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## Dramaturgy as Shared Message: A Study of Representation of Elites in Sama's Plays

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### Abstract

Balkrishna Sama (1902-1981) was born in the elite Rana family at times when common Nepalis aspired for liberal changes in politics, art, and lifestyles. He wrote plays and poetry, and served influential academic centers run by the Rana oligarchy. Often termed as the 'father' of modern Nepali theatre by literary critics and historians, he has also been criticized by leftist thinkers and critics for not daring to challenge the regime. Bestowed with the job of controlling publications in the domain of arts and literature in the capacity of director general of *Gorkha Bhasha Prakashan Samiti* (Nepali Language Publication Committee), he was also aware of the unstoppable wave of changes that Nepalis were ready to experience during the period. This paper analyses the position he takes while representing the members of the class he comes from. For this, it first contextualizes his plays and analyzes them through Stuart Hall's concept of 'representation'. The paper draws a conclusion that by projecting the images of Nepali elite characters marred with inability and inefficiency in their lives, Sama shares not only his understanding about the people of his class, but also the message that existing social order needed to go through reformation. He holds a valid understanding of human nature and Nepali society, and knows how to represent the world of Nepali elites he was familiar with.

**Keywords:** Dramaturgy, Nepali theatre, elites, Rana family

### Introduction

Balkrishna Sama (1902-1981), the first major modern Nepali playwright, lived through a historically significant transitional period. The child of the second half of the autocratic Rana regime (1846-1950), he experienced the rise of liberal arts and world views in Kathmandu and beyond as he grew up. Surviving the tumults of political and social change and continuity in the nation became his *karma*. His writing career began in the 1930s, the decade that saw the rise of modern political consciousness, as political organizations such as *Nepal Praja Parishad* had started to challenge the existing Rana

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regime (Whelpton 66-67), and the literary writers from Banaras, Calcutta and Kathmandu had started to "create a wave of creativity" (Baral 56-57) that favored for liberal ideas and political changes. Wave of such ideas did send shocks to the power center in the capital city that the Ranas had occupied for almost a century then.

Several facts about Sama have paved the way for his images of elite nature. First, he was born as a grandson of Dambar Shamsheer Rana (1859-1922) who had played a major role in turning the tide of political and military power in favor of his half-brother Bir Shamsheer by helping to assassinate Ranodip Singh (1825-1885), the then Prime Minister (Shah 286), Shamsheer's own uncle. Born and raised in a grand palace built by his grandfather, Sama had experienced the luxuries available to only a few families. In the autobiography *Mero Kavitaako Aaradhan (My Worship of Poetry)*, he describes the sophisticated palace he was born in, and the extravagant life that his grandfather and father Samar Shamsheer used to live. Sama critiques both his father and grand-father for amassing national resources for their personal gratification. Succumbed to debauchery and extramarital relationship, they spoiled their mind as well as health, and met a miserable death (134-5), as Sama puts it. The autocratic Rana regime had developed the ruling mechanism in such a way that all important posts in the military service were reserved for the sons of their families (Shah 48). By the same token, Sama was a born Colonel. He had had the opportunity to study in the Darbar High School, the only available English medium school during the period. Gifted with talents and driven by self-motivation, he struggled to become a poet and playwright. Soon he became a man of letters, his talents and the connectivity to the ruling class did earn him a post of the Director General of Gorkha Bhasha Prakashan Samiti, the officially highest form of authority that monitored the publication of books and other printed materials in Nepal during the period. Linguist and historian, Kamal Prakash Malla writes that Pushkar Shamsheer Rana (Sama's elder brother) played a major role in 'standardizing' Nepali language through writing grammar books (112) which were prescribed in the school. On top of that Sama was recognized as an influential teacher at the Darbar High School and later as a powerful lecturer at Tri Chandra College, the only college of the time. He played a major role in developing pedagogy and promoting Nepali language medium based education (Pandey 153-154) during the years. Since Sama was one of the towering personalities of the period, his plays and the views he projected through poems were also the guidelines for his fellow poets and dramatists: "Sama's plays and other writings, in turn, proved to be particularly important media with which the literary and intellectual elites of Nepal could cultivate and celebrate their own attachments towards the Nepali language in late Rana-era Nepal" (Onta 94). In the liberated Nepali society of post-1950 political context, his plays were performed in the stage of Nachghar and Royal Nepal Academy, the state-run theater centers. Finally, Sama got nominated as the member of the Royal Nepal Academy established in 1954, and remained in one or other post for successive tenures. Sama got all these posts and privileges partly because of his family background and partly of his talents.

