died early and his mother had no income source. He had to stock inside the room in pain and people began to call him *bairagi* (frustrated) rather than Bhim Bahadur Maharjan. In front of his house was a library; he began to carry a self-study habit. At the same time, he began to practice music by listening hymns, the sound used to come from the nearby temple. He was left lonely and he began to say, *Ma eklai bacheko chhu kasaiko saath chahinna* (I'm a man living lonely; I need no one's support). Next to his house in Birgunj was Maisthan temple. By listening to hymns coming from the temple he learnt musical patterns (Gole, 2016). After he began to write and express his feelings to the public, he adopted name, Birag (charmless person) and used it as his literary surname. During the Panchayat era the King would visit each development region one after another, in turn. The King would stay for a month observing local culture and meeting various sorts of people. Local artists and literary figures would show their talents with various cultural functions in front of the King. Birag's talent of playing flute music impressed King Mahendra in Birgunj, Parwanipur, in 2019 vs. Birag could not walk, nor could he stand straight, "Two persons had to carry me to take to the stage", Birag recalled his situation once (Gole, 2016). After his father died early, his mother was helpless. He was sent to his mother's parental home. He was taken as a burden, when being handicapped, they would express, "Why is he living in such a stage, no use of living" (Gole, 2016). The King asked about him and his situation after observing his plight. King Mahendra ordered to the Chief District Officer to support him. He was sent to Culcutta for the treatment but he could not come back to the normal life completely. His continuous bending backbone was stopped bending but he still could not stand up straight. However, in his words, he got new life from the support of the King Mahendra. Along with it, he also got a royalist tag forever in his life.

Birag shifted from his birthplace Birgunj to his workplace Hetauda, Makawanpur and began to work in Narayan Press, which was the His Majesty the Government-sponsored press. The job of the press gave him opportunity as an editor of *Narayani Weekly* for a long time. He also served as the founder member of Makawanpur Literature Council and the Chairperson of the council afterwards. According to Adhikari (2056), Birag began his literary career in 2015 vs and published his first poem in the magazine called *Udaya* (Rising). Adhikari divides his literary career into three parts: initiative period (2015-2024 vs), publication period (2025-2043 vs), and quality creation (2044 vs afterwards). Birag, as his biography shows, was much interested in lyrics since the beginning of his literary career (Baral, 2061 vs). He composed numerous songs and lyrics from the emergence of his literary career and it seems his poetic personality helped him in strengthening his passion to become a successful song composer and lyricist. The second phase of the literary career represents the production of a high number of songs and poems. Birag's passion for songs and lyrics in his third stage can also be seen in a concretized version. In this stage, he has been much concerned with the quality production of his literary pieces, though many of his masterpieces were produced during his second phase of life. However, his concerns were not limited to lyrics merely; rather he also had a firm interest in producing poetry and prose and memoirs that reflect his adherence to creation. He published almost a dozen books. Birag's extraterrestrial taste in

lyrics enhanced him to produce masterpieces of songs. Most of the memoirs that he could document to share with his public are based on the relationality created by his success as a lyricist. His memoir, *Sworsamratko Samjhana*, is the paramount proof that depicts a distinct relationship between him and singer Narayan Gopal.

Actually, “we knew there was a good relationship between Birag and Narayan Gopal; but we did not know they had such a deep relationship from within the heart of creativity (Dichhit, 2057 vs) that we came to know through this memoir after it was published in the journal called *Nepali* (issue no 125). The memoir was so splendid enough that Kamal Dichhit, the editor of the *Nepali* published it covering the whole pages of the journal. This research, qualitative in nature, aims to present a role of relationality that presents a sublime attachment between Birag and Narayan Gopal, their attachment in the heyday of the Panchayat period, initiated from Hetauda and continued till the end of life crossing the geographical boundaries.

### **1.2 The Context Review**

During the fieldwork in 2021 November and December in Hetauda (where Birag spent his rest of the life as an artist), Birganj (his birthplace) and Kathmandu (where a lot of his contemporaries live), this researcher found various stories related to the relationship between Birag and Narayan Gopal. Subtle hidden context of Narayan Gopal associated to Birag appeared during personal interviews and interactions then. That context turned to be more visible when this researcher found his memoir, *Sworsamratako Samjhana* as his masterpiece but not well discussed till the date, even in his birth and work places. The researcher was also unaware about it.

Narayan Gopal’s family had a house in Hetauda apart from a home in Kathmandu. He was already recognized as a popular singer and Birag wished to meet him. Narayan Gopal was married to a girl of Darjeling, Pamela Lama in Falgun 2027 vs. After they met in Darjeling, they got married without family consent of Narayan Gopal. They spent few days in Pokhara and came back to Hetauda. It was not easy to stay in Kathmandu, with his family, then. Birag’s memoir reveals the history of politico-cultural context. He tells the (hi)story of Narayan Gopal, who was in trouble just after he got married. His mother most probably suggested that he should go to Hetauda. Birag also was newly married then and was living in Hetauda. His wife Anu Devi Chhetri was from abroad, Asham. She was a singer, who had married to an artist (Birag) rather than a handicapped man. A song and music composer Birag got a singer, Narayan Gopal, and Narayan Gopal got a song and music composer. They forgot their newly married wife and began to spend time till late nights by the Rapti River. There was no bridge then over Rapti River; just a causeway was there. At night the road would be completely empty, without any vehicle. They would sit by the river till late night and rehearsed songs, drinking alcohol. In the words of Birag, their wives were close to each other as both were from abroad. When they found their husbands returned back drunk at mid-night, they would be angry. Narayan Gopal and Birag had to promise them that they gave up drinking alcohol to cool down their anger. But the promise would not sustain any longer. Next evening, or after some days they would again go to the Rapti River sides and spend time till late night drinking alcohol and talking about Nepali music. Narayan Gopal once said to Birag, “You compose a song of alcohol with a message that it is a bad thing to drink.” They discussed about it at night in Rapti River bank drinking. In the words of

Birag, Narayan Gopal wanted to give a message to all the people that drinking habit can kill the beautiful life and happy family. It is rumored that once Narayan Gopal's wife had gone to a suicidal stage. Birag asked to Narayan Gopal, "What to write about alcohol? Each night we are drunk." Narayan Gopal said, "Yes, *aaja bholi harek sanjha mattina thalechha* (these days each evening drunk) is a good theme (Dahal, 2063 vs).

