Cosmic Awareness in Laxmi Prasad Devkota
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Most of Laxmi Prasad Devkota’s works reflect his close observation and understanding of human actions and experiences. One area that deserves study is his perceptions above the ordinary and mundane, his cosmic awareness. This essay presents a brief sketch of Devkota’s orientation to cosmic perception of the human world. I have tried to examine some of Devkota’s works along with Albert Einstein’s concept of cosmic religion.

The cosmic awareness

On the surface the cosmic sense is what Rabindranath Tagore wrote in “Where the Mind is Without Fear”: “Where the world is not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls” (339). The cosmic is the unified, the absence of fragments and divisions. Tagore must have thought of the drawbacks of divisions in terms of castes, creeds, cultures, languages and national strengths. It was about the same time, the early twentieth century, that Albert Einstein, then a member of the League of Nations, advocated the need of a world government, which would work to disarm the warring countries towards ensuring peace and harmony among the human race. It was also the same time when Mahatma Gandhi had already emerged with the message of non-violence. In fact, the first four decades of the twentieth century saw a significant rise in the advocacy of universal brotherhood as the agendas of leading writers, philosophers and humanists.

Devkota was writing about universal godhood, selfless service and non-violence when the aforesaid thinkers had already become vociferous in their stance for peace and harmony. However, it is not to claim here that he was influenced by Tagore, Gandhi and Einstein. My assumption here is that some of his works reflect his cosmic realization, and this realization comes independently of his own observation of the world. His insights on god, religion and humanity resemble those of Einstein to a large extent. It could be so because both of these geniuses were writing in the backdrop of the restless decades of the twentieth century, when humanity in general craved for a secure and prosperous world sans “fear,” “fragments” and “narrow domestic walls.”

In his seminal essay “Religion and Science” Einstein defines cosmic religion as “a third stage of religious experience,” which belongs to or represents all other religions, “even though it is rarely found in a pure form…” (38). For him the first and second stages are “religion of fear” and “moral religion,” in which the images of diverse individual Gods are inherent. This diversity results from the generally perceived plurality of races, locations, rituals and beliefs. Cosmic religion transcends the
barriers of such diversity. In this sense, the existence of multiple religious sects, leaders and preachers underlies divisions, or at least the possibility of their recurrence. There is rare emergence of a representative, unifying religious leadership from within the divisions. Einstein admits that such emergence as that of Moses or Buddha has been distinguished by cosmic religious feeling, “which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man’s image” (38). Cosmic awareness on the one hand indicates unity in diversity and on the other hand shows the absence of diversity itself. With this, an individual feels the “futility of human desires and aims,” and that “individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole” (Einstein 38). In faith and pursuit of cosmic religion, Einstein believes, an individual “achieves a far-reaching emancipation from the shackles of personal hopes and desires” (49).

Devkota’s cosmic understanding

Devkota’s cosmic understanding manifests in his denunciation of a personal god and his discontent for divisions. The division has been the result of man creating god of himself. One very commonly known example is what he says in his poem “Yatri” (“The Traveller”). Here he questions the need of a temple to which people pay homage by riding human shoulders. He counsels a pilgrim to identify the god in himself and explains that god is within the beautiful living image of flesh and bones. His principal idea is that the actual worship is the service to the suffering and needy. This sense of ‘god in me’, ‘god in you’ and ‘god in the service of the suffering’ defies the existence of an individual, man-made god in favour of what Einstein calls a feeling, which “knows no dogma and no God conceived in man’s image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it” (38). Similar vision resounds in his Shakuntala, where Amatya exhorts king Vishwamitra against the latter’s cravings for a spiritual quest: “Dost thou desire God’s kingdom? Here it is/In human hearts of love and sympathy” (51). Love and sympathy are two emotions that Devkota advocates as significant to bring humans together in brotherhood, which equally rules out the practice of discrimination in terms of caste and creed. This famous line from Muna Madan, “Man becomes great by his heart, not his caste” highlights the supremacy of selfless care over the common notion of “domestic” division and racial superiority.

Devkota perceives the actual union in human race as much in the rejection of division, idol worship and exploitative pilgrimages as in people’s realisation of their rights to treat and be treated fairly. This realization is possible only in a social system where superstitions and dogmas do not keep them backwards and self-centered. To this direction he asserts:
Let the trumpet of people’s rights blow
People are the kings of today
Let selfishness vanish in shame
Be ash, just ash,


This concept of people’s supremacy is timeless. For Devkota, liberty entwined with selflessness is the ultimate goal of democracy. It is guaranteed in the elimination of the “drug of blind religion” and in making people the “kings of today.” This idea is more contextual at such times when general public concern is about empowering people against suppression and discrimination. Devkota seems to have foreseen a long-term discourse on democratic exercises in Nepal in light of ensuring rights to Nepali people. He knows that empowerment comes with unity which is ensured in the rejection of man-made aggrandizements, be it the kings, gods or political leaders:

I have called the Nawab’s wine all blood,
And the courtesans all corpses.
And the king a pauper.
I have denounced Alexander the great.
And I have deprecated the so-called high-souled ones. (“The Lunatic” 81-85)

When Devkota does not see any significance in the so-called grandeur of names like Nawab, courtesans, king, Alexander, and the high-souled ones, he must be underlying the need to see every worldly object and people as worldly and common. He rather sees greatness in the objects of nature that do not discriminate king from pauper. The pervasiveness of natural grandeur defies the existence of artificial structures. Devkota mocks such structures:

Look at the cruel horrid idols wreathed with skulls
The mother drinking the blood of her murdered child
Behold the trunk of the Elephant God!
My God is like a blade of grass: succulent, tender, sweet, all pervasive, never dying, self-regenerating, ever strong. (“The Donkey Speaks” 41-46)

To advocate the superiority of nature over man’s creations is to recognise the grandeur of physical universe. Devkota’s cosmic perception therefore takes on his profound attachment with the nature as an all-sustaining and all-binding force. In nature he does not see any limitations for inspiration and learning. Nature, the physical, gives him constant sense of existence as a being unbound by any mundane identity:
A variety of moonbirds,
I commune with them as they do with me
In such a language, friend,

As is never written, nor ever printed, nor ever spoken ...(“The Lunatic”18-22).

Devkota’s emphasis for the absence of limitation is what Rajeshwor Devkota calls “omniscient worldview” (3) in which he sees the living beings in commune with nature and in coexistence and harmony. Out of it, in the man-made world of idol worship, there is division and suffering, and no ground for attaining union with the greatness of nature.

At the heart of Devkota’s cosmic awareness lies his concept of universal religion, which resembles what Einstein called “cosmic religion.” Devkota’s Bapu and Other Sonnets can be considered as a true advocacy of this concept. Here he states that true greatness “lies in ordering every nature grain/Disciplining one’s thoughts...steadying to universal purpose and creation...” (“I Often Wonder” 8-11). This universal purpose calls for an optimistic and progressive adaptation to the world of reality, where an individual can assert:

We shall not cry an idle Krishna, Rama,
A God-cry for a crust, all idle show. (“We Shall Not Cry” 1-2)

This denunciation of individual gods like Krishna and Rama intensifies Devkota’s understanding of universality as being devoid of religious pedantry. Adherence to godhood, and its dramatisation into an “idle show” is what resist true human pursuit to universal understanding. Those who augment such resistance “read the gospel” and learn “empty truths” (“We Shall Not Cry” 5). Devkota’s belief in religion departs from the general concept of religion as observance to a specific idol:

Religion is the way to Truth and God,
The way to universal good, the healing balm.
It lies in doing good to another man (“Religion”)

Not in the pride of race, Religion lies;
But in broad sympathy without disguise, (“Religion” 1-3, 6-7)

The ideas like “way to universal good,” “doing good to another man,” “broad sympathy without disguise” are general facets in Devkotian principles of humanity and religion. They reflect the concept of greatness “more in the spiritual sense as an alternative to the material sense of greatness” (Subedi 12). It should however be noted that Devkota did not advocate the end of religions, but of merging all fragmented concepts of religion into one representative guiding principle:
The Koran is a Veda, Bible too,  
Are Brahman gospel so far they contain  
True words of wisdom. God’s voice is as plain  
In any language, race or culture true.  
We pray to one Grand Father in our Heaven.  
There is one God, was Bapu’s great emotion. (“Religion” 9-14)

The idea of unification of religions, and scriptures as the representation of a universal god irrespective of language, race or culture portrays Devkota’s cosmic awareness. This is where Devkota and Einstein converge. The agent of convergence is the true spirit of humanity and general tolerance that a human being inherently lives with. More to the way to convergence is needed a power to unite the human with the natural. Spiritual development becomes complete when humans are conscious enough to give justice to nature that teaches and sustains us. The justice comes from purity of soul in the purity of nature. Excess of intervention to nature, backed by excess of whims and idiocies, hinders the creation of universal religion. Devkota’s assertion in this respect is noteworthy:

We want to have a pure and chaste good sky  
No fanatical fancies, brain-dusts soul, (“Do you believe in war?” 8-9)

Conclusion

Both Einstein and Devkota defy the adherence to individual gods and idol worship. A sense of atheism may surface in their assertion. However, as Alan H Batten puts in his analysis of Einstein’s view on god, such atheism is only the “condemnation of anthropomorphic images of God” (“Subtle are Einstein’s thoughts”). In the heart of their ideas lies the call for glorifying the concept of godhood and religion as greater and more inclusive than what is generally believed and practiced in everyday life. In a broader sense, neither Devkota nor Einstein is an atheist. The cosmic sense -- the emphasis on the convergence of individualities into one encompassing principle, the concerns for universal brotherhood and harmony -- makes both these thinkers true preachers of humanity.

Works Cited