Sama's familial background is sure to have helped him to get the raw materials for his plays. Most of his plays have leading characters coming from the elite families of Kathmandu as they possess certain distinct historical and social attributes. Kings and queens, courtiers and businessmen, children of landlords and elite families do populate his plays mostly. Characters belonging to such familial backgrounds live with certain complexities, and they find it very difficult to come out. Prone to making mistakes, the elite characters lack inspiring attributes. Sama must have thought and rethought before imbuing them with such order of emotions and personalities in the plays. Exploring them is sure to know the dramaturgy of Sama and his purpose behind sharing such a

dramaturgy with the audience. In a nutshell, the article aims to answer: What could be the message Sama aims to share with his audiences or readers with such a world view of Nepali elites?

### Elites and Contexts

It is not mere coincidence that Sama's characters coming from the elite familial background in several plays either go through reformation or commit blunder. Pondering over the life story Sama provides to them, one comes to realize that Sama's elite characters have direct resonance to the social and historical atmosphere that the Nepalis had lived through in the post-unification period, i.e. after the 1770s. With the rise of king Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-1775) did appear a class of elites from the central part of Nepal, i.e. Gorkha in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Defining the rise of this social and political force as one of the major and important phenomena in the making of modern Nepali social order, Nepali historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi, who has extensively written on the economic and social history of Nepal of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, shares the finding that "the Gorkhali Empire opened up new career opportunities for the Gorkhali political elites, not only in the political leadership but also in the army and the provincial administration, and at times, even in the field of tax-farming" (39). Soon the expansion of the Gorkha, i.e. unification of Nepal halted with the Anglo-Nepal War in 1814-1816, the ever increasing plethora of opportunity for these elites naturally got shrunk. And the Nepali elites and their families formed rival forces and found themselves competing with each other for the limited power and post since the late nineteenth century. By limiting the decision making power within the reach of a few ruling families, the Rana autocrats after 1846 did pave the way for the unhealthy rivalry within their own group members. Ironically such autocratic polity promoted a culture of mediocrity and a *chakari* system. Instead of providing opportunity to the capable talents, a culture of picking up henchmen who surrendered to the interest of the job givers became a social norm. Critiquing such nature of power that the elites promoted, the anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista makes a point, "Instead of efficient fulfillment of duties and obligations, persistence in *chakari* is seen as merit, and with enough merit favors may be granted. It is a passive form of instrumental behavior whose object is to demonstrate dependency, with the aim of eventually eliciting the favor of the person depended upon" (05). Bista regards the rise of such political and intellectual spirit as the main source of hindrance to the development in Nepal. On top of that the polity run by the elites of such a vision and working strategy did promote the politicians and intellectuals who were nothing more than 'influencers' on the court. Pointing out this political psychology of the Nepali elites, historians Leo E. Rose and Bhuwan Lal Joshi define Nepali elites as "inveterate conspirator" in spirit. These elites often "operated in the deep, dark world of motives rather than over actions, behind the scenes rather than in a public forum, and whose public and private political lives were miles apart" (489). Elites of such spirit did garner power by 'conspiring' or helping others to 'conspire' and grab the power from the back door. They tried their best to maintain "political preeminence by monopolizing all available channels of information for himself" and, "often deliberately made misleading – of the crucial decisions under consideration" (489), Joshi and Rose further highlight. What Joshi and Rose point here can best be articulated through the storyline of *Bhimsenko Antya*, (*Bhimsen's End*) one of the most discussed plays of Sama.