During field visit this researcher found this song very popular among all groups and types of people. Those who never drink and think that drinking is a bad habit were fond of this song. Young generation artists are also singing this song even in Nepal Idols young singers, including a 10 years singer. Millions of views are seen in YouTube (Nepal Idol, 2020). What is there in this song, which was once stigmatized and stopped broadcasting from Radio Nepal? The answer was found in *Sworsamratko Samjhanama*, where Birag wrote that in the beginning this song was popular and frequently broadcasted from Radio Nepal and he was happy for that, but all of a sudden the song was not heard playing from the Radio Nepal. Birag called to the concerned person of the Radio Nepal to know the reason; the administration officer said that the song was ethically wrong as it was based on drinking alcohol. Birag said that it was a song of people, their life and plight; he also said that the song was not spreading the message to drink carelessly, rather showing the predicament of the people who are alcoholic. After some times, the song was played again from Radio Nepal.

Birag tried to defend his creation as universal saying that his song creates a feeling that alcoholic can kill a healthy life in youth. The singer is saying not to drink, look what is happening to me. Birag and Narayan Gopal were good friends then. He composed this song and it became hit and at the same time it created controversy. It was too difficult or almost impossible to sing revolutionary songs then having favor from the power bloc; they created dark and sad songs which could entertain people and save themselves from the power center.

Savitt (2002) writes, "Struggling makes one not just 'anybody' - it makes one a minority, an outsider." The struggling phase holds the power to tremble humans marking their failure. The line, "Zindagi dekhi zindagi, atina thalex; aaja bholi harek saajh" (Life is shocked with life; each dusk these days) displays the trembled feeling of the people during the evening time because of their inability to make any different more significantly in their life than the day they lived before. The insertion of the word "evening" has significance, as it is the time when people return to the home after the accomplishment of their task of the day and also evaluate their achievements. The word "piye" (drank) refers to the act of drinking alcohol, usually, people who drown in problems are habituated to it and Birag through the lyric represents the act of the majority of the people living in the society marching away from the center. People had no option other than listening to sad songs.

Birag had wished to record his many songs in Narayan Gopal's vocal but it was not easy then. Luckily, he met Narayan Gopal at Hetauda because in the words of Raj Kumar Shrestha, one of the key informants, when Narayan Gopal was not allowed to enter his Kilagal Kathmandu house after he got married to a non-Newar girl against his parents' wish. Narayan Gopal was roaming around Pokhara and other parts outside Kathmandu until his father Asha Gopal did allow him to enter his home in Kathmandu; his mother suggested Narayan Gopal he should stay in Hetauda; they had a house in

Hetauda and Birag got opportunity to befriend Narayan Gopal. Narayan Gopal sang few songs of Birag “Aaja Bholi”, “Timile Pani Ma Jastai” and “Kasari Ma Bhule Ke Maa Ma Bhule.” Birag was once in Paleti Program organized by Nepalaya in Kathmandu and Keshab Stait took him to Lahana Food Museum Kirtipur where he had shared that he could be a player if he was not disabled. He said that he had no other option rather than playing music and reading books after he became a disabled person; he learnt to write and compose music, as he confessed, all on bed. According to Raj Kumar Shrestha, Birag had a nature to respect a good artist as his guru even if he/she was younger than him. One of the instances he recalled: once Birag came to Kathmandu and wished to visit Amber Gurung. Birag was senior to Gurung. When he met Gurung, in the words of Shrestha, Birag was so pleased that he touched Gurung’s leg. Birag was a person who also composed a song “Birsidineharulaai”: *Birsidineharulaai aba birsidinai jati, roiroi bachnu bhandaa haasihaasi marnu jaati* (those who want to forget better forget them and rather than living with ceaseless tears, dying with smile is better). Birag would say time and again, the society still did not take artists as human beings; they love arts, not the artists. Narayan Gopal had similar sorts of perception, who never wished to show his fame; he even expressed that he wanted not to be addressed with the term *sworsamrat* (the vocal king). He did not like to give interviews and there was almost no interview of Naran Gopal, whereas he was the editor of *Bagina* magazine.

Now key figures Karma Yonzon, Premdhaj Pradhan, Gopal Yonzon & Pemela Lama, who know well to Narayan Gopal are no more to talk about him. Birag also is no more, who created songs far from just reflections of a temporary feeling. Therefore, Narayan Gopal wished to give his vocal to all the songs created by Birag. Because, there was no artificiality of feelings in his songs; his all songs sound as if they came from the actual ground of painful life attached of Birag. Narayan Gopal had chosen songs of painful life living aloof excluded from the common sense of the society because he was also living a painful life, detachment despite the fact that he was from well to do family. His love was not well accepted and he might have loved more love songs and Birag’s best songs have come up from such inner heart of pain. Birag lived a life with such a high degree of pain that he had no fear of society, neither fear with gods or devils and dared to write such words: *mandir ma baser piya, masan ma ladera piye* (I drank sitting in temple and lying on burning *ghat*). He had no fear at all of gods and devils, too. Birag was rather so pleased to his wife, who loved such a handicapped man as a great artist. He was so pleased to have visited artists like Narayan Gopal and Amber Gurung; the acknowledgement of his greatness to them and other good artists were expressed during the program when Birag was awarded Narayan Gopal Smriti Samman in his last stage of life.

