

FREAKS AND POLITICIANS

WORDS & ECHOES

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Writing a text about Nepal in Bhopal, sitting in a corner at the International Sufi Seminar (18-20 November 2011) fills me with a sense of unexplainable awe. Scholars and Sufis from Afghanistan to India converge here. It is organised by SAARC writers' apex body. This organisation's chairperson calls upon all to speak by transcending borders, opening up realms of religious experiences and abandoning practices of 'otherisation'. One senior Sufi of Afghanistan speaks about the present state of violence in his country and elsewhere. He calls on people to work with prudence. Everything about the freaks, Sufis and fakirs, is discussed in papers and paintings by eminent Indian painter Arpana Cour whose motifs project a strong sense of resistance as well as merger of dreams and translucent forms in art. All these open up for me some unique interpretations of power and faith, courage and freedom. I find an entirely different mode of interpreting history. History says peace missions have hit snags and groups who have worked for peace and fraternity in this region have faced challenges from governments and groups who act with different purposes than those of the peace lovers.

Outside, a group of journalists want to talk to me and their questions are political. Their information about Nepal is filtered through the media, which sees the political development of Nepal in linear terms. They interpret the politics of Nepal by using two terms—change of heart going on among the Maoist party but refusal by a group within it to negotiate. They ask me a barrage of questions about Nepal's attitude towards India and its future. I refuse to answer them saying that is not my cup of tea. But I suddenly realise it is your responsibility to talk about your country when people

outside ask you about it. I advise them to look into the strength of the political achievements of Nepal.

I stress on two things—politics of dialogue and poetics of politics.

What do you see as the main problem in Nepali politics? I look at the growing uncertainties and very importantly, conflict between a bigger sense of history and the presentism. The main problem with political parties in Nepal is that they are not working with long-term agenda. Lack of a sense of history is the malaise of Nepali politics today. Some questions irk me—who makes history and whose history are you talking about? Nepal's history has always spoken about kings and soldiers. But that is not exclusive to Nepal; it is a pattern of history. But when people's power changes that system, history-making will shift from kings to people. Political parties will take up the task of rewriting history. They create their own niches. In Nepal, after the last king of Nepal left his palace, the responsibility of making history was transferred to the political parties. I remember visiting the Narayanhiti palace museum. There, my eyes were searching for images, pictures, symbols, texts and fresh memories, as the king had left the space not long ago. I was surprised nothing that the long history of the royal rule and aristocracy was recorded there. A fugitive crown and sceptre were on a nondescript chair.

But the royal history may not be recorded in museums; it is recorded in hegemonic texts. It is still read widely and shaping people's perception. But the onus of making a new history lies on the shoulders of Nepali political parties. What is the pattern of history-making then? I ask. The present state of uncertainties is itself a mode of history. But the Please note that all the fields marked* are mandatory.

Get another CAPTCHA code problem with the ongoing political process is the lack of a broader vision that everybody in the country would accept.

That is a sense of history. Today important questions about what would be the right kind of future for the country are not seriously asked. Personal gains and aggrandisements of leaders appear to dominate every action. Parties have moved closer to making history by the present negotiation, but where and how do they want to lead the process is still not clear. I consider them as hubris of present politics.

But can there be a people's history? The term people's history is an interpretation. Now people in different parts of the world are looking for an alternative history. They do so by evoking memories and interpreting freak and free movements in positive terms. At the Sufi seminar, I present my view about this matter. I look at the movement of the Nepali fakirs known as Josmani for example. There is a history of freaks and free movers in the cultural spheres in this country. The Josmanis were a group of Saints, fakirs who used the poetry of the 15th century poet Kabir to disseminate their ideas from the 18th century onwards. They wrote their own verses in Nepali. That kind of text sharing is very important for movements of freedom. I put my views about the alternative interpretation of Sufism by evoking the Fakirian tradition of Nepal and their connectivity with the Bauls and other freaks from the medieval times. But what strikes me most is how Sufism, fakirs and other rebels are being evoked today. A very senior Pakistani Pathan Sufi scholar speaks. He says, "I come from a place where people used to do small skill works and lead peaceful life. But now blood streams flow down the gullies there". People are overwhelmed in the hall. People's efforts to look for an alternate history in this region cannot be overemphasised. Unanimity among the Sufis, Bhakti scholars and folklorists is overwhelming.

But how successful can such efforts like restoring the history of peace and love become today? People of the margin, rebels like Kabir, Dadu and Ramdas inspired the major Bhakti movements. People of lower echelons, considered subalterns today, were attacking the mainstream metropolitan history. In Nepal, conversely various Fakir movements, either negotiated with those in power or converted them in their faith.

Josmanis converted even rulers like king Ranabhadur Shah and Jungbhadur Rana into their faith in the 19th century. That is a very

curious matter. It was a kind of eclectic movement, which interestingly had brought people of different ethnic groups and castes together for a purpose. I link that symbolic movement to the present political change that has created conditions to look at different traditions of people's cultures. It has opened up opportunities to write the alternate history of the people. Freaks, rebels, thinkers, dancers, singers and performers from different groups of people in the society have become articulate. Nepali politicians would do well by acting by putting their houses in order and working with a vision of history.

– KATHMANDU POST