As a play written and directed by Sama in 2014 v.s. (1957 AD), it is also remembered as an important one since Sama himself had played the leading role, Bhimsen. Along with Bhimsen, the historically important Nepali ruler and his rivals, all

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characters come from the elite class. Caught into the play of conspiracy and the game of tampering with power, the play projects the very cunning and dangerous psyche of Nepali elites. The play contains the conspiracy-based political order that the Nepali elites promoted and were part of. Bhimsen Thapa, someone who is often critiqued to have made the benefit of internal rivalries between the Queens, becomes the victim of his former rivals. In the play, Kulraj, a member of the court, but trained in manipulating the situation through fabricating information, indirectly moves Bhimsen to commit suicide before the King Rajendra Bikram Shah arrives to pardon him. At his death bed, Bhimsen gestures to Kulraj, who is standing next to King Rajendra. He wants to communicate with the King that Kulraj is the culprit but in vain (115). There is a sense that the truth is not going to be revealed, and the culprit is going to become more powerful in the days to come. One feels the terrible world of the court that the elites were members of. Moreover, the play also exposes the Chhetri and Brahmin families such as Basnet, Thapa and Pandey as rivals in the order of power in the court.

Since the elites in Nepal during the period nurtured the male dominated social and cultural values of the then existing Hindu society, they practiced 'multiple' marriage as if it was a very natural lifestyle. Such elite culture of having multiple wives did not only pave the way for similar practices across the society, but also directly played a major role in creating conflicts and rivalries within their own families and allies. Rishikesh Shah, the pioneer historian as well as who had had an insider's world view of the Nepali elites, elaborates, "The Rana practice of marrying several wives and having concubines to boot resulted in oversized families with a large number of progeny and descendants. This combined with a roll of succession based on seniority by birth sent an ideal framework for the growth of intra- and inter-family misunderstanding and discontent" (246). Shah's observation of the Rana ruling families of the period can be articulated in detail with the storyline the play *Dhruva* is based on. The King character in *Dhruva* helplessly watches the innocent boy go through all kinds of suffering. Caught under the spell of his second Queen's infatuation, the King has no option other than waiting for the consequence. The story does not only come from the popular Hindu myth of Dhruva but also springs from the real experience of the Nepali elite and royal families. For example, Rana Bahadur Shah's (1775-1806) marriage to the second Queen is supposed to have paved the way for a new political order in the regime. Every king with multiple wives seems to have paved the way for family feuds and conflicts in the royal court as Shah mentions above. Such family-feud between two royal Queens is often pointed as the origin of major events such as the 1806 *bhandarkhal* and the 1846 *kot* massacres that the Nepali elites are often critiqued. Suruchi, the King at the end of *Dhruva* realizes that he himself was the cloud between light and his life. Infatuated in love with his second Queen, he finds it difficult to separate what is vital force in life from the issue that are trivial in nature. Since he realizes his mistakes and accepts Dhruva's power, he saves himself from a complete destruction. Not only as a father and king, but also as an individual known to his or her own follies, he celebrates Dhruva's coming home at the end of the play (53). Partly because of rationality and partly due to Dhruva's enlightened nature, the King manages to save his identity and pride at the end of the play.

