

Idealization of Gandhian Myths in Bapu Sonnets: Devkota's Romantic Perspective *

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Abstract

Bapu sonnets were composed by great Nepali poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota just after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in India. Mahatma Gandhi used to be called 'Bapu' by the commoners of India and these 38 sonnets written on him are supreme examples in terms of the form of the sonnet; but in terms of the content, the sonnets romanticize Gandhi and his contribution to India and Indian people. Written in the heydays of Mahatma Gandhi's popularity, the sonnets admire Mahatma Gandhi and deify him as a hero of Indian people. Mahatma Gandhi did play a great role in liberating India from British Raj but his role was controversial even in the Independence Movement of India and he became a more controversial figure in the subsequent years of his death. When these sonnets are read at the touchstone of how Gandhi is regarded today, they oversell Gandhi's contribution, for he was blamed as caste-biased, religion-biased, gender-biased and class-biased person. In this article, I am making an argument that the sonnets make overstatement about Gandhi and praise him excessively.

Keywords: Admiration, commemoration, deification, controversy, romanticize

Bapu Sonnets as Commemoration of Gandhi's Life and Works

Nepal's Great Poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota, known as *Mahakavi* (1909-1959) wrote 38 sonnets on Mahatma Gandhi and these sonnets got published entitled *Bapu and Other Sonnets*. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), an iconic symbol in India's liberation movement, has been known as Mahatma Gandhi to the world but the Indian common people called him 'Bapu', meaning father. The word 'Mahatma' refers to a saint or an ascetic person. Mahatma

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Gandhi led an anti-British nonviolent resistance that freed the Indian people from British colonial rule and so is honored by Indians as the father of the Indian Nation. Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to India's independence movement is unforgettable in the history of India and his contribution was even fortified when Gandhi was murdered unexpectedly. Gandhi became a hero, like Joseph Campbell's quotation, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." (27). Much literature is written on Gandhi in the Indian sub-continent and many films are made on his roles. In most of these writings and visuals, Gandhi's life and works have been idealized and he is deified as a supernatural entity. 'Mahatma', and Bapu Sonnets are the creations that conform to the eulogistic spirit of Mahatma Gandhi. In these sonnets, the poet has associated Mahatma Gandhi with mythical/religious heroes like Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Prometheus and Christ. In the course of the time, Gandhi has been commemorated as a national hero and his life and works have been established as myths or narratives in certain layers of the Indian community.

Problem, Objectives and Methodology

Poet Devkota wrote these 38 sonnets in the honor of Mahatma Gandhi and all the sonnets are concerned with Gandhi's later life and unexpected assassination. These sonnets highlight two myths on Gandhi: (1) Gandhi is a hero in the Indian Independence Movement, and (2) his campaign of nonviolent movement is an innovative strategy of resistance established and popularized by Gandhi himself. No doubt, Mahatma Gandhi deserves due reverence and acknowledgment for his contribution but the questions can be raised: Was Gandhi as a hero in the Independence movement of India? And did he deserve such excessive praise and admiration like deification?

At the literal level, the poet is found sentimental about Gandhi's life and works. These sonnets are being tested in the ground reality of India today, in many decades after the independence movement. The objective of this writing is to see whether the sonnets written more than half a century ago are still relevant as per the ground reality of India, whether the poet has taken disinterested perspective or he has adopted romanticized perspectives, whether Gandhi can be called a real hero of the Indian Independence Movement or not and whether Gandhi was a real guardian of the people from all walks of life or he had biases related to caste, religion, gender and class. In order to meet this objective, I have dissected these issues by using the tools that can bring impartial results.

Since this is textual analysis, both primary and secondary texts are analyzed to find the answer to the problem stated above. According to Joseph Campbell, a hero is the person who is endowed with extraordinary or superpower. In his book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Campbell writes: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder" and the "fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is

won” and finally “the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men” (27). Campbell’s concept of a hero is applied to see whether Mahatma Gandhi can be compared with mythical heroes or not. Similarly, the works written by Gandhi himself, by his admirers as well as by his critics are consulted in relation to the sonnets.