Birag in his song, “Dukheko Mutulai” (to the wounded heart) has marvelously illustrates the pain people have to experience in life. His techniques of providing life to the simplistic elements that one is circumscribed on daily basis keep him away from the mainstream. Birag’s masterpiece *Sworsamratko Samjhanama* presents how he used to create songs and vocalists would be in competition to get his songs. That time recording a song was a tough job. According to Madhu Chhetri, key informant, Bhim Birag was a simple, common and merry making person, more concerned about tragic feeling that has been expressed on his songs. In his words, in this song “Phulai Phula Matra Pani” (Just

flowers and flowers), there is liveliness with essence of life. He says, “I sang about 8-10 songs composed by Bhim Birag with my lyric; even in my music composition Narayan Gopal sang Birag’s song: we would record one song in a year then; Birag was good at all genres. He was very sentimental personally for Chhetri.

It was the Panchayat period and Birag was composing serious sentimental songs. The key actors of the Panchayat were active in micro management of the revolutionary consciousness. Larger masses of people were getting united against the Panchayat rule. The pioneer vocalist and lyricist of the time, Birag and Narayan Gopal were indulged in sentimental songs. It looks as if they were unaware of politico-cultural contexts. But their biographies show their association to the Royal palace and the Panchayat utopia, particular the biography of Birag. Narayan Gopal was more distinct than Birag regarding his biography and association to the Royal palace.

## 2. Discussion and analysis

Limited young generation artists and intellectuals may know that Bhim Birag and Narayan Gopal were very close friends, when they met in Hetauda in 2026 vs. It was the heyday of the party less Panchayat system imposed by King Mahendra and people including Bhim Birag were more servile to the Royal power then. He would be a responsible leader to form groups of youths and train them to perform cultural programs in front of the King. Even the senior intellectuals, the contemporary of Birag and Narayan Gopal, might know a little about their friendship and its impact on the history of modern Nepali music. Kamal Dixit (2057 vs), for instance, knew that Narayan Gopal and Birag were friends; hut he also did not know that they were so close friends. Birag wrote a masterpiece memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana* (Reminiscence of the Vocal King of Nepal) right after Narayan Gopal died and it was kept secret, unpublished for nine years. In the words of Dixit,

हामीले बुझेसम्म यो लामो लेख या संस्मरण  
विरागज्यूले उसै बखत लेखेका हुन् रे...२०४७  
सालको आधाआधीतिर । तर झण्डै नौ वर्ष यो  
गुप्तबास बसेछ । आफ्नो हृदय रोएको कसैलाई  
देखाउन नचाहने भीम विरागले ‘छातीको घाउ’  
आफैले छोपेर राखेछन् । कसैलाई (प्रकाशन  
गर्न) दिएनछन् । ऐले उनले ‘नेपाली’लाई  
पत्याएर त्यो नासो सुम्पेकाले हत्त न पत्त हामी  
छाप्दै छौं ।

As far as we knew, this long article or memoir Birag wrote in around 2047 vs but about nine years it remained unpublished. Birag had habit to hide his wounds of heart and tears and his heart wounds he kept hidden, not giving anyone to publish. He trusted to the journal *Nepali* and we are hurriedly publishing it. (1)

Did Birag keep his masterpiece memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana* just to keep his pain secret, to himself? This question demands contextual observation of the text. The historical context was dominant at that time. Why did Birag keep this memoir secret for about a decade, when he was a renowned figure then and he could easily publish the text? The context, obviously, was responsible for it. Birag’s creations did not show his direct association with the monarchy or the Panchayat system, but his biography and cultural activities were often associated with the Panchayat utopia, that would clearly reveal him a dedicated royalist. It was very difficult time, just after the Panchayat was dissolved and

democracy was restored then. The artists or authors having royalist tags were attacked publicly. *Panches* (supporters of Panchayat) were very notorious tag then. Narayan Gopal passed away right after the democracy was restored. Birag was being attacked as royalist then and living aloof in Hetauda. Being a renowned royalist, Birag's text would be criticized publicly then. Dixit having close affinity to royalists gave full space to the text in the journal *Nepali*, whereas the memoir was not well discussed among critics despite the fact that it carried important contexts of relationality and historicity of the first generation modern Nepali music.