Nepali elites are known for misusing national resources notoriously. They built their palaces and spent on the luxuries out of the taxes the nation generated. For them following transparency was like finishing their own power. National resources for them was means for their personal and family expenses. Driven by the desire of accumulating properties, the elites promoted a close circle of merchants and officers who helped them meet their interest. Exposing such autocratic nature of the elites, Britain born historian of

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Nepal, John Whelpton points out that the Rana elites and their cronies “had tended to see trade as a source of government revenue and also as a means for individual Rana to make money, often as partners to Newar merchants granted monopoly rights for the import of particular goods” (77). Since the Nepali elites had no place other than the cities in British India to invest their illegally accumulated wealth, Calcutta, the then capital of the British Empire became their favorite place to invest. In *Mukunda Indira* [(1996 v.s. (1939 AD))], Sama's often discussed play as it was the first one to be performed in the premise of Darbar High School by the students and faculties for the general public in 1939, Mukunda goes through a reformation at the end of the play. Instead of the metropolitan life styles and the world views he was exposed to and was fan of in Calcutta, he is finally ready to live with the one that is culturally assigned and nationally warranted at home. Someone who had almost gone wayward, Mukunda vows to surrender to marital bond with Indira. Together they decide to dedicate their life to the development of the nation—a message that the play highlights at the end: “We shall remain together, and celebrate life, and sing the song of progress along with nation” (125). Mukunda feels connected to the family and Nepali society at the end of the play. What he lacks in the beginning of the play is something he achieves in his soul at the end. Ludwig F. Stiller makes an important revelation that the rise of the elite class and their connection to Calcutta's metropolitan world has paved the way for social alienation among the youths of important talents. He writes, “As Ranas investment in the Calcutta market increased, the Ranas themselves were alienated from the needs and opportunities of their own country” (129). The Ranas by the third quarter of the nineteenth century had started investing money in the Calcutta share market, and their youths at home and Calcutta found themselves being cut off from real social needs of the nation. Mukunda in the beginning is socially alienated, and the entire drama concentrates on his realization of familial and social responsibility.

*Andhaveg (Blind Impulse)* and *Tansenko Jhari (Rain in Tansen)* written in mid 1930s, at times when Sama was under the heavy influence of William Shakespeare's dramaturgy expose the inner world that the elite youths did struggle with. Both the plays concentrate on the couple's marital and love affairs. Elite by their family background, the protagonists seem to be alienated from social responsibility. Their engagement with festivals and rituals are so intense that they do not live with any substantial driving force in their life. Their understanding about love and marriage is so trite that they lose their sanity in no time. Both plays begin and end in the elite family background. In *Tansenko Jhari*, though a friend to Shobhan, Pavan betrays the former. Shobhan and Nirmali, the lovers meet a miserable death. Similarly, in *Andhaveg*, Pampha, someone married to Garuddhwaj and a mother of two children falls in love with Jayabir, the nephew of Garuddhwaj. At the end, they lose peace as well as finish their own life. The images of the members of the elite families Sama projects are very uncomfortable in their nature. Unable to control their own strong desires, they happen to spoil life. Evil in them grows so strong that they find it difficult to tame.

### Critics and Sama's Plays

Critics on Sama's works have often focused on the performative and generic attributes of Sama's plays. Often praised as ‘William Shakespeare’ of Nepal, they have divided Sama's plays into tragic, historical and romantic groups. As an artist and director who had had the opportunity to work closely with Sama, Prachanda Malla emphasizes the performative nature of Sama's plays. He points out that the kind of realistic acting, costumes, music and conversations that the performance of *Mukunda Indira* (1939) demanded or were employed in did mark a major shift in modern Nepali theatrics. Malla