Review of Literature

There is a lot of critical writing on Laxmi Prasad Devkota, especially on his epics, essays and much appreciated folk poem, *Muna Madan*. Devkota’s works written in Nepali vernacular have got much attention from the critics and scholars than the works written in English. His short poems, essays and folk poem *Muna Madan* have been prescribed in school and college curricula time and again. But Nepali speaking academia is still unaware of Devkota’s works in English. Most of Devkota’s English works like *Shakuntala*, *Bapu and Other Sonnets*, *The Lunatic and Other Poems* and *The Witch Doctor and Other Essays* were published posthumously and so scholarship on these works remains unknown. *Bapu and Other Sonnets* was published only in 2006 and no formal criticism has been found written on these sonnets yet, so these sonnets deserve critical reading on them and my present study attempts to relate them with Gandhian myths and it being new in the field is justifiable.

Devkota’s Appreciation of Mahatma Gandhi in Bapu Sonnets

A thorough reading of these sonnets makes the reader feel whether Gandhi was a hero or a demigod. Poet Devkota makes a saintly portrait of Gandhi in the sonnets, a saint both in physical appearance and spiritual strength. In the later period of his life, Gandhi’s clothing style became established as a myth in the mind of Indian and non-Indian people alike. When people heard the name ‘Gandhi’, a physical figure came to their mind, a man clad in cotton *dhoti* (loincloth) with a shawl, big iron framed and largely lensed spectacles and a long cane in his hand. Poet Devkota idealizes this appearance of Gandhi in sonnets IV, X and XIII.

She would not understand why the great soul
You were was merely beggar, loin-cloth-decked
Why you must be so badly iron specked,
And six foot stick yourself as a whole. (Sonnet IV).

The poet makes Gandhi’s portrait in the above four-line, a beggar like a figure in a loincloth with iron-framed glasses and a long cane. Devkota refers to Kasturba, Gandhi’s wife, who could not understand her husband’s ‘Shiva like’ simplicity in the early days of his ascetic life. Lord Shiva is known as ‘Mahadev’, the God of the gods and the poet creates a divine picture of Gandhi comparing him with lord Shiva. According to Hindu Puranas, Shiva is clad in tiger skin around his loin with ashes on his head. The poet sees the image of Lord Shiva in Gandhi’s physical appearance. He explains how Gandhi walked on the street bare feet only with a

loincloth round his body comparing him with a great prophet in sonnet X. With the first line “Socratic beauty in a fatherly face,” in Sonnet XIII, the poet compares Gandhi with Socrates, who is said to have had ugly face and bright mind, physically not good looking but spiritually talented and self-confident.

The poet talks about Gandhi’s personal integrity and spiritual strength in many sonnets. In these sonnets, the poet compares Gandhi with Kohinoor diamond, Jesus Christ, Shiva, Rama, Krishna and Buddha. The first four lines of the first sonnet read:

Kohinoor of our Indian Crown, O saintly man,
Thou art the highest value to our race
Like pure gem thou cuttest through the face
Of our dark age... Thy light shines purely grand.

Similarly, the poet writes in sonnet XXXVII:

There was a Kohinoor on the Indian crown.
Bur brighter than the diamond was a man. (ll. 9-10)

Kohinoor is historically known as the rarest gem meaning in Persian “the mountain of light” (Ranjan 50) and famous for its light and size. By using the analogy of Kohinoor, the poet commemorates Gandhi and says that his light was “Fatherly to the Race of Man”(Sonnet XXXII, l. 10). The poet means that, like Kohinoor, Gandhi had light within himself to serve the race of mankind, the light meant only for others.