Birag was too pleased with Narayan Gopal, who multiplied his popularity and left his songs immortal in his vocal. Narayan Gopal wanted to give his vocal to all of Birag's songs. Narayan Gopal, in the words of Birag, sometimes would take his diary and hide it so that Birag could not give any song to other vocalists. Birag as well wanted all of his songs to hear from Narayan Gopal's vocal. Such a good and great friend Narayan Gopal passed away untimely saying that he had no problem or just a little complexity in his health when he had gone to hospital for the checkup. Birag would hear news about Narayan Gopal and his health condition and called him from Hetauda. Narayan Gopal from Kathmandu on telephone would say that he was fine, just publics were more concerned about his health. All of a sudden Birag heard news about the demise of Narayan Gopal and he had no other option than staying at Hetauda, watching Narayan Gopal's funeral ceremony by over flowing a lot of tears. His close friend Narayan Gopal had passed away early making not millions of music lovers but billions of his fans who loved him as an artist. The public loved all his songs. Birag composed some of the masterpieces among them. Dixit (2057 vs), recalling the editorial of *Nepali* volume 125 that was dedicated to the scenario of death ceremony of Narayan Gopal, writes

...त्यसरी गयौँ । तर कसरी गयौँ ! लाखौँलाई  
होइन करोडौँलाई रुवाएर गयौँ । तिम्रो  
पछिलागेको मान्छेको त्यो भल, आर्यघाटमा  
झरेको अश्रुजल अभूतपूर्व थियो । तिम्रो कलाको  
विजययात्रा 'नभूतो नभविष्यति' थियो ।

...you went away. But how! You passed away and not millions, but billion people cried. The mass at funeral, the people in the burning ghat and the tears were inexpressible. In the saga of music, it's the first in history. (1)

Birag wished to rush Kathmandu to take part in his friend's funeral ceremony but his health was not supportive. He was compelled to stay in Hetauda and cry on in front of the television screen. Millions of people were mourning on the untimely demise of Narayan Gopal and among them was Birag from Hetauda. The memories of the moments spent with Narayan Gopal that begins from Birgunj to Hetauda and Kathmandu moved on in the mind and heart of Birag in Hetauda. That saga of the funeral of the vocal king of Nepal, Narayan Gopal, happened not only in Kathmandu, Pasupati burning ghat, it happened in Hetauda as well and the witness is Birag's memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana*. But such a beautiful novella size memoir Birag kept secret to himself for nine years after he wrote just after the death of Narayan Gopal, why? The answer is nowhere in the text. The answer is available in the context. The politico-cultural context of the time did not motivate Birag to publish it, whereas the value of the book would be high then. Due to the context, the politico-cultural forces, the text could not be accepted and



acclaimed sufficiently. The text, however, impressed people including Kamalmani Dixit, despite a large number of progressive youths and activists in Hetauda was criticizing Birag as a royalist then. The mass of people, especially those politically enlightened, of his birth place Birgunj and work place Hetauda knew Birag's association to the royal palace, which was enough for them to denounce his creation then; but Dixit (2057 vs) writes,

नारायणगोपालको गला र कला मात्रै देख्ने, सुन्ने नेपालीलाई नारायणगोपालको भित्री नारायणको दर्शन गराइदिएका छन् विद्वान् कलाकार भीम विरागजीले । भित्री हृदयले दिएको श्रद्धाञ्जलीमा मान्छेको मुटु हल्लाइदिने शक्ति हुन्छ रे । पत्यार पच्यो यो संस्मरण श्रद्धाञ्जली पढ्दा । विरागजी, धन्यवाद ! नारायणगोपालजी, साधुवाद, भीम जस्तो मित्र पाएकोमा !

Intellectual artist Bhim Birag has introduced inner Narayan to those who knew only outer Narayan Gopal via his vocal and art. The condolence offered from the inner heart has power to touch the heart. This condolence memoir is an example. Thanks Birag and thanks Narayan Gopal for having such a friend as Birag. (2)

Hetauda, Makawanpur was centre of political activism, where Marxists and Royalists would come face to face in confrontation (the contestation between Marxists/Liberalists and Royalists was persisting till the date of this research). Birag was not visible in such political activism in public sphere but he had subtle association with Royalist politico-cultural forces. Marxists, Democrates and Royalists, all sorts of artists to some extent were close to Birag and his creation. But, Birag was attacked time and again regarding his role as an individual. His memoir (like his other texts) hides these sorts of references, however, when contexts are kept into consideration ignoring the close reading of the text, readers or researcher can understand the flavor of politico-cultural context. There are a lot of references to criticize Birag and Narayan Gopal to those who do not agree that an art or a literary piece is universal. There are multiple reasons to praise Birag and Narayan Gopal if a close reading is carried out of the memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana*. Dixit (2057 vs) was therefore so much influenced after getting the manuscript of the memoir that kept hidden about nine years that he as an editor made decision to publish the whole text in the journal, *Nepali*. Dixit, giving full spaces in the journal to the single text that would happen rarely in the past, as a justification writes,

नारायणगोपाल त एउटा राष्ट्रिय विभूति नै भैहाले । उनका बारेमा जति लेखे पनि हुन्छ र जति गरे पनि पुग्दैन । तर हामीलाई के लाग्छ भने, भीम विराग पनि एउटा रत्न नै हुन् । उनको बारेमा मनगो चर्चा भएको पनि छैन । धेरैले उनलाई चिनेका छैनन् । त्यसैले यस अड्कमा हामीले छापेको लामो संस्मरणले नारायणगोपालका आडमा वास्तवमा भीम विरागलाई हामीले प्रस्तुत गर्न खोजेका हौं भन्ने बुझियोस् !