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argues that Sama needs to be recognized for his talents of bringing theater out to the public, from the closed Rana's sophisticated theater and spectacles to modern avatar, i.e. into school premise. While doing it, Sama worked with minimum accruements (Malla 70-71). Unlike the trend set by the Parsi theatre, a form of sophisticated and highly stylized theatre favorite among the elites of the Kathmandu Valley, the 1939 performance of Sama's *Mukunda Indira* in the Darbar High School did pave the way for theatrics which are simple and socially rooted. As a veteran director and someone who was familiar with Sama and his plays for almost forty years, Malla points out an important historical fact that the writing plays in Nepali, directorial approach taken and the reception of the performance did go through changes with the performance of *Mukunda Indira*. Concentrating on the storyline of this very play, Keshav Prasad Upadhyaya, someone who has extensively written on Sama's plays points out the balance that the playwright Sama has drawn between tragedy and comedy (149). Upadhyaya regards this play as one of the best of Sama. Contemporary playwright and critic as well as someone who had had a couple of literary discussions on the art of writing plays with Sama, Abhi Subedi points out that Sama's poetry as observed in the conversation between and among the dramatic characters do provide a new lease of life to Nepali theater. Subedi argues that Nepali theater directors find Sama's plays written in the verse very challenging to tackle: "Sama's plays pose a challenge to the directors because he represents a powerful confluence of many things not only in the domain of literary epistemology but also in theater and arts. His stage directions given in his plays do not make the stage too complex, but directors feel shy about matching his poetry with the theater" (115). Subedi, someone who has written plays in verse, whose plays have been staged successfully highlight the significant job Sama does by bringing poetry into the stage. The pioneer Nepali literary critic and diplomat Yadunath Khanal comparing Sama's plays with the poetry of Bhupi Sherchan, another important modern Nepali poet, states that Sama though did not become political about the privilege his family had had, he showed sincerity in pleasing the muse (143). Khanal further praises Sama's power of inserting intellectual stimuli into dramatic arts (145). He hints at the point that by bringing social and intellectual issues on modern stage through telling stories of personal and public social order, Sama was doing an important work to inspire his fellow poets and dramatists of the period. One of the most dominant literary critics, Taranath Sharma, who though critiqued Sama's plays in the beginning of his literary career for not embracing the western sense of social and intellectual values in the plays, later does correct and locate the four different dramatic traditions in Sama's theater: Indic, Western, Parsi and modern Nepali, and regards his plays intellectually stimulating" (45-49). As a literary critic, Sharma engaged with Sama's plays throughout his career and reveals a fact that Sama cannot be easily dismissed. Among other critics, historian Pratyoush Onta's take on Sama's dramaturgy has also drawn attention of scholars on Sama in recent times. Onta points out the fact that Sama deliberately projected a mainstream Nepali nationalism mainly through the plays he wrote and performed during later years of his active times. He writes: "Among his many works the two full-length historical plays, *Bhakta Bhanubhakta* [2000 v. s. (1943)] and *Amar Simha* [2010 v.s. (1953)] highlight one aspect each of the two-pronged project of the writing of national history: the Nepali language itself as a medium of unification, and the *bir* mode of representing Nepal's past" (Onta 89). Onta critiques Sama's dramaturgy as it indirectly promotes a discourse, Nepalis are brave and truly nationalist, and they are proud of their leaders who did the same, supporting a certain strand of nationalism that the regime wanted its writers to promote.

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I would like to further argue that Sama's plays need to be read also as texts which record the real and aspirational life of the elites of the period. Sama's dramaturgy can help one to know the world that the Nepali elites lived with. In a sense, his plays can be supplementary materials to the information and issues concerned with Nepali history that the historians have highlighted and critiqued upon. Contextualizing his plays and taking his elite characters as his 'representational' strategies, this article aims to take scholarship on him to the domain of social science based analysis. It points out that a modest understanding of Nepali elite family's history and the nature of political and military order they promoted can be very instrumental to realize the force that Sama's plays present to the readers and audiences and vice versa. It reaches to a conclusion that with the plays Sama wanted to represent his understanding of the Nepali elites he was familiar with and could dramatize the story of. And since "Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (15), to borrow Stuart Hall, Sama's plays too need to be understood as the 'shared message' between the playwright and his readers and audiences. And, as 'shared message', they define Sama as an insider who held the correct understanding of the class he belonged and tried to free from.