Christian people believe that Jesus Christ was sent by God to be born as a son of God in order to give redemption to mankind. The crucifixion, the suffering borne by Jesus was for the sin of mankind. The poet compares Gandhi’s death with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in sonnet V. The sonnet begins:

When thou departs from our mighty land,
Thy work was done. Emancipated men
Stood dignified, triumphant, visioned, and sane. (ll. 1-3).

A poem written by J. C. O’Hair entitled “Christ in us the Hope of Glory” reads:

Our worth and work is no exemption;
Our only hope is God’s dear Son.
In His blood there is redemption;
Yes, the work has all been done. (ll. 8-11)

Though they are phrased differently, the aforementioned lines from two poems give the same message. Poet Devkota has used the word “Emancipated” and O’Hair has used “redemption.”

Both words give the same connotation that both Jesus Christ and Gandhi's blood was spilled for the liberation of mankind, the one liberated man from religious sin and the other rescued his men from the political abyss. The lines give equal status to Christ and Gandhi in the Christian community and Indian Hindu community respectively, and they idealize the myth of liberator.

In Sonnet IX, the poet compares Gandhi with Lord Rama and Krishna. According to Hindu texts, both Rama and Krishna had their own incarnations in India: Rama was born in Ayodhya and Krishna in Mathura. The poet argues that another Indian hero Gandhi was better for Indians than Rama and Krishna; the former remained only in transcendental form while Gandhi translated "life to Truth, to form divine." (l. 10). Devkota further idealizes Gandhi's personal suffering for the Indian people with the analogy of Prometheus in Sonnet VI: "A sincere Promethean man who smiles" (l. 10). The poet means that both heroes Prometheus and Gandhi suffered while doing good to humanity, the former suffered while seeking fire for mankind and the latter suffered while seeking freedom for his fellow men. Gandhi's personal integrity is idealized in sonnet XI, where the poet sees Gandhi translating his thoughts in a calm and serene manner. The poet signals towards another myth, the myth of the non-violent movement.

The poet makes elaborate discussions on non-violent resistance in many sonnets. In sonnet VIII, the poet compares Gandhi with Buddha and establishes Gandhi's principle of non-violence with Buddhist philosophy. The basic doctrines of Buddhism are known as four noble truths: existence is suffering (*dukkha*); suffering has a cause, namely craving and attachment (*trishna*); there is a cessation of suffering, which is nirvana; and there is a path to the cessation of suffering, the eightfold path (Sanita 28-49). The poet compares Gandhi's journey with the journey of Siddhartha Gautam, the former became Buddha from Siddhartha and the latter became 'Mahatma' from Mohandas. He writes:

You were a demi-Buddha, calmed all strife
Enlightened yourself and enlightened your race. (Sonnet VIII, ll. 11-12).

The poet spares many sonnets to describe the ideals of the non-violent movement. He calls the wars "the power of steel" (Sonnet XV l. 2). The steel war creates a chain of violence, one killing invites another killing and the violence takes chronic form. The poet talks about the chain of violence in sonnet XVI:

The soul of man, if violence were the law,
Would man destroy and his whole great race kill,
And the brute power, the tooth and claw
Kill not violence, but his race blood spill. (Lines 1-4)

Explaining the ideals of non-violence, the poet argues that by standing in the principles of non-violence, Gandhi wanted to end all forms of violence, as he writes in sonnet XXVI, the objective of non-violence movement is to “kill flesh, liberate spirit and conquer all” (l. 14). By ‘kill flesh’, the poet indicates about nulling the desires of the flesh, bodily desires.

The poet, thus, explains Gandhi as a saint and his principles of non-violence as faith or creed or a religion expounded solely by him. In addition to comparing him with Kohinoor diamond, Devkota has associated Gandhi with Christ, Prometheus, Rama, Krishna and Buddha and these are among the heroes discussed by Campbell (27-37). In short, Devkota has deified Gandhi and idealized his values in these sonnets. The questions arise: Was Gandhi really a saint or a demigod? Was Gandhi an indisputable Mahatma in his country in and after the independence movement? Was he a faultless ideal person, as the image the poet creates in these sonnets? To find the answer to these questions, scrutiny is needed and the scrutiny is made with the help of Gandhi’s biography and critiques written on him, with the help of the writings written by him, by his followers as well as by his critics.