Narayan Gopal is a national icon, no doubt. One can write a lot about him and that is never enough; such a person is Narayan Gopal. But we think Birag also is a shining stone. But, we have not given enough justice to Birag. Lots of people do not know him. So, in this volume we have tried to present Bhim Birag with reference to the vocal king, Narayan Gopal. (2)

It looks as if Dixit was trying to offer a huge space to Birag. He wanted to extend the fame of Birag with reference to Narayan Gopal. He was so much influenced after he went through the memoir. It further looks as if he came to know better about both Narayan Gopal and Birag when he went through the memoir. However, Dixit was actually familiar how hard it was then to write and publish about people like Birag after 2047 vs. Birag was being attacked publicly as a pro-royalist and he was living an aloof life then in Hetauda. The new political context had shrunk his public space. Dixit could not be unaware of that context. He did a close reading of the memoir and on the basis of that offered full pages of the journal of a volume. However, Dixit gives indications that artists like Birag have been ignored and left aloof. As if it was a satirical question statement, he writes towards the end of the editorial of the journal, *Nepali*:

मीठा-मीठा गीतका रचयिता, रसिलो  
सङ्गीतका सर्जक र सुरिलो गलाका मालिक  
भीम विरागका वारेमा पनि कसैले लेखिदिए  
हामी छाप्नेछौं । लेखिदेला कोही सहृदयी  
रसिकले ?

We publish the text if someone writes on Bhim Birag, the genius figure of Nepal, the creator of sweet songs. Would someone- the generous soul- write about him? (2)

The memoir *Sworsamratko Samjhana* begins from the scene when Birag is watching mass of people in the funeral processing of Narayan Gopal moving towards Pashupati burning ghat on television in Hetauda by wiping tears of his eyes. Mr. Mong enters in the living room and sits in the sofa with astonishment. Mr. Mong, looking at the television screen and the eyes with tears of Birag, asks in a sad tone, “What happened? Has the monarchy abolished?” (4). As mentioned earlier, Birag’s biography and creation is not universal, nor his tears are so. They are relative and influenced by the politico-cultural forces. When Mr. Mong asks Birag about the cause of his tears, in front of TV, he is speechless. The tears of Birag were being interpreted by politico-cultural lenses by Mr. Mong, who knew Birag’s devotion towards monarchy of Nepal. On the one hand, he was shocked by the death of Narayan Gopal and on the other hand Mr. Mong was trying to indicate his political or ideological association. Mrs. Birag replies, “No, no- not the matter of monarchy of Nepal; his artist friend who died is being telecasted now” (4). Mr. Mong watches carefully on the screen figuring out the huge mass of people in the funeral and asks, “Was he a great personality?” (4). Birag now speaks, “He was an artists of Nepal, just a singer, but how great figure he was, you are watching the mass for his funeral” (4).

Mr. Mong watches the mass moving towards the *aryaghat* of Pashupati and says, “In fact, your friend must be a great personality; otherwise, such a huge mass would not autonomously come in the street to participate someone’s funeral” (4). Birag has nothing to say, except saying ‘thank you’ in soft voice. Mr. Mong looking at the eyes of Birag with full of tears for a long time suggests, “There is no point in crying bitterly, this way; rather you can mourn alternatively, more meaningly” (4). Birag looks at Mr. Mong and listens to his words more carefully. Mr. Mong further says, “Yes, as a writer, you (Birag) have to rather write about your friend- a memoir” (4). Birag confesses that the inspiration of writing the masterpiece memoir came right then from Mr. Mong (from Manmar), who was living in Birag’s house as a tenant.

Birag had a lot of artistic instances to recall and write about his association with Narayan Gopal. Almost all of his songs are sad songs. They look related to the universal theme. The sense of hopelessness, indulgence, predicament and human limitations are core theme of Birag's songs. He would try to give universal flavor to his songs. Some of his songs carry nationalist sentiments. Again, the historicity comes to be associated to his nationalist sentiments. King Mahendra used to identify national figures for the promotion of nationalist Panchayat utopia. Artists like Birag and Narayan Gopal sometimes would engage in songs about nationalist content. Birag in the memoir quotes some of the masterpiece songs of Narayan Gopal having nationalist sentiments:

आकास जस्तो अमर गीत मेरो । म जस्तो दुई दिनको पाहुना ह्वेन ॥... म मरे पनि मलाई, मेरो देशको माया छ ।	My songs are immortal like the sky; Not guests of two days like me. I love my country even if I die. (4)
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It was easy to be a romantic or nationalistic personality then rather than becoming a revolutionary. Birag owed to the Royal power bloc. Narayan Gopal was more autonomous than Birag. He dared to say 'No' to the request of the power bloc. There are instances that the King called Narayan Gopal in the palace once. He had to wait in the waiting room and he said to the concerned official that he left the palace. He said, "Tell to your king that Narayan Gopal was here and left" (Dhakal, 2014). The song "Euta Mancheko Mayale Kati" (The Love of One's Has Big Impact) written by Chadani Shah, the Queen, was rejected to sing by Narayan Gopal in the beginning. Narayan Gopal could dare to say 'No' to the power bloc as many instances show. Deepak Jangam had to spend a lot of energy to convince Narayan Gopal to give his vocal. Jangam had to give the tune in the words time and again, 28 times. Jangam could not see say the author of the song. Narayan Gopal would say, "I am a man of public, not of the palace. I don't need the royal palace, nor the palace needs me" (Jangam, 2014). He would move with his mood. He did not like to sing in Radio Nepal, and then did not enter its gate again. He hardly accepted interviews and requests to sing in the gathering (Avenueus, 2014). His daring biography made him popular too. At the age of 51, Narayan Gopal suddenly passed away. It was not enough time to an artist, a creator. A lot of creations left unexpressed when he died early, unexpectedly. Birag, recalling the songs Narayan Gopal left to be sung, writes,

नारायणले पनि गनुपर्ने अझै थुप्रै कुराहरु थिए सबै अधुरा छोडी गए । उनको स्वर पाउने वर्तमानका र भविष्यका हज्जारौं गीतहरु टुहुरा भए ।	Narayan had a lot of things to be completed; a lot of songs that were waiting his vocal turned as orphans. (6)
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Narayan Gopal was no more but Birag would feel that someday he would come to Birag's door, look at him from his big eyes within the glass making his big eyes bigger and say, "Why this man is always sick, always bed-tied; sometimes come up to the door and embrace me" (6). He would come to Birag's bed without taking off his shoes and shake hands. He would often ask Birag, 'how are you feeling now?' Birag could walk later on, would come up to the door and embrace him but that wish of Narayan Gopal remained unfulfilled forever. The healthy looking Narayan Gopal would come for the short time and often leave bed-tied Birag aloof in Hetauda. The early demise of Narayan Gopal had added gloomy feelings to Birag.