### Representation and Beyond

Sama's dramaturgy can also be understood and explained by analyzing them from Stuart Hall's notion of representation. Hall, a twentieth century Marxist and cultural studies critic, points out that culture can also be understood as "feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas" (2). On a similar basis, expressions that Sama provides to his dramatic characters can be defined as raw material he uses to project the face of the members of elite class to public. Since Sama does this deliberately to communicate with his audiences mainly formed of students, teachers and educated members of the society during the 1940s. With such characters on stage, the audience can be argued to have grabbed the message the playwright was sharing with them. They can be argued to have realized the space offered to them for agreeing or disagreeing on the issues presented on the stage. Sama's plays as 'shared practice' make one also accept the fact that the public also wanted to realize such faces of the elites.

Sama projects the elite characters gone beyond the controlling line of meaningful purpose in their life. For example, Mukunda who is caught by the metropolitan world of Calcutta struggles to come back to understand the familial and social reality at home. He purges off the enticement offered by the western metropolis. The King protagonist, married to two Queens, cannot provide justice to Dhruva, the prince from the first Queen. He loses sense of judgement only to regret at the end. Caught under the spell of the second Queen, the King in another play cannot provide justice to Bhimsen as the former is surrounded by power mongers and self-absorbed court influencers. The grown-ups, both males and females from the elite families since they are alienated from social responsibility, they meddle with their own personal emotions and finish their own life. Sama imbues these characters with the violent emotions and personality, and while doing so, he also shares his world views with his audience. Sama's understanding that his audiences are going to like or appreciate the order of mind and emotions he is providing to such characters from the elite families defines him as an active creative artist. Hall emphasizes that by making a kind of "representation" one also creates a gap between "what one might think of as the true meaning of an event (or an object)" (06). By the same token, Sama seems to be sharing the message that elites are different from what they are often thought to be in the mainstream. Sama's power lies in creating new narratives about the elites and their world views. Prachanda Malla shares the information

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that Sama's performance of *Pralhad* was banned because of his representation of 'Hitler' and 'Gandhi', and it did not tally with the one the Rana rulers were promoting through their diplomatic policies. Supporting Gandhi in the 1940s was inviting concerns from the British (2037 v.s. (1981 AD) 74-75), needless to say. By projecting the characters caught into the conundrum of their own life views, there is a sense that they would have benefited much had they got a better understanding of life and society. Sama seems to be sharing the deep seated message that the elites in Nepal are cut off from social responsibility and their vision in life lacks of simplicity and clarity. With them, Sama embodies "concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form" so that audiences feel it and relate them with the universal principle of human nature. Sama's transmission of his interpretation of elite world views can be taken as "the practices of representation" (Hall 10). Thus, coming from the elite class did not make Sama dull but a creative genius as he knew how to represent his fellow social members and share it with the larger forward moving members of the society far and wide.

### Conclusion

Sama's representation of the members of elite class in the plays discussed above do also expose his strategy of 're-presenting' them. The way they had been accepted in the public of the time Sama belonged to, and the way Sama wants to represent them - reveals that Sama wanted to share his discovery with the general public. Deep down he was sure that there is something rotten in the elites of his time, and articulating that through plays would benefit both the elites as well as the general public. Also, Sama's understanding of Nepali elites' world views are pertinent and go along with the analysis that the historians have made on the rise and fall of Nepali elites, i.e. the Ranas and the Shahs along with other Khas-Arya linguistic community members. The article concludes that Sama's dramaturgy emanates from his understanding of the class he belongs to as well as the wave of the changes that was being experienced by the general public. Thus Sama's biography alone is insufficient to understand his plays and the vision they dramatize. His dramaturgy emanates from the critical stand he takes while representing the issues dominant of the time. Sama can be best understood as a critical elite of the time. As an elite he had access to the resources and as a critical being, he possessed tremendous analytical power to penetrate into the psyche and social order of the elites of his time. In a nutshell, Sama by representing the elites defines himself not only as one of the important playwrights of the period but also a critical genius.

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