Critical Discussion: Facts and Myths on Mahatma Gandhi in the Ground Reality of India

Campbell’s definition exactly applies in the case of Mahatma Gandhi, for he shows unbelievable energy, courage and patience, “supernatural wonder” while waging non-violent movement for India’s independence and ultimately India gets freedom from British rule. He discards all kinds of carnal pleasures and gives his entire life for a noble cause, the freedom of India. As per Campbell’s definition, Gandhi is a hero and in *Bapu Sonnets*, poet Devkota has idealized the roles of this hero. Gandhi’s journey looks like the journey of a hero, described by Campbell, from departure to return. His journey is supposed to have started from South Africa in his mid-twenties, from the incidents when he was thrown out of the first-class compartment of the train on seventh June 1893. That incident, as in hero myth, excited Gandhi towards “call for adventure.” Gandhi spent twenty-two years in South Africa (1893-1915) preparing for a long and difficult journey. The years 1914 to 1947, the independence movement of India can be compared with the hero’s journey in the unknown. Finally, the success of the Independence Movement in 1947 can be associated with the hero’s journey back home “return with the elixir.”

Devkota’s sonnets are written commemorating on Gandhi’s good deeds: how he struggled for Independence sacrificing all kinds of pleasures and how he gave freedom to his country. A narrative was made on Gandhi in the struggle for independence and this narrative was developed into a kind of grand narrative after he was murdered. The sonnets have caught the wave of the grand narrative, the information circulated by the establishment, the Congress Party of India that was in the government at the dawn of independence. These sonnets see the history written in the mainstream. However, history is recorded simultaneously from other

perspectives, too. A researcher should read both official and non-official versions of history to give an impartial judgment of the things.

The first myth established in the sonnet “Gandhi is a saint or demigod or *Mahatma* as a ‘Great Soul’ does not seem quite convincing. Christ, Prometheus, Buddha suffered for mankind and they all became heroes. Nobody refutes the role played by Gandhi in the independence movement, but it is necessary to see whether Gandhi was impartial on the issues of religion, caste, class and sex. A ‘Mahatma’ should raise himself above the level of these earthly pretensions. The poet writes in sonnet XIV: “The Koran is a Veda, a Bible too” and advocates that Gandhi treated all religions alike. Maybe the poet had Gandhi’s slogan *sarva dharma samabhaava* [Equal respects for all religions] in mind. However, Gandhi accepted that his philosophy came from Hinduism. He wrote: “If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should simply say: Search after truth through non-violent means” (*What is Hinduism* 1). Similarly, he elaborated on the relation between non-violence and Hinduism in the article “Why I am a Hindu”. He writes: “Non-violence is common to all religions, but it has found the highest expression and application in Hinduism” (qtd in Pares 138). Shanti S. Gupta is of the opinion that Gandhi wanted to use the creeds of Hinduism for the good of society. She elucidates: “He, therefore, wanted to restore Hindu Society to its old vigor by removing its rigidity and defects” (167). In a political speech in 1925, Gandhi spoke, “Get up early in the morning, rinse your mouth, wash your face, clean your teeth, remove the mucus of the eyes and take the name of Rama. Rama means God. Repeating Ramanama is a sovereign remedy. We must pray to him ‘O Rama!’” (CWMG, vol. 26, 22). These two instances show that Gandhi had accepted liberal Hindu creeds representing the spirit of all religions as being non-violent and wishing good to all human being in his mind. In a country where there was more than 20 percent Muslim population (Kuran and Singh 503), the minority got the benefit of the doubt, of Gandhi's being a Hindu and this community was not fully convinced in Gandhi's roles. The benefit of doubt was very much highlighted by contemporary Muslim leaders particularly Muhammed Zinnah who was instrumental in separating Pakistan from India.