Birag claims with references in the memoir that Narayan Gopal had high nationalist consciousness. He wanted songs for national sovereignty. This is another instance of relative positionality of Birag and Narayan Gopal. When India blockaded Nepal, a group of friends were talking about it along with Narayan Gopal. They were in a little hotel in Hetauda. Narayan Gopal had a revolutionary temperament. Time and again that would come out. “If India attacked Nepal, what do we do?” One of the friends asked. Narayan Gopal said, “We have to fight; we don’t have any other option. Someone will fight with guns, we fight with songs, by singing, writing, composing” (7). Birag recalls that moment,

देशमा परेका आघातप्रति नारायणको विद्रोही मन छटपटिएको मैले देख्न पाएको छु । भारतले नेपालको बोर्डर सील गरेको थियो... कोही बन्दुकले लड्ने, कोही कलमले, कोही स्वरले, कोही आख्यानले, कोही व्याख्यानले लड्ने । लड्नु त पछिपछि, लौ भीम विरागजी मलाई यस्ता गीतहरु चहियो जसले गाउँहरुका तन्नेरीहरु, सहरका बुद्धीजीविहरु, युवाहरुको रगतमा जोशको ज्वाला भर्न सकोस्...म गाउँगाउँलाई सहरहरुलाई आफ्नो स्वरले जगाउँछु ।

Narayan Gopal was restless when India sealed the Nepal’s border. He said, “We have no option except fighting either by gun or songs and literature. We must resist, oh Bhim Birag I need such types of songs that could awaken youths of hemlets, intellectuals of cities, such sorts of songs that could flow energy sparks in the blood of youths... I’ll awaken hemlets and cities and our people via my vocal” (7).

During Panchayat nationalism was one of the key tools to engage artists and intellectuals. The power bloc would valorize songs related to nationalist sentiments. Artists would love to foster their nationalist feelings. Romanticism, similarly, was at the core of their expressions. Nihilistic feelings were also celebrated then. Birag lived a very painful life physically so it was very favorable to him to get engaged in gloomy, sad and sentimental songs. Revolutionary songs were not in his ideological DNA, rather he would, like many others, love to produce songs related to nationalist sentiments. These sorts of songs were comfortable to the power bloc. Relation, place and context determine personality. Radio Nepal was in the grip of the power bloc. Artists were in exception in competition of getting favour of power bloc. The power hegemony was pervasive from the top to the bottom. The politico-cultural forces confronted with the autonomous looking artists and gradually shaped the identity of artists.

In Birag’s experience Narayan Gopal was a person of eloquence. He did not like to surrender or compromise for his benefit. He was rare personality in comparison to other artists or intellectual, far different than those having multiple standards. He would show his clear intention of his heart. In the words of Birag, Narayan Gopal was clear in his expression having no double standard in his behaviour. Birag writes,

नारायण आफ्नै स्वभाव, मान्यता र दृष्टिकोणभित्र बाँच्न चाहने...अरुभन्दा भिन्न...सम्झौता गरी बाँच्ने उनको स्वभाव विपरीत थियो। दुईचारवटा अनुहार खल्तीमा बोकेर हिँड्ने प्रवृत्तिको हाम्रो समाजको स्तरमा मिसिन नसक्नाले उनी धेरै खप्की पनि पाउने गर्थे। यस्ता तिताको मुख हुनेहरुलाई पचाउन हाम्रो समाज अप्ठ्यारो मान्छ।

Narayan Gopal had a unique nature, notion and perspective...distinct from others...non compromising personality. The double standard society did not accept him because he was not fit to it. So, he was often criticized. He was transparent and eloquent as an innocent singing bird-titra (9)

How such an eloquent personality Narayan Gopal got indulged mostly in sentimental and sad songs? How did he turn blind eyes to the progressive consciousness? What are the circumstances that confined Narayan Gopal to pessimistic atmosphere instead of promoting progressive songs? Narayan Gopal had requested Birag and his friends to write revolutionary songs to raise people from cities and hemlets for the nation, when India blockaded. Did Narayan Gopal live a very confined life in the name of universal creation? Was it his choice or he did not get progressive cohort group which could offer him revolutionary songs? These issues demand serious academic engagement. Place, relationship and historicity determine personality. What about Narayan Gopal's personality formulation? How much role of politico-cultural forces do we see regarding his personality as of Birag?

The memoir confesses that depicting Narayan Gopal is a herculean task. Birag looks very sentimental, serious and meditative within the waves of memories spent with Narayan Gopal. His feelings flow and rise like air and cloud. He is very dedicated to Narayan Gopal, his contribution to Nepali music world. Narayan Gopal gave his vocal to some of Birag's songs and many song remained waiting to be tuned in his vocal. He writes that the feeling is an air, a cloud, which cannot be cleaned until it rains (11).