The caste system is known as one of the social evils in India; but Gandhi’s ideas were not radical for eliminating the caste system, which had taken chronic shape. He wanted to preserve the Varna system in India. Gupta quotes from Gandhi’s writing: “The different professions can easily be brought under the four main divisions – that of teaching, defending, of wealth-producing and of manual serving” (170). These four professions, according to Gupta, belonged to Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras and the last of the professional group was to serve manually the three upper groups. Vindu Verma asserts: “Although Gandhi’s views changed over the years, he always believed in *Vernasharm Dharma*” (2806). These four Varnas were (still are) known as four main caste of Hindu society and the Shudras were treated in Indian society like non-humans because they were known as ‘the untouchables’. B. R.

Ambedkar, an active organizer of the Dalits during the struggle against British India, and his followers blamed Gandhi as a racist (Kogle 46). Nishikant Kogle quotes Birat Ranjan: “He [Gandhi] was a *bania* more brahmanized than Brahmins; his world view and life philosophy were moulded and shaped by the age-old Brahmanic values and way of life. . . ., he never gave up his basic belief in Brahminic fundamentalism” (46). Dalit scholars, thus, assumed that Gandhi believed in the caste system because of his belief in the Brahminical world view. Gandhi popularized a new term “Harijan” in place of untouchable. The term itself became derogatory because the meaning of the word ‘Hari’s children’ meant the children born by Devdashi, prostitutes. Devdashis often were not sure about the father of the children they bore. Ambedkar was never in good terms with Gandhi because of the issue of the lower caste people.

Gandhi talked about Swaraj, it was a kind of primitive communism. But in practice, he worked for the Indian bourgeois. He was always on the side of Indian landlords and his class interest is impeccably clear in this statement: “You may be sure that I shall throw the whole weight of my influence in preventing class war. Supposing that there is an attempt unjustly to deprive you of your property, you will find me fighting on your side” (in Nirmal Bose 115). For Gandhi, communism had no place in India, which he wanted to change it into a Ramarajya, a utopia. Gandhi’s role was ambiguous in the death penalty given to the Punjab Indian revolutionaries including Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Udham Singh and Shivaram Rajguru on 23rd March 1931. Gandhi could have saved them from being executed; but he remained silent about their arrest and verdict of the death sentence. As a reaction, according to Anam Iftikar and Muhammad Iqbal Chawala, “demonstrators greeted the politicians especially Gandhi by waving black flags” (24). Iftikar and Chawla write on the role of Congress, the party supported by Gandhi: “Though Congress was reluctant but on 29 March 1931, it passed a condolence resolution on Bhagat Singh saying that Congress did not support any shape or form of the political violence but it admired the bravery and sacrifices of those who died” (24). The historical coincidence of Bhagat Singh’s martyrdom and Gandhi Irwin Pact gives benefit of doubt to Gandhi’s critics. The historical record shows that an agreement was signed between Mahatma Gandhi and then British Viceroy Lord Irwin on fifth March 1931. As per the agreement, Gandhi would end the Civil Disobedience Movement (*Satyagraha*) and Irwin would release the prisoners. Tens of thousands of prisoners including Jawaharlal Nehru were released but Bhagat Singh’s group remained neglected. Gandhi could have put a clause about Bhagat Singh in the pact; but supposedly he didn’t do it simply because of their being communists.