Many songs in Birag's words were waiting the vocal of Narayan Gopal to be visible in public. That remained incomplete. The memoir tells the personal history about how Birag met Narayan Gopal in Hetauda in the time when freedom of expression was a dream. They became close friends from their first meeting and remained so despite many upheavals went on in the course of their friendship and cooperation. Other friends of Narayan Gopal of his childhood might have a different picture of him. Birag met him at the moment when he was an established singer in the history of modern Nepali music. He established his sweet relationship with Narayan Gopal, which is essential between a singer and a musician cum song composer. As he accepts in the memoir, there was magnetism in the vocal of Narayan Gopal and moreover, Birag was highly influenced by the pure heart of Narayan Gopal in the unconditional personality of his relationality and friendship (12).

The memoir tells the history how Birganj was a centre of Hindi and Bhojpuri music, Indian art and literature. Nepali and Newari language were marginalized and invisible. Radio Nepal was not clearly heard due to poor network. Radio Siron and Vividha Bharati played days and nights Hindi Cinema songs. It was very hard to introduce Nepali songs and renowned Nepali artists in Birgunj. A group of young artists and art lovers had established Birganj Sanskritik Sangeet Parisad (Birganj Musical-Cultural Council) in 2017 vs and Birag was one of the founder members of it. Narayan Gopal and his colleagues were being heard from Radio Nepal then and few of the members of the council knew them. Narayan Gopal was being popular as a modern singer of Nepal. His songs "Ankhako Bhasha Ankhaila" (The Language of Eyes) and "Sworgaki Rani" (The Queen of Heaven) were being popular then. They had invited Tara Devi, Shiva Shankar, and Narayan Gopal in particular from Kathmandu.

Bhim Birag met Narayan Gopal for the first time in his life in Birgunj musical program in 2018 vs; it was just a formal meeting in the program; they could not continue

their good relationship, when Birag was in Birgunj. In 2023 vs there was a literary conference in Bhadrapur, in eastern Nepal. After the program, in the invitation of Indra Bahadur Rai and Ishor Ballav, few of the literary persons and artists had got opportunity to visit Darjeling. In that group Vijaya Malla, Kiran Kharel and Ratna Shamsheer were at the core. There was a program as an introduction of Gopal Yonzon, who performed songs in front of them “Aljhechha Kyare Pachheuri Timro Chiyako Buttama” (Your Veil Supposed to Have Stocked in Tea Plant), “Ekhai Naau Time Ma Mattiyeko Bela” (Don’t Come Alone When I’m Drunk), etc. Later on all these songs Narayan Gopal recorded from the Radio Nepal. These songs contributed to refine his voice and establish Narayan Gopal to the broader mass. Words of Gopal Yonzon in the vocal of Narayan Gopal became a popular brand in Nepali music world. Bhim Birag turned a big admirer of them (13). Narayan Gopal used to go to India and come back Nepal time and again in the course of his higher education on music. Once he stayed a night in Birgunj that helped Birag to understand Narayan Gopal little more. Birag captures that sweet moment in the memoir about how he would feel when he could meet Narayan Gopal and would spend time,

सङ्गीतले सङ्गत खोज्छ, जो मैले नारायणको  
संसर्गबाट प्राप्त गर्न सकें । सङ्गतले सङ्गीतको प्रस्फुटन  
हुन्छ भन्ने तथ्यको ज्वलन्त उदाहरण मैले धेरै पटक  
पाएको छु । नारायणगोपालसँग बिताएका केही  
घण्टापछि ममाथि एउटा अनौठो नशाजस्तो  
छाइरहनथ्यो, मानौं भित्रबाट केही कुरा बाहिर  
ननिस्केसम्म शान्ति नै पाइँदैन जस्तो !

Musical passion longs unconditional  
friendship that I got from Narayan Gopal  
and that paves way to music creation- I  
realized this fact multiple times when I  
was with him. I would feel a sort of unique  
feelings of creative expression whenever I  
met him and my heart could not rest in  
peace until I expressed it in the form of  
song. (13)

The memoir also captures various politico-cultural instances of their relationship history and the history of Nepali music. How Birag’s songs were recorded from Radio Nepal with various hassals. The co-incidents of his songs’ birth, recoding, and complexities have been documented minutely in the memoir. How Birag could not get job at Radio Nepal as a flute player and the wish to stay in Kathmandu got shattered shows the politico-cultural context of that time. *Bagina* magazine under the leadership of Narayan Gopal could not sustain longer. This history tells the predicament of the artists in Nepal. The memoir also talks about the relationship between Narayan Gopal and Gopal Yonzon, who turned aside later. The first was the king of vocal and the next of music. The gap between them was a big loss to Nepali music. Birag captures some of the interesting instances of how they were dedicated together to bring valuable outcome and how their separation caused a big loss to the modern Nepali music.

People, for the formulation of the sustainable identity, march from one corner to the other part of the world. But, an inability to form the desired identity makes people victim of suffering which leads one to the craggy track. If someone loses his identity, the person after the loss is the same as the person who was there before; so what is lost cannot be what makes the person the person he is (Shoemaker, 2006). Identity must not be comprehended as an essence of an individual; rather it is a set of attitudes, characteristics that differ an individual from other individuals. Birag in the song, “Aaja Bholi Harek Sajha” (These days every dusk) dispenses the tragic situation of people because of an inability to have control over the moments of life- the addiction in life.

The lyrics of the song posturizes the people living in the society who have immense problems in life and are compelled to turn themselves into alcoholics with their desire to receive some relief. Depicting the deteriorated human personality, Birag tries to visualize the bare reality of addicted people who cannot omit their habit even though they try it. It was actually the predicament of Birag and Narayan Gopal in their actual life. Their personal

predicament connected to the collective predicament after the song was hit overnight. It provides an essence of the struggle of such people that is the implicit reality of human beings. We people, in general, are indulged with some sort of addiction in this or that way and even one tries to get rid of it; however, people are incapable of running away from it. The song, *ajabholi harek sanjha* (these days every dusk), has images embedded in such a way that the mood splits all of a sudden. There are a lot of juxtapositions and the singers or listener have to shift mood all of a sudden to reach to the temple just after that to the graveyard; the protagonist is drunk laughing and crying at the same time and drinking by telling time and again not to drink. The protagonist negates each and every mood and action of his/her own.

Though this song remained very popular but there are certain sorts of censorship used to stop playing it from Radio Nepal. There are multiple views as reaction to this song. Birag and Narayan Gopal used to drink and get indulged in the Rapti, Karra and Samari riversides till the late night. The politico-cultural scenario was not in the favour to Birag, who was being charged as a supporter of the Panchayat and royal power. Anti-Panchayat groups were active around then. Hetauda then was a centre of the collision between the Royalists and Marxist political forces. Birag neither could involve in the activities related to Marxist ideology and the anti-Panchayat movements, nor could he live beyond the historicity. Birag in such a crucial moment of politico-cultural transformation remained silent or spent time indulging in alcoholism. At the same time he wrote songs on alcoholic habits and Narayan Gopal via his vocal made it popular. Despite the fact that many art lovers and critics try to interpret the song with universal aesthetic value, but this song could not remain beyond the influences of politico-cultural influences. Birag's biography offered a lot of instances to justify this claim.

Birag received highly renowned awards including Gorkha-Dachhin-Bahu, the award offered by the King then, though it was not just because he was close to the King or royal palace. Birag was one of the established artists then. There were annual visits of the King in each development region and during such visits the King would meet renowned local figures through the recommendation of the regional head officer. During the Panchayat era, Birag was established as a national figure despite the fact that he lived in Hetauda, outside of the Capital city Kathmandu. His association with the best singers and lyricists as well as literary figures was remarkably popular as expressed in his memoirs. During 1970s to 1990s, his lyrics associated with Narayan Gopal were trendy. Everything they touched would carry a remarkable story, whether it was about love, pain, drink, and philosophy- whatever theme. Even the everyday life, jamming and celebration in odd places including burning *ghat* in Hetauda was normal to them. Birag would, in association himself with Narayan Gopal, was branding those odd habits. How do others feel is different thing but all sorts of his lyrics of the song describe the toxic characteristics of life that is unavoidable for living a life? His eloquent expressions of pain in life connect others' life experience. At the same time, they are connected to the politico-cultural forces. His painful life and his gloomy expressions are not universal; they are relative as Goldstein (1989) mentions, physical pain and other unpleasant experiences may be good overall; some we may justly call 'good' simpliciter. It exactly echoes the human confrontation and articulates the harsh dimension of human materiality. Holmqvist and Płuciennik (2002) write that the sublime allows us to correlate miscellaneous linguistic phenomena and perceive them in a new light.

There are many instances that show deep association between Birag and Narayan Gopal. The historicities of their time often come between them. Their biographies imbedded in historicity get revealed in their creations as Birag tries to express his suffocation through the songs related to their drinking habits. Every word of this song carries the helpless life of drunkards who say 'do not drink- do not drink' but drink again. They drink in pain; they drink in a festive mood; they drink in shrines; they drink in burning *ghat/masan* (cemeteries), everywhere every time- dusk and night. Birag's biography and creativity celebrate

predicament of their life; the songs produced by them are not universal; they are confined within the politico-cultural forces.

### 3. Conclusion

Bhim Birag's biography, his creations and his relationality are associated to the politico-cultural forces. His masterpiece creations, even the universal looking songs, have to be approached keeping the historicity into consideration. One should be familiar with the context, in what circumstance or when the text was produced that often show a text relative, not an autonomous and universal product. Birag's memoir *Sworsamratako Samjhana* (Reminiscence of the Vocal King of Nepal) presents remarkably notable instances that an art or a literary piece is not beyond the historical forces. Birag, as an author, looks confined to the limits of the historical forces when Birag and Narayan Gopal were undergoing through the Panchayat utopia. Jameson (1981) argues that literary critics should always pay attention to the historical context in which a work was produced; his commanding notion "Always historicize" is relevant to note. When we read Birag's memoir, the context shows the historicity of the Panchayat and its impact on Birag and Narayan Gopal. As most of the new historicists believe, we have to use the entire world as the text not just confined to a text. Similar instances are applied in case of Birag's biography and creativity. We can see the entire politico-cultural atmosphere when their life subtly engaged in the maintains of the Panchayat utopia via their artistic or literary productions. As Foucault (1980) and Gramsci (1999) argue that knowledge and truth is connected to power, the creations of anyone including Bhim Birag or Narayan Gopal exist within the hegemony of the power bloc. Unlike the followers of old historicism, new historicists engage in politico-cultural forces and their influence in artists and their creation, which is a primary material to them to interpret a text. So, new historicists claim that an art of a literary piece is always historical, not universal. Entire historical atmospheres- the politico-cultural contexts of the time shape an artist or author's thought pattern. The biography and creations of Birag including Narayan Gopal therefore could not go beyond the then politico-cultural forces. They look more servile to the power bloc, the Panchayat utopia. While contemplating on *Sworsamratako Samjhana*, listening echoes of its historicity, Birag and Naryan Gopal along with their contemporaries- their biographies and creations- look very subtly servile to the maintenance of the power hegemony and this culture of seeking comfort zone in hegemonic position still persists in the newer forms.

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