Gandhi was/is criticized for his role towards women and sexuality as well. He is blamed for having maintained a patriarchal outlook and seeing two sexes as unequal. Gandhi described the role of men and women in an article published in *Harijan* in February 1940. He remarked:

The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires the qualities which men need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially the mistress of the house. He is the breadwinner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care, the race must become extinct. (in D. G. Tendulkar 324)

Thus Gandhi saw male and female relationships in terms of the 'active-passive' binary which has been an important ideological device for denying women any chance to acquire power and decision-making ability in the family and in society for centuries. Gandhi is said to have taken the vow of celibacy in 1906 when he and his wife were 38 year old. This decision was taken without Kasturba's consent and he did injustice to his wife in the name of an experiment. In another odd experiment, as Ved Mehata wrote, Gandhi himself accepted that he had slept naked next to naked women to test his celibacy vow (9). Gandhi's practical views and his odd experiments do not seem to have done anything to ameliorate women's condition in contemporary Indian society. These facts help the researcher to conclude that Gandhi was not a hero of that level as highlighted by Devkota in *Bapu Sonnets* and the first myth 'Gandhi is a hero of certain class, area and caste, not to all people.'

Devkota's sonnets advocate that it was Mahatma Gandhi who founded the creed of non-violence, but it is misleading and even the practice of non-violence is controversial. No doubt, it was Mahatma Gandhi, who popularized non-violent movement and he became model for latter freedom fighters like Martin Luther King in America and Nelson Mandela in South Africa; but the concept was in practice long before Gandhi. Mark Shepard argues that the American had used non-violent struggle in the 18th century. He adds: "To oppose British rule, the colonists used many tactics amazingly like Gandhi's – and . . . they used these techniques with more sophistication than anyone else before the time of Gandhi" (4). Similarly, one group of scholars and historians refuse to accept that the Indian Independence movement was based on non-violent principles. In a speech, Puspendra Kulshrestha, an Indian journalist, argued that the movement which took the life of 2.1 million people, cannot be called a non-violent movement. So, the second myth "Resistance through Non-violent movement" does not seem convincing. Gandhi was not the primary source of non-violent resistance.

A large bulk of scholarship written for and against Gandhi is in circulation but, as per the principle of adequacy, the instances discussed above are sufficient enough to show that Mahatma Gandhi was/is a controversial person in Indian history. So it can be said that his fame as a liberator is relative, not absolute. Muslims could not assimilate Gandhi's ideas because of their Hindu orientation and Hindu blamed him for giving much leverage to Muslims. As

described in the poems, Gandhi was not able to reach the level of a saint or hero for all the walks of Indian lives.

Conclusion

In spite of so many contradictions and ambiguities, Mahatma Gandhi still remains a much respected icon in India and a figure of global importance even seven decades after his assassination. He suffered whole life for India and Indian people; but ironically his dream of united India could not take place. The partition of India and Pakistan remained the most unpalatable experience in his life. Only two of his contemporary politicians Churchill and Trotsky called him a fake (Mehata 2), even his enemies venerated him. Gandhi had influences on American Civil Rights movements and antiapartheid movement of South Africa but his ideals were not followed by Indian politicians and, now instead of abiding by the principles of non-violence, India is the fifth largest military power of the world. His spinning wheels have long been forgotten and he is now commemorated once a year, only on Gandhi Day.

Indian National Congress, the establishment of the independence movement and the party that ruled India at the dawn of independence created and circulated the official version of Mahatma Gandhi and the world knew him in accordance with the flow of the official information. These sonnets were written at the dawn of Indian independence, in the heyday of Gandhi's popularity, and so they carry out the spirit of Gandhi mentioned in official Indian narratives. As a result, Gandhi was associated with mythical figures like Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Prometheus and Christ. More than seven decades have elapsed since Gandhi was murdered and the controversial things which were recorded in the alternative versions of history are getting revealed in the course of time. Mahatma Gandhi is still remembered in India and Congress Party still celebrates Gandhi Day but Gandhi has not remained as a Kohinoor. The sonnets are, no doubt, well-formed but in terms of the content, they have romanticized the roles played by Mahatma Gandhi. Had the sonnets been written a few decades after Gandhi's death, perhaps, these sonnets would not have come with such eulogy of Mahatma Gandhi.

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